Samuel Beckett: *Krapp’s Last Tape*

Samuel Beckett’s one-act play *Krapp’s Last Tape* centers around the elderly Krapp as he listens to recordings of himself commenting on his life from his younger days. Though there are numerous obvious similarities between the written text and the video seen in class, there are also interesting differences that make each version unique in its own right. The acts of watching the play being performed versus reading the written word (including all of the stage directions) are two separate experiences for the audience. For instance, in reading the play, one is able to catch the more meticulous details, such as how Krapp’s appearance is described:

> “Rusty black narrow trousers too short for him. Rusty black sleeveless waistcoat, four capacious pockets. Heavy silver watch and chain. Grimy white shirt open at neck, no collar. Surprising pair of dirty white boots, size ten at least, very narrow and pointed.”

In viewing the performance of the play, these details are almost overlooked with a quick glance at the character’s dress; they are not meticulously pointed out, which add an extra dimension to the character. Also, the dim light of the set does not allow the viewer to fully appreciate Krapp’s appearance as described in writing.

Another thing I noticed upon reflecting on the differences between the written and performed versions of the play was that whilst watching it, the deliberate slowness was much longer than the slowness I had imagined when I had read through it. I believe that seeing it performed live therefore enhanced my understanding of Krapp’s character. I read right through the stage direction of “pause” and onto the next phrase, never stopping to appreciate the dramatic effect that the pause in the performance of the play undoubtedly delivered.

The video performance allowed the audience to feel the atmosphere of darkness and bleak sadness as well as focus dramatically on the long periods of silence. The extreme close-ups of Krapp’s face also added to Krapp’s character and his sentimental sadness as he listened to recordings of himself and realizes the man that he has become. This filming technique that adds to the depiction of Krapp’s character could not be achieved through only reading the written dialogue of the play. Though Krapp may not be saying anything, the physical expression on the actor’s face depicts much about the character: whether he feels delighted or depressed about what he is hearing, whether he agrees or disagrees with the way in which his younger self documented and commented on his life up to that point, which ultimately allows the audience to sympathize with him.

Overall, both the written as well as performed versions of the play depict a man who in recording and subsequently filing away his life realizes he has lost it rather than lived it to its fullest. The play seems to encourage that ultimate happiness stems from an active approach to living life.