Written in 1971, *The Lost Ones* comes to life at the border of fiction and political commentary. The work examines how surveillance mechanisms exact a bodily and psychic toll on individuals subjected to technologically manipulated environments. The result is a less corporeal, more dehumanized population. The work explores the nature of consciousness beyond the realm of personal interactions.

Bishop Berkeley’s dictum, *Esse est percipi*, asserts that individuals internalize the sense of being seen in such a way that it defines human consciousness as a kind of structure. Beckett’s adherence to that idea is forcefully illustrated in *The Lost Ones*, in which the action takes place in a sealed cylindrical structure made of rubber. The sense of being observed is established from the start. With seductive fluidity, the narration plays out in a sparsely limned landscape, one that Antoni Libera sees as depicting the human mind. He writes:

> Life in the cylinder is a model of human history. The anonymous observer, who is not one of the bodies, but knows at least as much about the cylinder as its inhabitants do and, [...] is the personification of the human mind, which, in spite of being tied down to the earth, can, nevertheless, grasp it and learn the truth about it. [...] This is why the result of its speculation, the observer’s report (the text of *The Lost Ones*), is not written in the first person.

(151-52)

The adroit management of subjects in the cylinder illustrates its diabolical ability to modulate the dwellers’ behavior. As a result, tension ensues from the mobilization of the citizenry in which the instincts of basic survival are skillfully exploited. By reducing the individual to a function of perception, Beckett adopts the Berkeleian mode, and reduces sensory experiences to ideas. For Berkeley, ‘ideas’ and ‘sensations’
are synonymous. By this Berkeley meant that interactions of a reciprocal nature occur among ‘ideas,’ and subjects resolve problems in those interactions, which are also ideas, insofar as they are perceived. Insofar as they are not perceived, interactions between individuals do not exist (Berkeley, 128).

The Predatory Nature of Power
Wreathed in melancholy, The Lost Ones explores the limits of subjectivity through detached viewpoints that don’t so much cancel one another out as add another tile to the perceptual mosaic. Since it is an axiom of human behavior that everything we do is an extension of who we are, the question is: What constitutes the self?

The sustained focus on surveillance makes Beckett’s work a timeless fable, certainly, with regard to conditions where extreme variations of light and temperature have been used to frightening effect. Wherever the psychic and bodily envelope is violated, questions about what constitutes the self are relevant. We know from neuroscience that the idea of a permanent ‘I’ is a fiction, that our mind is nothing but a bundle or collection of different perceptions. The self that inhabits one’s body today is only similar to, not identical with, the self that is going to inhabit that body tomorrow. The Lost Ones emanates an uncanny mental and physical energy and the reader wants to experience the temperature variations, to feel the rubbery walls of the cylinder and the depths of the tunnels, and to probe the contours of the crevices for oneself as a double-check maneuver. These are kinetic emotions, and are probably the very responses Beckett wants us to consider.

In addition to being tactile, the voyeuristic aspects of the visual imagery tilts toward the predatory. In this way the construct of the eye as one instrument of prey is illustrative as well as allusive. The continual adjustment of scale and intensity of what little interaction there is commands our attention through the precision of the visual line. We sense the shifting moods of Beckett himself, as his text visually bears down and penetrates the subjects. The effect is on ruination as part of the work’s content. At its darkest, the lack of events, the casual violence and diminution of the personal – all offer an immediate glimpse into the violence inherent in human consciousness: “Paradoxically the sedentary are those whose acts of violence most disrupt the cylinder’s quiet” (14). The subjects are not even aware that they are contributing to the apathy that pervades the environment until it is too late and more violence has been committed against one’s neighbor.