

An Analysis Of The Themes in Samuel Beckett's What Where

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Samuel Beckett, an outstanding twentieth-century literary figure, contributed greatly to world literature with his numerous plays, novels, short stories and criticism. Beckett began writing his essays as early as 1928 and continued writing until he died in 1989. He deals with the identity of self which changes because it exists in time, and becomes subject to memory. In his analysis of Proust he explains this as follows:

There is no escape from the hours and the days. Neither from tomorrow nor from yesterday because yesterday has deformed us, or been deformed by us... Yesterday is not a milestone that has been passed, but a daystone on the beaten track of the years, and irremediably part of us, within us, heavy and dangerous. We are not merely more weary because of yesterday, we are other, no longer what we were before the calamity of yesterday. (2-3)

Therefore, Beckett describes “a fragmented vision of self emerging from the shadows of time”. As he writes in *Dream* “the notion of an unqualified present-the mere ‘I am’ is an ideal notion” (Ben-Zvi, 5). He believes in the mutability of the self. Although his characters are imprisoned in self, the prison is “so fleeting and intangible that we can never lay hands on it” (Barret, 15). Therefore, it is not possible to know oneself completely.

There is a split between spirit and matter; that is, between body and soul. Body is seen as purely mechanical and material, and mind is seen as purely spiritual. Beckett's characters try to achieve a blissful life in the mind. Beckett seems to believe that man has no control

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over the universe. Man knows nothing about the essence of things except what is in the mind. Therefore, his characters long for a mental existence rather than living through the pain of physical being. Since mental and physical existence are accepted as totally separate, one searches for a microcosmic life but this is only an illusionary hope because in relation to the outside world, the mind is completely impotent.

The purpose of this article is to depict the themes in Beckett's one act play "What Where" which was first published in 1984. In this play he presents five figures: Bam, Bem, Bim, Bom and the voice of Bam which is represented by V. According to Beckett's note, the "players" are "as alike as possible" and they all wear the "same long grey gown" and they all have the "same long grey hair" because they are a succession of individuals encompassing the individual. The voice of Bam, V is presented in the shape of a small megaphone at head level". The playing area which is called "P" is a 3mx2 rectangle. It is "dimly lit" and "surrounded by shadow" (310).

The play starts in general darkness. The light is only on V. After a pause, V starts talking. He says:

We are the last five.
It is spring.
Time passes.
First without words.
I switch on (310).

V introduces the five characters of the play. The play begins, in "spring" which symbolizes "rebirth" or "reawakening". So, as the play begins, life begins for the characters. They are hopeful about the future but the struggle of life just begins. They have several unanswered questions related to the meaning of life, existence and death. So they get busy, trying to find the required answers to their questions but this is a hard task in this eclectic, chaotic, cold and rigid world.

When the play starts Bam with "head haught" and Bom at a different direction "head bowed" are revealed on the stage. Then Bam's voice, V is heard giving orders as if he is directing a play. Bam, Bom, Bim and Bem enter and exit in different directions. Beckett displays a chaotic scene of these actors appearing and disappearing and while these movements are taking place, V repeats the same lines and controls them by saying "Not good" "I switch off" or "I start again". After some repetitions, he comes to a point when he finally likes the outcome and says "good".

At this point, Bam starts questioning Bom:

- Bam : And he didn't say anything?
Bam : Well?
Bom : (Head bowed throughout) Nothing.
Bam : He didn't say anything?
Bom : No.
Bam : You gave him the works?
Bom : Yes.
Bam : And he didn't say anything.
Bom : No.
Bam : He wept?
Bom : Yes.
Bam : Screamed?
Bom : Yes.
Bam : Begged for mercy?
Bom : Yes.
Bam : But didn't say anything?
Bom : No (312).

The questioning of Bam continues as V directs him. Bam asks the same questions once more and adds:

- Bam : Then why stop?
Bom : He passed out.
Bam : And you didn't revive him?
Bom : I tried.
Bam : Well?
Bom : I couldn't (pause).
Bam : It's a lie (pause). He said it
to you (pause) confess he said it to
you (pause) you'll be given the works
until you confess (313).

V approves Bam's treatment of Bom and then Bam orders Bim:

- Bam : Take him away and give him the works
until he confesses.
Bim : What must he confess?
Bam : That he said it to him (313).

V passes judgement on the completed interrogation and repeats the same words he said to the first interrogator at the beginning, but with one difference. The time of the year has changed. Apparently, there has been a forward move in time and summer has come. Summer always brings joy to the hearts of people. The sun shines and a more colourful atmosphere is created in this season. But for the players the only connotation of the arrival of summer is the passing of time, the inquisition still continues. Bam poses the same questions to Bim, but with one difference. Instead of asking "what", now he asks "where". But Bim cannot provide any answers.

Then Bem is called in to do the questioning. V again is in control and announces that now "it is autumn". Probably this is the last chance to find the answer to the questions "what" and "where". As before, this time Bam asks Bem about the inquisition but V does not repeat his earlier directions. He just says "so on". Bam is aware of his responsibility and he continues his interrogation of Bem but he finds out "nothing", upon which Bam, exits.

Finally, the last phase comes and V tells that it is winter now. The cold atmosphere of winter covers the whole stage. Bam enters again but this time his head is "bowed". V says:

Good.
I am alone.
In the present as were I still.
It is winter.
Without journey.
Time passes.
That is all.
Make sense who may.
I switch off (316).

With the ending of the play all the seasons have come to an end. Throughout the play a man's four-phases in life are presented. The first phase is spring which is the beginning or a rebirth, a reawakening in him. At this stage, he is hopeful about the future, because he is young. He has some expectations from his future life. He probably has some plans to fulfill his goals about himself and he is impatient to start life.

The second phase is summer. In summer his hope still continues. This is the time when his struggle just begins. He is unaware of the events that life will bring him. He still thinks that he will get what he is looking for.

In the third phase, his life reaches its autumn. This season brings a cool, darker atmosphere, which reminds one of a gloomy, melancholic, sorrowful and a sad stage of life. Now that he has reached maturity and that he knows better, he gradually loses his hopes and learns not to expect much.

When winter arrives, there is no more hope because V realizes that he has not been able to achieve any of his goals. This is the final stage of his journey. As he remembers his past, he confesses that life has not brought much to him and that there is not much time left for him. He only feels the freezing cold of winter.

Each one of the seasons symbolizes a different phase of man's life and this is indicated by the use of different names for the players in each season. In spring, Bom, in summer Bim, in autumn Bem are questioned by Bam, throughout the play. But since none of them can provide any "logical" answers, they leave the stage one by one until winter arrives and until V is left alone.

V, is "the controlling power" or "consciousness". V directs the action and imposes his wishes on Bam, Bem, Bim and Bom which represent different aspects of one individual. They presumably represent "being" in different stages of life. They receive the orders from V and get involved in an interrogation. The dilemma of "consciousness" and "being" are explored by V. Joseph Zinker explains this situation by the help of psychology. He says that there are "two modes of consciousness", "two modes of being in the world". For example, in the play while the "Voice of Bam" is "in control", Bam is "flowing in the process", while V is "grabbing hold of", Bam is "hanging loose", and while Bam is "experiencing wants sequentially", V is "seeing the whole simultaneously" (59-60).

It is obvious that these different qualities of the "self" introduce some "polarities" and "conflicts" in man. For example, if a man owns "the characteristic of kindness" he also owns "the polarity of cruelty". Moreover, a person owns not only one "opposite" but a lot of "related opposites", creating "multilarities". For instance, cruelty is not the only polarity of kindness; insensitivity or "callousness toward other person's feelings" may be another. (Zinker, 196-197). In *What Where*, these "interlaced" and complex polarities in man are in conflict and these polarities are represented in the persons of Bam, Bem, Bim and Bom. Furthermore, to show that in every man's mind there is a questioning and evaluation of these polar forces, Beckett introduces Bam, Bem, Bim and Bom interrogating one another. This interrogation may be taken as the revelation of V's search for reality. Through exploring his inner self, V tries to find his alien self which is the ultimate reality. In his explorations he needs to know the meaning of life and existence. That is why Bam, Bem, Bim and Bom

keep asking the questions “what” and “where” because man is confused and does not know “what” to look for and “where” to find it. Actually Beckett knows that what V is searching for does not exist. But all the same, just as in complete absence of water thirsty people seek water to relieve their thirst, Bam, Bem, Bim and Bom try to find answers to their questions when there is none to be found. They are tortured by the commands of V and they are caught in a whirlpool, torturing one another to reach the goal of finding the answers to the questions “what” and “where”. Finally, “self” becomes both the victim and the victimizer by its own questions. Man becomes his own enemy, because the questions confuse the mind and make life complicated. In other words, while being engaged in the process of finding the truth, man tortures himself with lots of unanswerable questions; that is, the secret of existence, life and death. V makes Bam, Bem, Bim and Bom “weep, “scream”, “beg for mercy’ and even pass out for finding the answer to “what” and “where”. This interrogation of Bam, Bem, Bim and Bom repeats itself over and over throughout the play. The same questions are repeated for each one but no definite answer is given, thus after the interrogation of each there is a return to the same point as if they are all moving in a vicious circle. This ridiculous, hopeless, and useless act of questioning takes all of V’s life away from him. Without being able to enjoy life, everything comes to an end. So, all the efforts, obviously turn out to be futile (Piling, 124). At the end of the play, V is left with no hope of salvation because it is too late for him. He is too old to try again. The last lines of the play conclude the search. “Time passes. That is all” and “make sense who may” (316). These three sentences indicate that both the stage time and human time have come to an end. Images of life have been created and beyond this point “nothing” can be told. The answer to the questions “what” and “where” still remain as the greatest secret of mankind.

In conclusion, it may be said that Beckett explores life in What Where. Life is a long, continuous search. First of all, it is a search for the self. Beckett does this by dividing “being” into four parts and they interrogate one another under the control of consciousness. While looking for the answer to the whats and wheres of life and existence, man realizes that life consists of a repetitive pattern without any meaning. Time both consumes itself and man, leaving no chance to start over again. Beckett provides no result and leaves the audience in ambiguity by saying “That is all. Make sense who may” (316), because “what” and “where” are still unknown. Hence, it can be claimed that although seasons change, names change and time passes, the questions and the answers always stay the same, proving that the reality of life is a big “nothing”. As Democritus says “Nothing is more real than nothing” and this ties in with the concluding remark of Beckett’s *Ohio Impromptu*: “Nothing is left to tell.”

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