THE ‘FREEDOM’ OF SARTRE AND BECKETT:
*The Flies* versus *Eleutheria*

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Sartre’s *The Flies* reflects the author’s philosophical ideas in *Being and Nothingness*, in which he emphasises transcending what simply is, or Being-in-itself, entailing bad faith and pain, by means of Being-for-itself, which involves action to realise freedom for humanity. Beckett’s Victor in *Eleutheria*, on the other hand, who is also suffering from the pain other people inflict upon him, desires to overcome Being-in-itself in order to seek freedom in inaction. In the play, Beckett ridicules early Sartrean heroes trapped between two opposing values and questions Sartre’s heroic commitment for the betterment of the future as philosophised in *Being and Nothingness*.

Both Samuel Beckett and Jean-Paul Sartre, having lived through difficult times in France under the German Occupation during World War II, ruminate over the question of being and freedom in the chaotic circumstances of wartime and post-war France. Sartre published his philosophical masterpiece *Being and Nothingness* in 1943, the essence of which is reflected in his play *The Flies* – an adaptation of an ancient Greek myth – published the same year. While Sartre was already an established writer, and *The Flies* was produced and published in Paris during the war despite its anti-German stance, Beckett was still struggling as a little-known writer of fiction and poetry. Beckett, however, began to write plays after the war, perhaps motivated by a rivalry with Sartre for whom “the theatre must transpose all its problems into myth-
ic form” (Mészáros, 42), and acquired fame with his second play, *Waiting for Godot*.

Beckett’s first play *Eleutheria*, written in 1947, was published posthumously in 1995. Though Beckett does not admit Sartre’s influence, *Eleutheria* contains several parallels with Sartre’s *Being and Nothingness*. Both writers, in their plays, for example, focus on freedom of choice and freedom of the will, ideas emanating from ancient Greek philosophers. Sartre, believing that humans must be free from remorse and repentance and plunge into action, adapted the Orestes myth. Beckett, who in 1938 had explored the concept of “absolute freedom” in *Murphy* (72), wrote *Eleutheria*, which means ‘freedom’ in ancient Greek, and proposed that a man should stay in a state of inaction to be free from every nuisance of human life other people impose upon him, including feelings such as remorse and repentance. Beckett’s play can be considered a critical response to Sartre’s idea of freedom of action philosophised in *Being and Nothingness* and depicted in *The Flies*, in which Sartre, unlike Beckett, makes his protagonist Orestes aware of the necessity to relate to other people to counter their bad faith. With this in mind, I will discuss and analyse *The Flies* and *Eleutheria* with particular emphasis on the idea of ‘freedom.’

**The Pursuit of Freedom**

The central theme of *The Flies* concerns the question of how one can acquire liberty when under the oppression of a dictator. As summarised by Dorothy McCall, the situation of the city of Argos in the play corresponds to the condition of France during the Occupation:

Aegisthus is the German invader, Clytemnestra the French collaborator, and Orestes the resistant. Jupiter [Zeus] stands for the ‘moral’ commandments that the Nazis and their collaborators sought to impose on the French people as absolute law. Electra represents those who rebelled against the Vichy mentality but lacked the will to translate their rebellion into action.

(16)

Although compared to Sartre’s clear analogy of wartime conditions in France under the German Occupation, Beckett does not present such clear-cut correlations, there are nevertheless instances suggesting that Beckett is commenting on war-time experiences in *Eleutheria*. The play is about an attempt of a young man named Victor Krap to be free