

On Samuel Beckett
Robert S. Griffin
www.robertsgriffin.com

In 1982, at 76 years of age, the Irish playwright Samuel Beckett (“Waiting for Godot,” “Endgame”) wrote a play without spoken words for German television entitled “Nacht und Traüme.” This description of the play is drawn from a biography of Beckett, *Damned to Fame: The Life of Samuel Beckett*, by James Knowlson (Simon & Schuster, 1995).

A black-coated old man, grey hair, hunched over, his head bowed, sits with his hands resting on a table in a rectangle of light in an otherwise dark and empty room.

A male voice hums and then sings the last few bars of Franz Schubert’s “Nacht und Traüme,” which sets to music the words of the Austrian poet Heinrich Josef von Collin. “Kehre wieder, heil’ge Nacht/Holde Traüme, kehret wieder” (“Return, sweet night/ Return, O you sweet dreams”).

The head of the old man falls to rest in his hands. He sleeps.

The room goes dark.

In the upper right corner of the screen appears an image of the old man—it is his dreamed self. Next to the image and a bit above it, a circle of light.

A left hand emerges from the light and rests gently on the image’s head, and then the hand withdraws.

As the hand retreats into the light, the dreamed image raises its head.

A right hand emerges from the light and brings a chalice to the image’s lips, and then withdraws.

The right hand re-emerges and wipes the image’s forehead with a cloth, and then withdraws again.

The right hand emerges a third time, and the image gazes upward and grasps it with its own right hand.

The left hand emerges from the circle of light and rests on the image's head.

The dreamed image and circle of light disappear, and the old man at the table reappears.

The process is repeated, the Schubert ballad and the dreamed self and the circle of light and the hands, except slower.

And then everything goes to black.

When *Nacht und Träume* was telecast in June of 1983, it attracted an audience of two million viewers.