



SPACE IN THREE SHORT PLAYS BY SAMUEL BECKETT

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Abstract

The research tackles the element of space in three short plays of the Irish playwright Samuel Beckett (1906-1989). The plays *Breath* (1969), *Act Without Words I* (1956) and *Come and Go* (1965) are selected because they are suggestive of particular spaces. The study investigates the mythical context of these plays, highlighting the characters as archetypes, and showing how they fit in the spaces created by Beckett. In other words, the research illustrates the spacial arrangement of Beckett in these three plays, where characters are mythic figures of archetypal patterns. For that reason, an archetypal approach is followed throughout the analysis of the plays. Beckett is one of the founders of the Theater of the Absurd that appeared in Europe in the 1940s. This type of theater reflects on modern man's fear of war, suffering of bad economic problems and lack of humanitarian feelings. Beckett incarnates characters that are not individuals, but people of universal significance. He borrows archetypes from mythology, and employs subtle language and rich subtext to fill in the spaces in his drama.

Keywords: Space in three short plays; Samuel Beckett, archetypes

Space in Three short Plays by Samuel Beckett

The research is concerned with the device of space in Samuel Beckett's three plays *Breath* (1969), *Act Without Words I* (1956) and *Come and Go* (1965). It shows how the playwright occupies the available spaces in his drama. The study also attempts to analyze symbols and character types, and demonstrate how mime, stillness, silence and speech convey meaning in Beckett's plays.

Space is either concrete or abstract. Zygmunt Bauman divides space into "physical" and "social" (145). Bauman says that physical space "may be conceived of as 'pure space,' 'empty space,' space devoid of any content relative to time and circumstance." (145). Michael Whitworth says that " 'place' signifies a conservative, static idea of dwelling" (637). This is what Bauman calls 'physical space.' Whitworth also remarks that " 'space' signifies something socially produced and complex"

(637). And this is what Bauman refers to as 'social space.' Bauman remarks that social spacing measures the distance between a person and another. The other is close to either "intimacy pole" or "anonymity pole." (149). Therefore, it is the role of every person to judge how far the other stands close to either poles.

Similarly, Coles Editorial Board note, "[A]ccording to the theologian Paul Tillich ... [s]pace has two important aspects. It involves physical location—the body itself and the place where the body is located — and also social location — a vocation, social relationship, and a meaningful environment of values" (12).

Malcolm Kelsall believes that a play without space is not drama at all; he asserts that theater space affects the performance and the audience's emotions (14). So, the physical space should be filled with



objects like ornaments, costume, make-up, music, props and lighting (14). It is obvious that Samuel Beckett never presents physically spaceless plays or creates complete bare stages. He cares about filling the physical space of his plays *Breath, Act Without Words I* and *Come and Go* with various items. He puts few stage props on stage, promoting a miniature theater.

In *Breath*, there is a pile of “RUBBISH” (11). In *Act Without Words I*, there are “little tree,” “scissors,” “tiny carafe” (25-26). “[C]ubes” and “robe” are also there (28). In *Come and Go*, “Narrow benchlike seat” is only there (21). Rodney Simard argues, “The minimalist techniques of the absurdists are adaptable, however, only up to a certain point. For example, the minimalistic staging, insistence on inner realities, use of the poetic language of monodrama, and presentation of symbolic riot are the devices the absurdists use to achieve their primary effects” (19-20). Horton Foote tells John DiGaetani in an interview, “[In minimalist plays] the effects are often arrived at through suggestion rather than through statement” (68).

Besides, most of Beckett’s plays are socially spaceless or empty because the characters are mere archetypes that stand for all human beings. Beckett does not reflect on certain individual of a certain nationality in a certain country. As an absurdist playwright, Beckett shows man as a human being with fantasies, dreams, hallucination and suffering. This justifies why David Pattie calls Beckett’s characters “unrealistic” (385).

Carl Jung states that universal archetypes lie in the ‘universal unconsciousness’ which is shared by all human beings (43). Jung asserts that “the psychic system of a collective, universal, and impersonal nature... is identical in all individuals” (43). He means that society and people share certain knowledge and morality; and so, humankind acts and reacts in the same way. Tom Chetwynd confirms, “the individual shares in a communal fate, the communal destiny of Man. Individual destiny and human destiny, are interwoven, inseparable.”

Naomi Goldenberg proposes that Carl Jung wants everyone to experience an original myth (52). She notes, “Jung suggested that psychoanalysis set itself up as a new sort of religion— that psychoanalysis teach people how to live by ‘myth’” (47). She illustrates, “The function of religions, Jung believed, is to provide people with myths to live by. Since religions seem to be increasingly unable to fulfill this task in modern times, Jung thought it was to psychology to reacquaint people with myths.... [so.] Jung set out to build a psychology that would function like religion” (48). K. K. Ruthven argues that myths are universal because they are circulated and repeated in our lives over and over again (24).

Litter is not removed from stage throughout the performance of *Breath*. This means that the physical space is filled with rubbish, denoting that the world is full of unworthy matters. However, the surrounding vacuum makes the play vague. The audience does not know whether the setting is home, street, hospital or park. It can be only proposed that it is the world.

Besides, social space is absent in the play because the voices of the protagonists who breathe forcibly have no individualistic significance. Characters are physically absent and show no social affiliation. They are archetypal patterns of man who cries on the moment he goes out of to life and suffers from the throes of death when he passes away.

Hence, *Breath* is not socially defined. Beckett does not say anything about the social background of the play. The scattered rubbish can belong to any person of any identity, age, gender and class. What increases the sense of ambiguity in the play is the fact that the voices, who are the protagonists of the play, lack both physical and social locations. Voices are heard, but again do not indicate certain identity, age, gender, race or class.

Moreover, the two voices that cry and breathe forcibly at the beginning and ending of the play lack social relationship in the sense that the audience do not know how they are socially related to each other by bond of manhood, sisterhood,



parenthood, kinship or friendship. This is true as far as Rodney Simard's comment is concerned: "Beckett's drama evokes the universal rather than the particular, freeing his characters from the limits of time and space while suggesting the subjective and universal nature of all experience" (17).

Accordingly, it can be assumed that the two separate cries in *Breath* come from one person. That person symbolizes man who cries twice at birth and death. The play conveys an existentialist point of view. After Charles Darwin raised doubts about the biblical story of man's creation, modern intellectuals like the Danish Søren Kierkegaard (1813- 1855), German Friedrich Nietzsche (1844-1900), German Martin Heidegger (1889- 1976) and French Jean-Paul Sartre (1905- 1980) promote the philosophy of existentialism to be alternative to religion. C. W. E. Bigsby argues, "existentialism ... eliminated determinism and gave meaning to the notion of choice" (9). Roger Shinn says that existentialism empowers the human will and develops "volitional persons" (763).

Existentialism is also strongly connected with transcendentalism. Roger Fowler notes that existentialism is a transcendental approach through which man accepts his life in a hostile world that makes him suffer; and so; man works to raise his spiritual capabilities to transcend materialism and human selfishness to accomplish peace with oneself (63). Hence, an existentialist person chooses by his own free will to be good, not to please God, government or any authority, but to satisfy himself.

Jonnie Mobley determines that existentialism is a "modern philosophy strongly affecting the theatre of the absurd, which depicts humanity as insecure in an irrational universe" (51). Arnold Hinchliffe refers the word 'absurd' to Albert Camus's collection of essays "the Myth of Sisyphus" (1942) where he coined this term. In that myth, Sisyphus is put in an eternal absurd situation—he is doomed to roll a big rock up a hill and it keeps on falling back; however, Camus denies that he means to refer to the Theater of the Absurd (35).

Mona Aousenna thinks that Sisyphus's absurdism reflects modern man's problem which is working in vain and suffering in an indifferent world (iii). All in all, Coles Editorial Board point out, "All the basic recognizable features of the Absurd are ... : 1. The sense of man's alienation/ 2. The cruelty of existence/ 3. The futility of conventional objectives/ 4. The futility of man's struggle/ 5. The strong vein of fantasy" (15). Therefore, the protagonist in *Breath* is like the mythic figure Sisyphus. He shortly lives, suffers and dies. Beckett reflects on this existentialist reality in the play.

Beckett employs the technical device of silence to give the same implication and convey the same meaning. In *Breath*, the litter is shown in stillness for five seconds. Silence dominates the scene after the first cry for almost five seconds. The second cry is followed by another five seconds of silence. John Fletcher and John Spurling note,

The silence in *Breath* lasts five seconds and is framed on the near side by a baby's first cry, an inspiration of breath and an increase of light which together last ten seconds; and on the far side by a decrease of light, an expiration of breath and the same baby's cry which again last ten seconds. The stage is occupied by a litter of 'miscellaneous rubbish' which is given a five-second prologue and a five-second epilogue under a faint light" (18-19).

Act Without Words is a speechless play with one character, miming to raise existentialist questions about life. Samuel Beckett mentions that the setting is a desert, but he does not define it on a geographical scale. It stands for the globe in general. Tom Chetwynd also thinks that "wild uncivilized places [are] the unconscious parts of the psyche, untamed by the conscious Ego, where impulses and instincts reside" (311). The playwright says that the protagonist "falls" into it (25). This indicates that he is an archetype of Father Adam who has fallen from Eden. He finds the Earth pure and uncontaminated. So far, nature is not corrupted yet by man. However, Beryl Fletcher and John Fletcher give another



suggestion—they believe that Beckett refers to idea that a baby always wants to remain in his mother's womb, and is forced out to an insecure world (114).

The protagonist then hears a whistle, and instantly follows it right and left. The whistle symbolizes Satan who tries to tempt Adam to sin. When a “tree descends from flies,” he does not try to reach it to avoid repeating his original sin of eating from the forbidden apple-tree in Heavens (25). Fletcher and Fletcher argue that the protagonist is exposed to various types of “goad” or “stimulus” during “the cycle of action” (15). Man is often faced with several tempting factors in life.

The protagonist tries to reach a carafe of water since he looks thirsty. Water represents life because no-one can live without water. Once a “big cube descends from flies” the protagonist starts to use it as a ladder to reach the water but in vain (26). After several futile attempts using an extra small cube, the carafe “is pulled up... beyond his reach” (27). Man is known in the Bible to be sinful; so, he is punished for displeasing God. Therefore, the protagonist is regarded as an archetype of a sinful creature. John Fletcher and John Spurling note that *Act Without Words I* is “loosely based on punishments from the classical underworld: the first on that of Tantalus, who was condemned to stand in a stream which receded whenever he bent down to drink... ; the second that of Sisyphus who had to trudge up a hill pushing a boulder which fell to the bottom every time he reached the top” (119).

A rope is sent to the protagonist from the flies. He succeeds in reaching it and cutting part of it by the found scissors (27). He makes a lasso and ties the small cube all around (27). His attitude reflects boredom because he does not help himself with the rope—he is just passing time. The whistle is heard again but this time the protagonist ignores it in boredom: “He ... starts to trim his nails, stops, reflects, runs his finger along blade of scissors, goes and lays them on small cube, turns aside, opens his collar, frees his neck and fingers it” (28). This is an absurd situation. Katharine Worth states that the idea of the absurd is represented as a monotonous kind of

living where characters lack human warmth and try to bear “the painful and absurd incomprehensibility of life” (24).

The protagonist feels that life is deceitful, unfriendly and hostile when all the helping tools (rope, scissors and cubes) are taken away from him (28). The man becomes helpless and reaches a stage of frustration and despair. His stillness and silence means that he has become tired of false dreams. Ruby Cohn points out, “Beckett penned the mime play *Act Without Words I*, in which the mute figure painfully learns the futility of motion” (78).

The protagonist furthermore distrusts his human capabilities and surrenders to death. He does not even care about the carafe that descends once again from the flies and “plays about his face” (28). Finally, the carafe is pulled up;” and this means that death approaches the man (28).

Several critics are concerned with the issue of silence in Beckett's plays. For example, Yahia Lababidi remarks, “Samuel Beckett ... seemed to be heading toward silence: in works such as ...*Act Without Words*, silence almost comes to overtake speech Silence may ... be viewed positively.... Silence is, after all, the best response and conduit for our most profound experiences: Awe, Love, Death” (29-30).

Silence in *Act Without Words I* can be interpreted differently as well. The protagonist is silent by necessity because there is no-one to communicate with him. His isolation in the desert prevents him from talking and increases his suffering in a difficult life where food and water is scarce. Robyn Fuchs notes,

Sociologists hold the view that the individual cannot develop in the absence of the social environment—the groups within which interaction takes place and socialization occurs. Within this context, primary socialization refers to the initial socialization that a child receives through



which he or she becomes a member of society (16-17).

Zygmunt Bauman points out that social space is a combination of “cognitive, aesthetic and moral spacings” that are “human-made” (145). Bauman illustrates that cognitive spacing is based on “calculation” (167). That is to say, one lives with a stranger, neighbor or any outsider, shares the social space with him/her and works to restrict his/her freedom in order to “gain control over social spacing” (159). This is due to one’s pre-conceived stereotypical image of strangers: “they are morally lax, sexually promiscuous, dishonest in business deals, overemotional and incapable of sober judgment—and altogether irregular and unpredictable in their reactions” (162).

Aesthetic spacing, according to Bauman, measures “the amusement value” in a stranger’s company (168). One shares an aesthetic value with him/her by having fun without judging whether this person is moral or immoral (178). Moreover, moral space is filled with one’s duty or moral responsibility to care about an intimate person (166). Bauman asserts, “The objects of moral spacing are the others we live for.... Moral spacing is negligent of reasons” (165-166).

Such division of social spacing can be illustrated in the relationship among the three ladies in *Come and Go*. There are four elements in this play that makes these ladies look strange and unfamiliar even if they are natural. Firstly, their names (Flo, Vi and Ru) are not human names. They are strange nicknames that are not commonly used in any country. Beryl Fletcher and John Fletcher suggest that the names reflect the colors of their hats: “Flo[ra]/..., Vi[olet] and Ru[by]” (198).

Secondly, the ladies’ sitting suggests magic and uneasiness. They sit “very erect, facing front, hands clasped in laps. Silence” (19). Fletcher and Fletcher note, “The fact that we cannot see what the women are sitting on gives them a slight air of unrealities, as though they are suspended” (197).

Thirdly, the ladies’ costumes make them puppet-like. They all look alike, wearing long coats and dull-colored hats “with enough brim to shade faces” (21). Hence, the playwright stresses the external elements that make the ladies similar, and hides the faces that reflect different identities.

Fourthly, their language is concise, compact, repetitive and ambiguous. James Knowlson says that silence dominates the ladies’ speech, and words seem to be like “an intrusion” into the dominating silent atmosphere in *Come and Go* (123).

The three ladies’ first speech is shocking to the audience:

VI: When did we three last meet?

RU: Let us not speak.

Silence (19).

Beryl Fletcher and John Fletcher think that this is an allusion to the three witches in William Shakespeare’s *Macbeth* (198).

As Shakespeare fills the physical space of *Macbeth* with the deserted wood, Beckett fills the space in *Come and Go* with another remote and imaginative place; however, it is undefined. Beckett here uses the device of intertextuality. Chris Baldick states, “intertextuality, a term coined by Julia Kristeva to designate the various relationships that a given text may have with other texts” (112). Lois Oppenheim defines an intertext as a “previous text echoed directly or indirectly in a new one” (185).

Besides, Bruno Latour argues that intertextuality, for the postmoderns, is a kind of “repetition or revisiting of a past” (74). Latour adds, “[T]he past is not surpassed but revisited, repeated, surrounded, protected, recombined, reinterpreted and reshuffled” (74-75). M. Habib also points out that Ronald Barthes believes that the post-structuralist device of intertextuality obliges the reading to be active, productive, and constitutive” (76). Roger Webster asserts that Ronald Barthes views “the text



as a network” which embodies repeated stories or myths” (99).

Like the three witches in *Macbeth*, the three ladies in *Come and Go* are weird. Their names, sitting, costumes and language are not commonly used by ordinary people. However, it is obvious that the ladies support one another and promote intimacy and sisterhood. They are happy to stay together. They share a social aesthetic space, enjoying one another’s company. This is clear from the gesture at the end of the play: “...they join hands as follows: VI’s right hand with RU’s right hand, VI’s left hand with FLO’s left hand, FLO’s right hand with RU’s left hand, VI’s arms being above RU’s left arm and FLO’s right arm. The Three pairs of clasped hands rest on the three laps. Silence” (20).

Moreover, they share a social moral space, caring about one another’s past, present and future. Every two of them talk about the third when she is absent. Every lady takes turn to disappear in the darkness nearby, giving a chance to the other two to gossip about her. Gossip here is not a negative quality. On the contrary, Beryl Fletcher and John Fletcher note, “none of them [the three ladies in *Come and Go*] is concerned with her own troubles, only with thoughts and memories of each other, sitting with clasped hands “as in the old days” (201).

The ladies do not talk much. They whisper in one another’s ears, get startled and exclaim “Oh!” (19-20). They express their sadness about each one’s life tragedy. Rosemary Pountney proposes that the three women “may be ... in the last stages of terminal illness” (76).

Though not much talk is said in the play, language has spacial significance. Margaret Hamilton remarks, “Language was conceived of a sign process, that is, as a spacial network of juxtaposition, of competing and contradictory discourses; and as a site open to intervention” (82). The ladies might be orphans, raised up in an orphanage. They remember their good old days “at Miss Wade’s” (19). Their similar phrases “God grant not,” “God forbid” and “please God not” (19-20) show that they all care

about one another and seek security for all of them. Beckett means to include repetition in phrases but in different ways.

In life, sisters, even twins, are different in personalities. Beckett stresses this universal truth by filling the social space of *Come and Go* with iterability. In his stage direction, Beckett writes that the three “ohs” mentioned by the three ladies are “three very different sounds” (22). Peter Zima remarks that Jacques Derrida believes that “whenever a sign is repeated it (re-)appears in a different context and the contextual shift invariably alters its meaning... [since] repetition in the sense of iterability leads not to the consolidation, but to the disintegration of textual meaning” (151).

Julian Wolfreys confirms,

Iterability or iteration challenges the very idea of the stability of concepts, identities, and conceptuality in general. Iterability does not signify repetition simply; it signifies an alterability (121)... The principle of iterability or repetition-with-a-difference is necessary for any writing. Indeed, a written sign that is not iterable is arguably unthinkable. Thus, iterability is of the very condition of writing (122).

Hence, the three different “ohs” in *Come and Go* give the impression that the three ladies’ have three different stories that are painful. One might be a lonely widow or spinster, the other might be divorced, and the third might have been jilted by a boyfriend. Guessing the meaning of what they little say is a necessity. John Fletcher and John Spurling note,

Beckett’s plays deliberately draw attention to the inability of the characters’ words to communicate a meaning or to pass information—except what is so stale and habitual as to be ludicrous—with the result that familiar words and phrases appear in a new light: partly as sounds and rhythms for their own sake, partly as archaic, petrified



'meanings' which have been deserted by their context... Beckett made... impotent, stultified words and phrases express their own inadequacy, trace the outlines of silence and loss. In the so-called 'dramaticule' *Come and Go* he uses only 121 words to achieve the same effect (117).

Beckett fills the social space with not only instances of long silence, but also gestures. The ladies communicate without words. Their clasp of hands in laps at the beginning of the play indicates that they are helpless and unhappy(19). Their joining of hands at the end of the play shows that they unite, promoting connectedness and sisterhood. The ladies hands are also without rings, and this demonstrates that they are neither engaged nor married. Hugh Kenner believes, "the three women in *Come and Go*... define themselves by what they do not say" (174).

It is obvious that the three ladies in the play have intimate relationship; therefore, they do not share any cognitive spacing. They do not consider one another unwelcomed outsiders or strangers. None of them tries to dominate the others. On the contrary, they share aesthetic and moral social spacings, enjoying one another's company and caring about one another's life.

All in all, *Come and Go* is an absurd play, and the three ladies are absurd Sisyphus-like characters. They suffer from helplessness. They have problems, and lead an uneasy life. It seems they have turned old and approach death. Anne Cirella-Urrutia remarks that absurd plays often "portray man's entrapment in an illogical, hostile, impersonal and indifferent existence..." (7). Cirella-Urrutia adds, "[M]ost adult absurdist plays ... [do] not provide a typical cause-and-effect plot" (7). It is not strange then that there are no available complete details that form a plot.

Edmund Thomas and Eugene Miller argue, "Absurdity: In philosophy, a statement or theory that is plainly not true, not sensible, or contradictory. Something that is foolish, ridiculous" (249). On the

contrary, Arnold Hinchliffe explains, "It [absurd drama] challenges the audience to make sense of non-sense, to face the situation consciously rather than feel it vaguely and perceive, with laughter, the fundamental absurdity" (12).

To sum up, the research highlights the spacial significance of Samuel Beckett's three short plays : *Breath, Act Without Words I* and *Come and Go*. It traces both physical and social spaces in these plays, and shows how Beckett— as an absurdist playwright— uses space in a non-traditional way, filling it with limited speech, stillness, mime and silence. Since the plays present the Theater of the Absurd, the study demonstrates the existentialist problems that Beckett tackles in his plays, throwing light on their mythological background and universal aspect. In the analysis, the researcher follows an archetypal approach, and exhibits characters as archetypes of universal significance.

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