

## LISTENING TO SAMUEL BECKETT

*All That Fall* was the first of the six short plays that Samuel Beckett wrote for radio. It was commissioned by the BBC and was first broadcast on the Third Programme in 1957. It is an early play, written not long after *Waiting for Godot*, and has a more naturalistic setting than the later plays, whether for stage, radio or television.

Mrs Rooney, a woman in her seventies, is walking along a country road to meet her husband, who is blind, at the railway station. On the way she meets first Christy driving his cart, then Mr Tyler riding his bicycle, then Mr Slocum driving his car. Mr Slocum gives her a lift. When they get to the station they meet Tommy, the porter, and Mr Barrell, the station-master. Miss Fitt, a woman in her thirties, joins them and helps Mrs Rooney climb the steps to the station entrance. They wait at the top of the steps for the train, which is delayed. When it arrives, fifteen minutes late, there is no sign of Mr Rooney until a small boy called Jerry leads him out of the station. Mr Rooney explains that he was 'in the men's'. Mr and Mrs Rooney set off to walk home. Mrs Rooney asks him why the train was delayed, but he says he doesn't know. It starts to rain. When they are nearly home, Jerry runs after them to give Mr Rooney something he dropped at the station. Mrs Rooney asks the boy if he knows why the train was delayed. Jerry says, "It was a little child fell out of the carriage, Ma'am. (Pause.) On to the line, Ma'am. (Pause.) Under the wheels, Ma'am." Then he runs off, leaving the old people to walk home in the rain.

The minor characters would feel quite at home in a play by J.M.Synge, Sean O'Casey or even George Bernard Shaw, pricking the surface of an otherwise serious work with touches of Irish humour, such as that with which the exchanges between Mrs Rooney and Christy begin the play.

Mrs Rooney How is your poor wife?

Christy No better, Ma'am.

Mrs Rooney Your daughter then?

Christy No worse, Ma'am.

Or a few moments later, when Christy, out of the blue, says to Mrs Rooney, "I suppose you wouldn't be in need of a small load of dung?"

The frequent pauses and long silences in Beckett's plays have been misunderstood as an expression of nihilism, when they are in fact the essence of comedy, which depends above all on the judicious use of pauses, otherwise known as comic timing. Beckett gets his next laugh from the silence between two speeches, the first of which is Christy geeing up his donkey, the second Mrs Rooney as 'straight man'.

Christy (To the hinny) Yep! (Pause. Louder.) Yep wiyya to hell owwa that!  
(Silence.)

Mrs Rooney She does not move a muscle.

Even before this, Beckett has signalled his comic intent by having fun with the sound effects. The play begins with the stage direction: *Rural sounds. Sheep, bird, cow, cock, severally, then together. Silence.* This is meant to get a laugh, like the sound effects which accompany the combined efforts of Mrs Rooney and Mr Slocum to get her into the latter's car. They begin with *Sound of Mr Slocum extracting himself from driver's seat* and are then interspersed between Mrs Rooney's words of advice and encouragement.

Mr Slocum Now, Mrs Rooney, how shall we do this?

Mrs Rooney As if I were a bale, Mr Slocum, don't be afraid. (Pause. Sounds of effort.) That's the way! (Effort.) Lower! (Effort.) Wait! (Pause.) No, don't let go! (Pause.) Suppose I do get up, will I ever get down?

Mr Slocum (*Breathing hard.*) You'll get down, Mrs Rooney, you'll get down. We may not get you up, but I warrant you we'll get you down.

(*He resumes his efforts. Sounds of these.*)

Mrs Rooney Oh! ... Lower! ... Don't be afraid! ... We're past the age when ... There! ... Now! ... Get your shoulder under it ... Oh! ... (*Giggles.*) Oh glory! ... Up! Up! ... Ah! ... I'm in! (*Panting of Mr Slocum. He slams the door.*)

Similar sound effects recur throughout the play, as they do in Beckett's next, and otherwise less comic, radio play, *Embers*, in which the central character often controls the sound effects himself. In the opening monologue, he remembers a conversation between him and his father, reproducing it as dialogue with stage directions.

'Are you coming for a dip?' 'No.' 'Come on, come on.' 'No.' Glare, stump to door, turn, glare. 'A washout, that's all you are, a washout!' (*Violent slam of door. Pause.*) Again! (*Slam. Pause.*)

A little later, speaking to his wife, he calls for another sound effect.

'Hooves! (*Pause. Louder.*) Hooves! (*Sound of hooves walking on hard road. They die rapidly away.*) Again! (*Hooves as before. Pause.*)

In all his plays, but perhaps most obviously in his radio plays, Beckett uses the conventions of the medium to create theatrical illusions and then to undermine them. He wrote novels and poetry too, but in plays and the illusion on which they depend he found a representation of life itself.

The title, unsurprisingly for Beckett, whose work is full of references to religion, is taken from the bible. At the end of the play, when Mr and Mrs Rooney are walking home together, Mr Rooney asks whether the preacher has announced his text for tomorrow, Mrs Rooney tells him that it is 'The Lord upholdeth all that fall and raiseth up all those that be bowed down'. It is then that the little boy runs up and tells Mrs Rooney what caused the train to be delayed. Jerry's 'Under the wheels, Ma'am' are the last words spoken. The play ends with more sound effects: *Silence. Jerry runs off. His steps die away. Tempest of wind and rain. It abates. They move on. Dragging steps, etc. They halt. Tempest of wind and rain.* The sound effects say it all.

Beckett was adamant that *All That Fall* should not be filmed or acted on stage, turning down requests from Ingmar Bergman and Laurence Olivier respectively. A recent production by Max Stafford-Clark for *Out of Joint*, which played in London and Bristol, had the actors walking among the audience and the audience wearing blindfolds. The placing of voices and sounds was a matter of luck, depending on where you were sitting. With nothing else to connect to, you were left, literally, in the dark. The actors had nothing to connect to either and forgot their comic timing. It was a travesty. Beckett was right. Of course he was. I am left wondering why we never hear Beckett's radio plays on the radio. But we can at least read them and use our imaginations. No blindfold required.