



**HÁSKÓLI ÍSLANDS**  
Hugvísindasvið

# **A Mother's Love**

**A Lacanian Psychoanalysis of Samuel Beckett's *Rockaby***

**Ritgerð til B.A.-prófs**

**Dagbjört Vésteinsdóttir**

**Maí 2011**

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**Enska**

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**Abstract**

In this thesis I will discuss my findings of applying Lacanian psychoanalysis to Samuel Beckett's short play *Rockaby*. First I will present a recapitulation of Lacan's theories relevant to my discussion; his theories on the mirror stage; desire, need and demand; and on language and the castration complex. Next I present the results of applying these theories to a reading of the play. I find that the double self of the protagonist in *Rockaby* is evidence of the alienated self constructed in the mirror stage. The reason why this alienation is so extreme is partly because of the need to objectify herself in order to confirm her existence. The woman has to do this herself because there is no other to do it for her and never has been. The neglect she has suffered from childhood plays a part in her desire for recognition and love from her mother. The demand "more" is for a "proof of love" (Lacan 286), as all demands are according to Lacan, but because her mother has passed away, the alienated self takes on the part of the mother. The obsession with the mother suggests that she has not resolved the castration complex and is still occupied with being the phallus, the mother's desire, in order to get attention from her. That which the mother desired was a union with a man and, therefore, that is the object of the woman's desperate search. The lack of male presence in the play also gives rise to the suspicion that the castration complex has not been resolved, since authoritative presence is imperative in its resolution of replacing the Desire of the Mother with the Name-of-the-Father.

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## Introduction

*Rockaby*, written in 1979 and 1980 (Beckett 272), is one of Samuel Beckett's later short plays. It is deceptively simple with only two parts for one actress, "w: Woman in chair. / v: Her recorded voice" (275), and a relatively compact structure consisting of four similar sections. The text, mainly rendered by V, is ambiguous, fragmented and reminiscent of poetry, or even a lullaby, and gives the reader, or audience, very little certainties regarding W, her existence and V's relation to her. Therefore, the play is open for interpretation and has inspired various discussions by scholars.

The ambiguities in the play have been subjected to some scrutiny. Charles R. Lyons states in his article "Perceiving *Rockaby* - As a Text, As a Text by Samuel Beckett, As a Text for Performance" that "the fragments that constitute *Rockaby* imply but do not confirm certain relationships between parts" (303). In the same article he expresses his opinion that the obscurities in the play have a specific purpose: "I find that stimulating this process of organizing clues into an implied narrative to be a significant aspect of Beckett's dramatic method" (306). His conclusion on the matter is thus that the unverifiability of that which is presented on stage is for the spectator's benefit to make a whole out of the small pieces implied, and at the same time realise that this whole truly only exists in the imagination (306).

Other Beckett scholars feel that spectators do not experience the play in such an imaginative manner. In *Beckett in performance* Jonathan Kalb devotes a chapter to *Rockaby* where he stresses the importance of the actor's performance when it comes to how the audience experiences the play. He especially emphasizes Billie Whitelaw's rendition which he claims "builds on the ambiguities Beckett wrote into his text" (12). Kalb describes Whitelaw's method of rehearsing the play by first listening to the musicality of the words when read aloud, before considering the text and its meaning (17), and suggests that this is closer to the experience of the audience than the one Lyons describes: "We attend first

perhaps to the text's music or the subtly changing tableau, and only later realize the poetry's implications and become inadvertent interpreters" (22). Even though Kalb disagrees with how Lyons views the audience's experience of *Rockaby*, he does agree with Lyons that the play is to be possibly understood in more than one way (12).

The uncertainties in *Rockaby* can also be attributed to the protagonist's own divided attitude towards her own self and existence. As Elizabeth Barry says in her article "One's Own Company: Agency, Identity and the Middle Voice in the Work of Samuel Beckett" on the common theme of self-perception in Beckett's work: "the very act of trying to perceive oneself separates the self into subject and object. In isolation the perception of self is an anxious activity. The subject needs another to confirm its existence, to heal this split and give it an objective image of its own existence" (123). This discussion on the split subject applies especially to *Rockaby* in which the only character presumably talks to herself about her anxious search for "another". She has to have an "other" to be certain that she does exist; whether she truly does is one of the questions raised in any interpretation of the play.

This self-perception, that splits the subject, is evident in psychoanalytic terms as the identification that takes place in Jacques Lacan's mirror stage. In this stage a person perceives herself in a mirror and will forever identify with the exterior image seen there. The identification ensures an alienation from this self that is truly another (Lacan 2). Craig N. Owens applies this theory in his article on the two short plays by Beckett, *Rockaby* and *Catastrophe*, where he argues that these works "do not simply split the subject, but they split the performance" (74). What Owens means by this is that the alienation does not only prevail in the subject of the protagonist of the plays; it transmits to the actor in *Rockaby*, who is alienated from the character, and the audience in *Catastrophe* because of the use of recorded material in the performances (78). This assumption on *Rockaby* is in part based on the strict framework of the play and how little, according to Owens, the actress on stage is given to

connect with the character (77). It is difficult to agree with this statement after reading Kalb's description on the little nuances that Whitelaw used to wring out her powerful rendering of the play. I therefore maintain that the actress might feel certain alienation through her *character* who is certainly alienated from her voice.

Catherina Wulf also uses Lacanian psychoanalysis to approach a few of Beckett's later short plays in her thesis "Desire in Beckett: a Lacanian approach to Samuel Beckett's plays *Krapp's Last Tape*, *Not I*, *That Time*, *Footfalls* and *Rockaby*", which deals with "Jacques Lacan's concept of the Desire for the Other, as the outcome of the human subject's division" (abstract). Specifically pertaining to *That Time* and *Rockaby*, Wulf finds that they "are indicative of the regression of desire leading toward the characters' death" (abstract). She argues that the decrease of W's speech shows this lessening of desire which ultimately leads to her death. This reading seems plausible, although it is difficult to be sure whether W does pass away in the end and whether she was even alive to begin with.

In this thesis I will discuss both the alienation and the desire that stems from Lacan's split subject in Samuel Beckett's *Rockaby*, although I will mainly discuss the text of the play and touch less upon the play as a performance. I will, therefore, not implicate the audience itself or the actor in my argumentation, as Owens does, and focus mainly on the protagonist's psyche. Unlike Wulf, I will not only focus on desire but also try to give an analysis of the protagonist's mentality by applying some of Lacan's theories on psychoanalytic formative stages of the self, especially the mirror stage and the castration complex. Through this psychoanalytic investigation I hope to show how desire for her mother's love, never replaced by the authority of the father, has exaggerated the inherent split of the woman's self, resulting in one half, W, taking on the part of the child, and the other, V, the role of the mother.

## Lacan's Relevant Theories

Jacques Lacan's work is extensive, covering a myriad of topics within the field of psychoanalysis and even incorporating theories from other fields, such as anthropology and linguistics. More than that, many of his better known suppositions evolved and transmuted over time. Because of this complexity, and for the sake of clarity and accuracy, it is appropriate to enlist the theories I will be using in my reading of Beckett's *Rockaby*. Below, I will attempt to explain Lacan's claims on identity formation relevant to my discussion on the play, starting with his theories on the mirror stage, which ends with a split in the subject when language is acquired; going on to his claims on need, demand and desire; and ending with a discussion on the language of the unconscious and the castration complex.

### *The Mirror Stage and the Alienated Self*

Lacan describes the "function of the imaginary" as "phantasies in the technique of the psychoanalytic experience [. . .]" (35). Probably the best known phantasy Lacan described is the alienated self, which is based on the image of the other discovered by a child in the mirror stage. Even though phantasies are not real, by definition, Lacan maintains that this particular untruth of the self as an other (2), will, from the moment it is assumed, "mark with its rigid structure the subject's entire mental development" (4). In this formative way, the Imaginary is an order that figures greatly in a subject's life, both during and after the mirror stage.

According to Lacan, the mirror stage begins when a child is around six months (1). At this point the child's life is ruled by great uncertainty and his body image is fragmented because his motor functions are underdeveloped at birth (Lacan 4). Between the age of six and eighteen months children begin to recognise their mirror image. They start to assume that the image in the mirror is indeed they themselves, and see that they are whole beings and not "fragmented", as their previous experience of having so little control over their bodies has



taught them (4). This image that a child identifies with does not have to be from a literal mirror; an image of another person, the mother or a sibling for example, has the same function as an actual mirror image (Wilden 160). By recognising that he is not fragmented, the child starts anticipating a mastery of his functions, which he still does not have complete control over (Lacan 2).

Even more importantly, this moment of recognition results in the assumption of the image, which a child sees in the literal or metaphorical mirror, as his identity. Lacan describes this function thus: “We have only to understand the mirror stage *as an identification*, in the full sense that analysis gives to the term: namely, the transformation that takes place in the subject when he assumes an image [. . .]” (2). The problem with this “identification” lies in the fact that the image is not truly a part of the child himself. The metaphorical mirror image is the image of another person and the actual mirror image is at the very least inverted; therefore neither is a true representation of the child himself (2). Lacan asserts “that this form [the specular image] situates the agency of the ego [. . .] in a fictional direction” (2) and that the result is “the assumption of the armour of an alienating identity” (4). The likeness seen in the mirror is thus integrated into the child’s perception of himself ensuring that the subject be, in a fundamental way, partly estranged from his ego.

According to Lacan, the mirror stage does, nevertheless, establish the child’s relation to his reality, or set him on the journey from “the *Innenwelt* into the *Umwelt*” (4). When the child has arrived at that destination, and started to perceive his outer world, “the mirror-stage comes to an end [. . .]” (5) in the moment of a “deflection of the specular *I* into the social *I*” (5). In this process the other of the mirror image, the “specular I” becomes what a subject assumes as himself in relation to others; it becomes the first person pronoun that refers to both the inherent sense of the true self, and this other that he perceives to be himself. As Lacan states: “he must resolve as *I* his discordance with his own reality” (2) although the imaginary

streak of the ego “will always remain irreducible for the individual [. . .]” (2); that is, the two parts of the self will never merge completely.

To sum up, Lacan’s conception of the mirror stage is a formative stage of the ego in the Imaginary. During the stage a subject starts to perceive himself as a whole, separate from other things and people (Lacan 2). He does this by recognising his mirror image, both literally and metaphorically, and projecting his identity on this image, which is fundamentally “other”. This illusory sense of self is a precondition for communication with other people and is in that way necessary for normal development, but since this self is based on an image that is not really a part of the child, he is alienated from it. This alienation makes the self “radically unstable, split, divided, ex-centric to itself” (Barzilai 105). The mirror stage ends when a subject enters the Symbolic by acquiring language and assuming an “I” as a unifying concept of the double self of himself and the other (Wilden 161).

### *Need, Desire and Demand*

In the mirror stage a child recognises that he is separated from the other that surrounds him and at the same time he identifies with that other. As Lacan states while discussing the end of the aforementioned stage: “It is this moment that decisively tips the whole of human knowledge into mediatization through the desire of the other” (5). According to this, it is not possible to acquire any knowledge without first desiring that “other”. That particular desire cannot spring to life without the recognition of the self as apart from other: “man’s desire finds its meaning in the desire of the other, not so much because the other holds the key to the object desired, as because the first object of desire is to be recognized by the other” (58). Without the acknowledgement of the other, desire has little meaning because it comes to the conscious in disguise, which makes it extremely difficult for the subject to perceive it without

outside help (58). In addition to this recognition, both need and demand are contributing factors in the constitution of desire (287).

Need is a straightforward concept in Lacan's thought; it is simply that which a human wants physically or psychically and it does not have to be voiced in any particular way. However, the very nature of demand requires that it be expressed: "so far as his [man's] needs are subjected to demand, they return to him alienated. This is not the effect of his real dependence [. . .], but rather the turning into signifying form as such [. . .]" (Lacan 286). This transformation of need occurs because "demand annuls (*aufhebt*) the particularity of everything that can be granted by transmuting it into a proof of love, and the very satisfactions that it obtains for need are reduced (*sich erniedrigt*) to the level of being no more than the crushing of the demand for love [. . .]" (286). In this way, when need is communicated, it turns into demand which is always a demand for love, according to Lacan.

In the process of a need becoming a demand for love, there are certain needs that cannot be demanded; these are the ones that comprise desire. As Lacan states: "That which is thus alienated in needs constitutes an *Urverdrängung* (primal repression), an inability, it is supposed, to be articulated in demand, but it re-appears in something it gives rise to that presents itself in man as desire (*das Begehren*)" (286). The needs repressed in this way are the ones that cannot be satisfied, for example those which are taboo in society (286). Still, they cannot simply be swept away never to be heard of again; instead they are pushed into the unconscious where they are manifested as desire and from which they try to escape to the conscious through dreams and any other possible medium (167).

Unsurprisingly, like desire, need and demand are two concepts that have strong ties to the mother; she has power to satisfy the needs of the infant and it is from her that love is demanded. When a child is separated from his mother, he first experiences absence from that which fulfils his needs (Lacan 255). Lacan felt that Freud's theories on the *Fort! Da!*

phenomenon demonstrated that, when a child makes a substitute for himself, the object, come and go at his own will, he does this to master the abandonment of his mother (103). Lacan also sees the workings of desire in this act: “*Fort! Da!* It is precisely in his solitude that the desire of the little child has already become the desire of another, of an *alter ego* who dominates him and whose object of desire is henceforth his own affliction” (104). This “alter ego” is the other assumed as the “I” in the mirror stage. As is shown in the discussion in the next section on language and the castration complex, this “desire of another” is, at a certain stage, the desire of the phallus, which is that which the mother desires (197-198). Both relation with the mother and the double self are, therefore, operative in establishing the desire for the other.

### *Language and the Castration Complex*

One of Lacan’s most famous statements concerning language is: “what the psychoanalytic experience discovers in the unconscious is the whole structure of language” (147). In other words, a psychoanalyst should discover in his work that, like language, the unconscious is structured. These ideas on language as a structure are derived from structuralism and Ferdinand Saussure’s theories. Lacan’s theory argues that language is a structure made up of differences: what gives signifiers, or words, meaning is their difference from other signifiers (153). In other words their position on the signifying chain marks their import (153). Their meaning is not deduced from the concepts or signifieds they refer to and, according to Lacan, a signifier is even barred from a signified and, in that way, it defies signification (149). What this study of signification has to do with the unconscious is that images that break into the conscious from the unconscious, such as images in dreams, are signifiers in the same way as words in a language (159). Images in the unconscious make up a structure and derive their meaning from their difference from each other.

Lacan is of the opinion that “the value of the image as signifier has nothing whatever to do with its signification [. . .]” (159). He thus warns against the folly of interpreting the image, derived from the unconscious, as a simple, direct symbol for the object of the image. What he claimed to be the fruitful approach is to interpret the symbol as being a part of a linguistic structure (159). His evidence for this structure of the unconscious, and also a tool for making sense of it, is the parallels of metaphor and metonymy in linguistics to Freud’s concepts of condensation and displacement, respectively (160). Similar to the metaphor, condensation is the process whereby two concepts, or images, are moulded into one or, as Lacan describes it a “superimposition of the signifiers, which metaphor takes as its field [. . .]” (160). Displacement, on the other hand, is akin to metonymy: “In the case of *Verschiebung*, ‘displacement’, the German term is closer to the idea of that veering off of signification that we see in metonymy, and which from its first appearance in Freud is represented as the most appropriate means used by the unconscious to foil censorship” (160). The conscious represses unwanted notions that are hard to deal with in the social stratum of the Symbolic and so it resorts to deceiving the conscious with condensation and displacement in an orderly, or a structured, way. Because of metaphor and metonymy belonging to the field, linguistics is imperative when interpreting images that stem from the unconscious.

Lacan’s theories on the signifier and signified of language are not restricted to the practice of deciphering images in dreams; when a child acquires language “there is born the world of meaning of a particular language in which the world of things will come to be arranged” (65). It is a structure that exists prior to an individual’s birth and his acquisition of it. This pre-existing structure, Lacan calls “a symbolic order” (65) and from the moment of a child’s entry into the order, language permeates and constitutes all of his existence, conscious and unconscious. This entry happens in the mirror stage, when “language restores to [the *I*], in

the universal, its function as subject” (2). Hence, language has a bearing on identity in the Symbolic as well as on unconscious material.

Identity is not fundamentally changed in the Symbolic, only moulded; the self never loses its alienating quality of the “I” being based on the other of the mirror stage (Lacan 2-3). When the child has established the other as his self-image, the Oedipus complex has yet to have a formative function on his identity (22). The complex is basically identification with the parent of the same sex, leading to an orientation with the child’s biological sex (22). Still, thus described, the Oedipal identification is oversimplified and emits the previous stage of the castration complex that is linked to the well known Lacanian concept of the phallus.

Lacan expands the Freudian castration complex and, according to him, this complex is largely identification with, and desire of, the phallus as what the mother desires. As he explains: “by his [the child’s] dependence on her [the mother’s] love, that is to say, by the desire for her desire, [he] identifies himself with the imaginary object of this desire in so far as the mother herself symbolizes it in the phallus” (198). Since this desire is for something which the mother cannot have (symbolised by the phallus the mother lacks), it introduces a kind of lack to the child (207).

When the castration complex is resolved, the Name-of-the-Father, another signifier, replaces the Desire of the Mother (200). This concept is not necessarily connected to the actual father, according to Lacan, rather a symbolic father: “It is in the *name of the father* that we must recognize the support of the symbolic function which, from the dawn of history, has identified his person with the figure of the law” (67). This law is the law of society, both the literal law and the rules that govern human behaviour (67). The consequences of an incomplete castration complex, or not substituting the Name-of-the-Father for the Desire of the Mother, are grave and lead to a person becoming psychotic (217). Because this signifier of authority is missing from the signifying chain, it becomes destabilised and balance is only

regained where “signifier and signified are stabilized in the delusional metaphor” (217), the delusion being the root of the psychosis.

### **The Alienated Self, Desire and Castration in *Rockaby***

When reading *Rockaby* with Lacan’s theories in mind what immediately comes to mind is the question of the protagonist’s identity and self-perception. W sits in a chair on the stage and listens to her own voice, V, supposedly talking about her life. Yet her voice is exterior to her and speaks about her in the third person, indicating a grave split in her psyche. Secondly, the desire that fuels both the search that V describes and W’s “mores” are striking. Attempting to find the roots of that desire has great appeal. And thirdly, the strong mother imago that permeates the text seems to indicate that this only person mentioned by V, other than the woman herself and “they” (Beckett 280), is the key to any endeavour to solve the mystery of W’s condition.

#### *V, the Alienated Self and W, the True Self*

Evidence of the double self, constituted in the mirror stage, is not difficult to find in Samuel Beckett’s *Rockaby*. The two parts in the play, W and V, are two sides to one person; W is the woman who sits in the rocking chair on the stage and V is her voice. Beckett is very clear on this in the stage directions: “w: Woman in chair. / v: Her recorded voice.” (275) so it should be evident that V is indeed W’s voice, and does not belong to another. The double self consists of W, the true self or the inherent sense of self present since birth, and V, her voice that might be considered her alienated self. Lyons approaches the question of the double self in a different way:

In this play the *I* is reduced to the equivocal perception of the Woman who

revolves a recitation in her mind as the story of another, not herself and yet herself. The implied creator of that text – the *persona* who originally formulated these words in sequence – is the *I*. However, we perceive that *I* only in the figure of the actress in the chair. That *I* has substantial identity only in the past – in the moment in which the text itself was formulated. The present *I*, who invokes and hears the recitation, is only the residue of the consciousness that organized the narrative. (302)

In other words, Lyons maintains that the recorded voice, V, is the past self, the creator of the text, and that W, the woman who sits in the rocking chair, is the present, barely conscious self. The reader or the spectator feels that W is the subject of V's text. Still, if the "recitation in her mind" is the makings of a past self then how can she recite it now? This former self, V, must be a part of her present self for that to be possible. V is a part of the self and yet separate, an alienated self.

If V is W's alienated self, V has the function of being a kind of social front necessary for W to communicate with others. According to Lacan, the other, that is seen in the mirror stage and assumed as a self, is a prerequisite for communication with others (5). V might therefore possibly be this projected self, based on the illusory mirror image that is ultimately a phantasy of the Imaginary, and the precondition for W's initiation into language and the Symbolic. Owens argues for another dimension of alienation in *Rockaby*. According to him, because nearly all of the text recited in the play is recorded and played back during the performance, the actress, forced to sit still and recite one word four times, is alienated from the character of W: "*Rockaby* does not offer the actor playing W an inroad into her character" (77). True, the recorded text does create alienation, as exterior from W, but the assumption that the actress herself is alienated from the character of W does seem hasty. Kalb gives a detailed description of how Billie Whitelaw made certain choices in her performance that



could completely alter the audience's perception of the play: "Within the limits of Beckett's single instruction, "W's 'more' a little softer each time," Whitelaw realizes this great range of variation, the effect of which is to assert the pre-rational quality of the lines [. . .]" (14).

Considering this, it is hard to imagine Whitelaw being alienated from the character in her performance. Even though the actress on stage does not have a conventional narrative to render, the atmosphere of the play, almost entirely created by the presence of the woman, is very powerful. Still, as mentioned above, the actress might experience a certain kind of alienation; the alienation of W, the character she portrays, from her voice, V.

What, then, is the matter with the image that *Rockaby* draws of W and her alienated self, which is, after all, supposed to be inherently divided from W in the Lacanian world view? The answer is not simple. The radical division of V from W is one part of the reason why the split feels not quite normal. W listens to V as if she were literally listening to another human being. Of course she is, in fact, listening to an other, the other of the mirror image. Still, normally a subject does not engage in the act of listening to an entity he assumes as a part of himself, and that is perhaps precisely what is wrong; the alienation from V is so extreme that W does not consider V a part of herself anymore. Barry's view of the act of speaking to oneself strengthens this assumption: "The subject seems to divide into speaker and listener, when a disembodied voice [. . .] speaks to a mute listener on the stage. This physical division between speaker and listener in Beckett's plays in fact enacts a splitting that is already constitutive of the act of speaking itself" (126). Listening is inherent in the act of speaking, but when a person actively listens to herself the voice seems to take on a life of its own (127). In the woman's abnormal listening to herself lies the answer to the question of why W's split self is different from those of other functioning subjects in society.

This radical division of the self might be a consequence of the protagonist's need to become "her own other" (Beckett 281). In that way the alienated part of her is left to its

own workings under the Law of the Father essentially inherent in language. V, an automaton wired to work under the rules of society, takes on the part of rocking and singing W to an eternal sleep. Lyons suggests that: “The texts that revolve in the consciousness of Beckett’s characters seem to manifest a process of self-objectification that provides the means to sustain consciousness” (310). Considered in this light, V’s monologue is essential to objectify W, as there is no other to do it for her. If W is not objectified, she cannot be certain whether she exists at all. It is also possible that W has lost in the perpetual battle between the two halves of the self. As Lacan describes, the mirror stage is a “primary identification that structures the subject as a rival with himself” (22). In that way V is a rival to W. *Rockaby* illustrates, in that way, the last feeble attempts of W to hold on to the Symbolic by uttering “more” and demanding that V let her continue having a connection to the outer world. In the process V gets W to agree that it is “time she stopped”, effectively brainwashing her to agreement. However the division of the self came to be, it is quite clear that it constitutes the self-perception in the play.

If the reasoning is seen through, that V is the alienated self and is split from W, it follows to reason that V would be left to its own workings reacting with the outer world. If that is presumed then W can only barely be a part of the Symbolic; the socialization at the end of the mirror stage is at least partly undone by the split. Without the ability to communicate with others or her surroundings W’s consciousness has been steeped into the Imaginary order and the workings of self-perception. According to Lacan, the past is accessible through the Imaginary and not the Symbolic (47) so it is logical that V’s recitation should mostly concern the woman’s past life. That vague link to other, as the exterior world, is seen only in V’s words and it is not possible to know for certain whether W actually understands and/or is conscious of her words.

A similar situation is seen in another of Beckett's short plays, *Not I*. Mouth's insistence of not referring to herself as "I" suggests that she, like W, does not have a unified sense of self. As Wulf suggests: "Mouth's emphasis on the third person pronoun can be related to the split between 'moi' and 'je' in her utterance or the cleavage between speech and the subject's entity" (20). Wulf uses the French terms Lacan used for the self of the mirror stage (*moi*) and the self constructed in language (*je*). It could be argued that Mouth is the voice of the alienated self that constantly speaks without much connection to the woman herself who hardly understands what her mouth is saying. The only connection between the two is the woman's past. Similarly, in *Rockaby*, W's nucleolus of being is barely a part of the Symbolic, instead, the Imaginary and the past appear to govern her universe.

W's Imaginary world is characterised by ambiguities. It does not look as though she is fully conscious of other, nevertheless, that cannot be confirmed with concrete evidence from the text. There is some hint of it in the fact that the chair is supposed to rock automatically, which indicates that there might be a person rocking the chair who W is simply not aware of. However, the rocking might also be interpreted as a supernatural element or even W's delusion. Because, W does not seem to be able to communicate with others than herself, she is hardly a subject in the Symbolic any longer. The supposition that she is not aware of her environment, for example the entity that rocks her chair, contributes to a certain eeriness of the play; she is confined in the solitude of the Imaginary. Since the Imaginary is the order of deception and phantasies, it stands to reason that everything is not as it seems; does the rocking chair really rock on its own? And is W really old or does she merely feel that way? The question of her age will be analysed in the section on the language of *Rockaby*, in which the unconscious of the play is scrutinised.

To summarize, the one character in *Rockaby*, the woman, is split into two parts: W, the corporeal woman who sits in the rocking chair on the stage, and V, her voice that is played

from a recording. These two parts correspond to the two sides of the woman's inherently split self; W is the true self while V is the alienated self, constructed in the mirror stage. The division between the two selves is so extreme that V has become W's "own other" (Beckett 281). Because the woman's self is so radically split, W regresses into the Imaginary, where the past and ambiguities reign, while V still exists in the Symbolic order of language.

### *Desire of Recognition and Demand for Motherly Love*

One of the central themes of *Rockaby* is desire. Throughout the play, V talks of W going outside or looking out her window to seek evidence of "another creature like herself" (Beckett 275). (That is, of course, assuming that V is in fact talking about W, which seems most likely but is ultimately unverifiable.) The search for the "creature" must be fuelled by something that drives the woman in her relentlessness. I will attempt to show that this drive is desire, a need that has been repressed because it could not be satisfied, but breaks through to the conscious every chance it gets.

The desire manifests itself in the text partially in the form of V's description of W's search, and as such exists whether V is telling the truth about W's doings or not; if there were no desire there would be no search. In the case of V's speech being invented, there still has to be a force that compels those kinds of imaginings. However, it may be possible, if Lacan's theories on desire are applied, that the "other" W searches for is not only the presence of another but also the recognition by another which is "the first object of desire" (58).

When the glimpses of W's life, that the reader or spectator is privy to, are considered, the question of whether W was given attention at all in her life rears its head. Most of the text that V recites concerns two aspects of W's life; her search and her mother. Although it is hard to verify, it is plausible that W's search has been going on longer than only for a short period before the actual recital of the text. Lyons claims that the use of the word "till" (Beckett 275)

in the very beginning of the play “suggests the extended but undesignated period of time in which she searched the streets for another creature like herself” (303). The repeated use of the words “all eyes / all sides / high and low” that occur in the first three sections in *Rockaby*, and in a variable form in the fourth, support this. The feeling the repetition creates is that the search has lasted for a long time, perhaps all of W’s life. In the fourth section W seems to have given up the search and much of the text concerns her mother who “rocked / all the years [...] / till her end came [. . .]” and who was “gone off her head [. . .]” (Beckett 280). No interaction the mother might have engaged in is described, only the years of rocking that imply a catatonic state. When these details of W’s life are considered, both her search and her relationship with her mother, it appears probable that W was never given proper attention by her mother in her youth, or at least that she could not perceive it. It seems that she has experienced problems in the same area with others as well since she has not even been able to find “one other living soul” (277) in her search. That her desire should be directed toward recognition is therefore understandable.

W’s only independent utterance in *Rockaby*, “more”, also has a similar connection to her mother as the desire to be recognised. Her command is, however, not an iteration of a desire, but a demand since it is an expressed appeal for an undefined something. According to Lacan, a demand is always the demand for love (286). The ambiguity of that which W might be asking for, whether it is more of V’s talk or more time before her imminent death, is thus rendered a moot point. When W says “more”, she is appealing to V for something; therefore it is a demand, and thus a demand for “a proof of love” (286). This requirement was originally directed toward her mother in childhood and is now directed toward the only person who is listening; herself. At this conjecture, one might ask what “love” means. Generally speaking, love is impossible to define, but in the context of demand and need the proof of its existence is, in Lacan’s view, the response to the demand (286). On this subject Lacan states that

“demand in itself bears on something other than the satisfactions it calls for. It is demand of a presence or of an absence – which is what is manifested in the primordial relation to the mother [. . .]” (286). W’s demand of “more”, if understood as described above, is a demand for a reaction and has its roots in the longing for a response to the demand made on her mother, it being a proof of her love.

The mother is extremely important in *Rockaby*, both because of her connection to W’s underlying desire and demand, and also because she is the only tangible person mentioned in the play apart from “she”, the subject of V’s narrative, and a vague “they” that inform W that her mother has gone mad (Beckett 280). V first mentions W’s mother in the last section, when she tells of how “she” goes “down / into the old rocker / where mother rocked” (280). This is presumably where W is now, rocking in her mother’s chair, dressed in her “best black” like her mother was when she died:

dead one night  
in the rocker  
in her best black  
head fallen  
and the rocker rocking [. . .]. (280)

W’s circumstances are therefore strikingly alike her mother’s at her death and this fact raises questions on their connection and W’s identity as Kalb describes:

The mention of “mother” rocking permits several different responses: we may conflate mother and daughter, viewing the woman as a composite character who incarnates certain tendencies passed down through all generations; we may continue to view her as a singular character whose self-objectification has taken the form of identifying with her mother; or we may even speculate that the voice belongs to a true other [. . .]. (10)

Kalb feels that these three possibilities are all equally probable. Still, it is clearly stated in the stage directions that V is W's voice (275) so the possibility of the voice belonging to someone other than the woman does not seem to be in keeping with any reading that Beckett intended. The first two possibilities might well exist together. It seems that when W has lost all hope of finding another she takes it upon herself to become her "own other" (281) and that other seems to be her mother. She does this by imitating her mother's dress and behaviour. W even goes as far as replicating her death in her own apparent death, which conforms to Lacan's ideas of desire not satisfied possibly resulting in the subject's demise: "There is no other way of conceiving the indestructibility of unconscious desire – in the absence of a need which, when forbidden satisfaction, does not sicken and die, even if it means the destruction of the organism itself" (167). W's desire of recognition from her mother, which has its roots in a repressed need, thus ultimately leads to her supposed death because it is impossible to fulfil.

Not only is the mother tangibly felt in the text when V speaks of her madness and subsequent death, but this particular imago is also felt in the imagery and other framework of the play. In the stage directions Beckett specifies how the arms on the rocking chair are supposed to look: "Rounded inward curving arms to suggest embrace" (273). Since the rocking chair once belonged to the mother, the arms on the chair, that W so tightly holds on to, strongly suggest her mother's arms. A manifestation of the duality, of W becoming her mother, is the play's poetic form and title that both suggest a lullaby. Traditionally, the lullaby is sung by a mother to the child, but in *Rockaby* W's own voice, V, sings the lullaby to herself, making her both the mother (V) and the infant rocked and sung to sleep (W). The desire for attention from her mother is so strong that the protagonist's self is divided to the extreme as to take on the two roles of parent and offspring.

Another play by Beckett in which the mother is prominent is *Footfalls*. The parallels between the *Footfalls* and *Rockaby* are quite a few. In both plays the main protagonist is a

female who listens to a voice; the difference is that in *Footfalls* the voice is explicitly identified as belonging to the mother. Still, there is no corporeal evidence of her presence in the play, so it might be argued that she is a figment of May's imagination. That feeling is reinforced by the mother stating in the beginning that: "There is no sleep so deep I would not hear you [May] there" (239). Even if May's mother is not imagined, her presence, real or not, is paramount when comparing the two plays. May obviously has strong ties to her mother, either she has her presence at all times in her mind, or she spends all her time within a calling distance from her and has done so since childhood. She also seems to mourn that she is not closer in age to her mother, who is close to ninety years old, perhaps because she is too dependent on her and fears her death: "M: What age am I now? / V: In your forties. / M: So little?" (240). The protagonists of these two plays, *Rockaby* and *Footfalls*, are quite similar and if the question is asked what might happen to May once her mother passes away, the answer might very well be that she could end up as W has.

The palpable desire for acknowledgement and reaction is felt throughout *Rockaby* in V's account of W's quest for "another". This desire is ultimately the primordial desire of recognition of the other of her existence to validate said existence. It shows itself in the permeating presence of the mother imago, both in the narrative and in the framework of the play. The notion that the time has arrived that she "was her own other" (Beckett 281), along with the resemblance to her mother and the dual parts of the woman as both the singer of the lullaby and listener, all point towards W's voice, V, having taken over the part of (m)other in the purpose of fulfilling her own desire.

### *The Repressed and W's Incomplete Castration*

When studying any written text it is, of course, imperative to study the language, or the words, that constitute the work. When Lacan's theories on the structure of the unconscious



being like language are applied to that study, it becomes more than just a straightforward investigation pertaining to syntax; it becomes an excavation of unconscious material. Being unconscious, this matter is necessarily of scandalous or unpleasant nature; otherwise it would be a part of the conscious and not hidden: “The unconscious is that chapter of my history that is marked by a blank or occupied by a falsehood: it is the censored chapter” (Lacan 50).

While examining this content it is important to remember that the needs from which it stems are repressed because the conscious refuses to deal with them, as they go against the law of the Symbolic order; the law of society. These needs do not go away, but instead become unconscious desire (167).

To glean insight into the possible unconscious of the text it can be fruitful to see the words and phrases in the text as Lacanian signifiers, or metaphors and metonymy, indicative of condensation and displacement, and, instead of studying their straightforward meaning, scrutinising what other meanings lie hidden behind them. To take an example, the word “blind” is often mentioned in the text, although its straightforward meaning is “window shutter”, it implies that W might be blind. Her not being able to see might count for the futility of her search and for her isolation. It might even be the reason why all the stage is dark except for her and the chair and perhaps that shows how little space her awareness spans. In the stage directions the woman’s eyes are described as being “huge” and her stare as “Now closed, now open in an unblinking gaze” (273) as if she is unseeing, supporting the theory that W is blind, whether she is literally unseeing or blind when it comes to the reason for her isolation and difficulties. In this way, hidden meanings can be inferred.

In the language of the text of *Rockaby* there are quite a few things that point to the double and the split self. Since the text is written to be performed, the words on the page are not necessarily those the audience hears, for example the recurring word “eyes”. Although most would hear it as “eyes” it could just as well be “I’s”, referring to the woman’s two selves

discussed in the previous section. The double is also found in the contrasts of the play: in the stage directions the woman's hands and face are white but her dress is black (273), the two colours denoting both innocence and mourning. These might denote her two selves as well. One is the innocent child rocked to sleep, and the other is the widow who sits in the rocking chair and mourns a dead husband. This is further supported by the description of W as "Prematurely old" (273). This phrase tells of her age as old but still young for an old person. The word "prematurely" also reminds strongly of a prematurely born child. In the same train of thought, the word "recorded" in the description of V as "Her recorded voice" (275) stands out. When the word itself is dissected it consists of the parts re-cord-ed, the cord part being of particular interest as reminiscent of an umbilical cord. Accordingly, the word seems to tell a story of a refastened umbilical cord, although V would be the infant in that case as the re-cord-ed one. These instances paint a picture of the woman's two selves taking on the parts of the infant and the mother.

In a similar way, it can be inferred from the text that W's mother was something else than her "harmless" slightly loony parental figure and is the reason for W's sorrow. There are many words in V's monologue that speak of W's sadness and hard life: "pane" that is used in the meaning of a window pane is an obvious referral to W's pain and in the same way "said" becomes sad, "she sad". The stage directions also give many clues. When describing the lighting, Beckett gives the direction "Subdued on chair" (273), which is easy to connect to the woman on stage. It is W that sits subdued on the chair. Also, W's line in the character list of *Rockaby* is suspicious: "w: Woman in chair" (275). The absence of the word "sitting" is so glaring it might as well say "w: Woman in jail"; in the very least it suggests that W is not in the chair of her own volition. This also speaks of her imprisonment in her aloneness and her seeming inability to grasp her surroundings.

The title of *Rockaby* plainly alludes to the well-known lullaby Rock-a-bye Baby, which may seem to support a good relationship between W and her mother until the lyrics of the rhyme are studied further. They tell of a mother who sits in her rocking chair while her child is rocked by the wind up in a tree. All is well, until the tree branch supporting the infant breaks and it falls to the ground in its cradle. The title thus suggests that W's mother failed her in some terrible way. With this in mind, the last section of the play can be seen in a different light. Her being "harmless" (Beckett 280) might in fact be heard as "armless", telling of the failure of the mother's embrace. We know from the text that the mother was wearing her "best black" when she died (280). This could be taken straightforward to mean that she was in mourning. But black is also the colour of another evil, the sin; it is the antonym to white, the colour of pureness. When reading this segment of the text in this light, "mother rocker" (280) stands out as strikingly familiar. It is, of course, the obscenity "mother fucker" I am referring to. The chair becomes a man in that scenario, someone W's mother had a lasting affair with for years if this reading is applied to the rest of the text. Other instances of the word "rock" are instantly turned into the profanity "fuck" and since Beckett himself plants the word in the closure of the play, this interpretation feels legitimised. Consequently, the failure of the mother was that her embrace was that of a sexual nature, and not reserved for her child. W did not get enough, if any, affection from her mother and part of the reason might be this man, at least in W's eyes. Whether these meanings are truly hidden, and repressed by the conscious because of their scandalous nature, or hidden in the sense that they are not there at all, is hard to know for certain. Still, when they are seen in the context of other insights on the play, their significance increases.

These insights gleaned from the "unconscious" of the text are even more interesting when one studies the formative effect the castration complex has on identity. As was explained above, according to Lacan, the castration complex takes place in part when the

child identifies with that which the mother desires beyond the child itself, which is symbolised by the Phallus (198). Whether the mother is seen as a mourning widow or as a sexually active woman, what she desired was a man, or more specifically a union with a man. Partly because of the desire for recognition from the mother, described in the section on desire and demand, this desire becomes her child's desire. As Lacan describes: "The symbolic parity Mädchen = Phallus [. . .] has its root in the imaginary paths by which the child's desire succeeds in identifying itself with the mother's want-to-be, to which of course she was herself introduced by the symbolic law in which this lack is constituted" (207). Since she could not give her mother this union, W has been looking for this union for herself in order to be desirable and worthy of her mother's attention. In her desperation for recognition, it is, therefore, possibly the desire for the phallus of her mother's desire that drives W in her relentless search.

If W's search is indeed for a companionship with a man (which seems likely, although V's words "another creature like herself" may either be interpreted to contradict or support that), the absence of male presence, and even influence, is all the more conspicuous. There is no man mentioned in *Rockaby*. Men might be included in the "they" (Beckett 280) that proclaim her mother insane, and yet they might not be. In *Footfalls* there are, similarly, no men, although there is male presence of Him in May's monologue when she says "and walk, up and down, up and down, His poor arm" (242) evidently meaning God's "arm", that is, the aisle in the church. However, no obvious desire of the Phallus can be linked to May, which points to her not having encountered the lack experienced through separation from her mother. In *Rockaby* a male absence is all the more tangible in the text in the form of W's, and her mother's, desire.

This absence gives rise to the theory that W has not yet resolved the castration complex by replacing the Desire of the Mother with the Name-of-the-Father. That signifier is

synonymous with the law that governs the Symbolic order and society. It stands to reason that when the castration complex is not resolved, a person cannot become a fully functioning subject in society, as Lacan explains:

It is the lack of the Name-of-the-Father in that place which, by the hole that opens up in the signified, sets off the cascade of reshapings of the signifier from which the increasing disaster of the imaginary proceeds, to the point at which the level is reached at which signifier and signified are stabilized in the delusional metaphor.

(217)

In other words, because signifiers make up a chain, all the signifiers are thrown off balance when one is missing. The equilibrium is regained, but the chain is skewed because the Name-of-the-Father is absent, leading to delusions. Another result of the lack of the signifier is that W cannot follow the rules that regulate society. As an outcome, she is both isolated and psychotic. She is trapped in the “delusional metaphor” that stems from the Imaginary and consists of her becoming her own mother.

Because W has no authority figure to make the laws of society known to her and to replace her current meaning of existence, fulfilling her mother’s desire in order to gain her attention and love, she has still not resolved the castration complex. The consequence is that she cannot enter the Symbolic order to a full extent, although she has conceived of herself as a subject in language. That subject is V, the other she projected her identity on when the mirror stage came to an end. However, the lack of the Name-of-the-Father made it impossible for her to merge the two selves and assume them as an “I”.

## **Conclusion**

Samuel Beckett’s short play *Rockaby* has been a source of debate for scholars since it was first published in 1981. Because its content is highly ambiguous, it is hard to deduce concrete

findings when reading the play. It is clear, though, that the protagonist's identity and self-perception have a great impact on any reading of the work, since there is only the one character and, what is more, she speaks to herself of her own life and doings without any relation to the others she seeks. Jaques Lacan's theories in the field of psychoanalysis deal, in particular, with the formation of identity, desire and language and are, therefore, useful in analysing the play.

The two sides of the woman seen in *Rockaby* is one of its most prominent features and must figure into any interpretation of its content. I have argued that these sides correspond to the inherent division of the self in humans described by Lacan in his theories on the mirror stage. The reason for how extreme this split has become, seen in how W listens to her own voice as though it belongs to someone else in an attempt to be "her own other" (Beckett 281), lies in the desire that drives her search, also a central theme.

According to Lacan, desire is ultimately directed toward the recognition of other (58) and demand toward the "proof of love" (286). When this is applied to *Rockaby* it seems clear that what W desires most is the attention and love of her mother; the only tangible person mentioned in the play apart from the woman herself. Furthermore, the mother imago permeates the play's imagery and framework giving rise to the importance of her presence in the play. Because W cannot possibly be recognised by her mother, who has passed away, she has utilised her own alienated self for the purpose of objectifying herself in attempt to confirm her existence.

In contrast with the femininity of the play, the absence of male influence is striking. In Lacan's theories, a male presence, or an authority figure, is imperative for the child's development and especially its internalisation of the rules of society (217). Since this figure is nowhere apparent in *Rockaby*, it can be inferred that W has never resolved the castration complex in which a child desires the mother's desire, or the phallus, partly because of the lack

it feels by a separation from the mother (198). In a Lacanian reading of the play, what the protagonist desires most is thus the mother's love and because the phallus of her desire is that of a union with a man, male companionship is what W seems to seek in order to gain recognition. Because her mother has passed away, she has been forced to take on the parental role herself in a feeble attempt to attain a fulfilment of her own desire, but when that last desperate attempt fails, she appears to die.

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