

Drama as Appears in Samuel Beckett's "Ping" and "How It Is"

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Abstract

This paper Shades light on one of the most important writers in the modern and postmodern age, Samuel Beckett and his novel, and short stories. The paper hypothesizes that Beckett has presents a great amount of drama in his novels and short stories as he used to do in his plays and to achieve that he uses a postmodernist technique which is minimalism. The paper aims at proving the being put hypothesis by following a mixture of formalistic and postmodernist approach which fits the texts and the minimalism technique. The paper ends with the conclusion that sums up the results.

Keywords: Beckett, "Ping", "How It Is", Minimalism, postmodernism

Introduction

Samuel Barclay Beckett (1906 –1989) who is an Irish modernist , and later on postmodernist poet, theatre director, playwright, and a novelist. As an adult, he lived in Paris. He wrote in both French and English. He is extensively regarded as the most powerful writers of the 20th century. (McDonald, ed 17)

Beckett's work offers a unwelcoming, tragicomic attitude on human existence which is usually attached to black comedy. It became more and more minimalist in his later line of writing. He is regarded as one of the last modernist literary figures, and one of the key manes in theatre of the absurd. (Esslin 1965)

The 1969 Nobel Prize in Literature was given to Beckett for his writing, which in the poverty of modern man acquires its elevation in forms of drama and novels as well as short stories.

This paper hypothesizes that throughout the short stories and the novels of Samuel Beckett there is a lot of drama which is created and revealed by the use of minimalism as a postmodernist technique. Thus, the paper aims at proving the being put hypothesis that minimalism is the postmodernist tool which is used by Samuel Beckett in his short stories and novels to create and increase the amount of drama and tension. The paper tackles Samuel Beckett's short story, "Ping" and his novel, "How It Is" and is limited to them. The paper is very important because it covers an area of literary works that is not adequately covered by researchers for it is Beckett's drama what is usually matter for the researchers. What is important too is that the selected texts are of Beckett's late works that shows clearly his final vision regarding life and writing.

Methodology

The paper tackles the selected texts by following a mixture of approaches of formalistic criticism and postmodernist criticism to generate an approach that fit the discussion, because it is a suitable approach for the theme and the techniques used by the writer.

Discussion

Nothing matters but the writing.

There has been nothing else worthwhile.

.. a stain upon the silence.

(Samuel Beckett,

http://www.brainyquote.com/quotes/authors/s/samuel_beckett.html)

Samuel Beckett (1906-1989) is an Irish poet, novelist and playwright. "Waiting for Godot" is his masterpiece. He won, in 1962, the international publishers' Prize, then he got the Nobel Prize in 1969. He has a huge weight and impact on English as well as in American literary works of many writers such as Edward Albee, Harold Pinter, Tom Stoppard, and Sam Sheppard (Gontarski).

He went to France to work in Paris as a lecturer at the École Normale Supérieure from 1928 to 1930 after graduating from the Trinity College in Dublin in which "he developed a lifelong interest in Dante". He met James Joyce in Paris. Then he wrote a literary essay about "Finnegan's Wake" (Carey 7). Then, he started to write his literary works in French and then translated them into English. Once he said "half-jokingly" in French language I "can write without style." (Gontarski)

Beckett is considered as one of the early postmodernist writers. "Ping" is one of his later works which was first written in French. It was published as "Bing". A year later, Beckett translated the story into English and name it, "Ping". "Ping" or what David Lodge called the enigma seems to be a good example of postmodernist literary work.

The story has no plot, no identifiable characters, nor time or setting in the conventional meaning. "Ping" sometimes is considered as a prose poem for the special use of word-patterns and rhythm. Thus, approaching the text via postmodernist framework is safer and fruitful. (Menteşe 12) the story shows a great deal of drama because of the minimal use of words. The minimalism that appears in the text declares that there are a lot of things to be understood but they are very difficult to be said explicitly. The drama, here, is what Beckett tries to create since, he is successful in making the reader tensed and stick to the novel till its end. In this sense, it is the end of the reading process that releases the tension and the drama of the text.

Literary Minimalism

It is one of the postmodernist trends in literature that may suits "Ping". the critic, Carey states that "Beckett's writing follows a minimalist curve that ironically becomes increasingly universal as the use of words diminishes." (9) Minimalism is characterized by the use of limited number of words yet not every short literary text can be described as minimalist. It is through the context that the reader can guess a meaning out of the text. The writer's role is minimized to "A fly on the wall" i.e. an observer who conveys what he\she sees without interfering in the narration "Rarely do we drop in to the thoughts of a character." Meaning is no more imposed on the reader who becomes part of the reading process. Thus the point of view becomes more objective. The role of the reader, here, is essential. It is the reader's mission to conclude or merely feel what the writer presents. Characters, in such texts, are usually ordinary people with no heroic aspects. The character can be any one or any creature. The story presents a thin aspect of life. (http://litspot.net/?page_id=664)

In the introduction of his PhD thesis "Less is More: Literary Minimalism in American Short Story—Ernest Hemingway, Raymond Carver and Frederick Barthelme", Dr. Greaney summarizes the characteristics of literary minimalism as following :

"A reduced vocabulary; a shorter sentence; a reticence towards the expression of a character's thoughts or feelings; unresolved, even slight narratives which reveal more than they resolve; the use of unadorned language and the rejection of hyperbole; a detached, even 'absent' narrator; a more abundant use of dialogue; fewer adjectives and, when used, not extravagant; showing, not telling as a primary means of communicating information; an interest in the accurate depiction of the everyday; and a focus upon the present tense." (Greaney)

"Ping " & "How It Is"

The above citation seems very much applicable to Beckett's "Ping" and "How It Is" as will be shown throughout this paper. "Ping" is one of the initial high points of Beckett's final detachment from anything resembling a familiar consciousness. It is just like a dream or a nightmare, or it can be an extract from one's final moments of life before death.

On the other hand, "How It Is" is a tragedy. It is a monologue said by its narrator when crawling endlessly in the mud. Recalling his past life which is divided into three distinguished parts. Its plot regarding people, sacks, and mud is very clear from its first line: "*how it was I quote before Pim with Pim after Pim how it is three parts I say it as I hear it*".

All the variations of the phrase show that Beckett is emotionally involved in this chronological sequence, which are literally; before, with, and after. There is a drama and conflict with this succession as the narrator is captive in it. Nevertheless, the extraordinary reality is ever-present and dominant. The feeling of reality, itself, creates, in its turn, a sense of drama and tension that cannot be missed.

Unlike "How It Is" which is very quickly revealed, "Ping" is slowly exposed. It, in contrast, ends up as nothing but a landscape. The text presents a frozen situation that cannot be changed or altered. It is reflected from the first sentence in the text on:

"All known all white bare white body fixed one yard legs joined like sewn. Light heat white floor one square yard never seen. White walls one yard by two white ceiling one square yard never seen. Bare white body fixed only the eyes only just."(Beckett, in <http://www.samuel-beckett.net/ping.html> retrieved in 30-3- 2016)

Thus, there have been endeavors which made to create a plot, however, these are deeply all in vain. All these endeavors increase the amount of drama in the text because they are unachievable.

Regarding colors, "Ping" shows that the narrator's sensitivity changes, nevertheless in the end of the section, any hint of a sequence crumples into the "shining white infinite". The drama of this infinite is that it is timeless and senseless. Beckett endorse a removal of time throughout the text which is of four pages. What is important here, is that Beckett's earlier works went on in circular form while "Ping" and all that follows, among

them "How It Is", it runs in place.

With the eradication of time, the effect is overenthusiastically developed. The use of "a before/during/after sequence" causes the text to lose some very dear things such as; anticipation, memory, unknowing, forgetfulness, speculation. At the same time, the amount of drama enlarged. What remains is hopelessly precise, but misses the first principles of fiction; this is where the line between fiction and pure, formless prose is drawn.

Beckett's Minimalism in "Ping" is a special one. The words used in the text are about 1000 words but the vocabulary is only 100. This is due to the repetition in the story, for instance the word white is used 88 times- primary French title of the story was 'Blanc'- means white- before Beckett changes it into "Bing". (Dearsley). The word 'ping' is used 33 times. The word blue is used 23 times. The word "almost" is used 37 times and so on. The playwright sometimes repeats group of word such as "all know all white"; "bare white... fixed one yard" which is repeated in sentence 1, 17, 22, 40, 45 "Bare white fixed..." is repeated in 4, 7, 9, 25. "White on white" is found in 9, 22, 40. The word "invisible" is found in 9, 22, 40, 45. (Kopschitz 88). The only unrepeated word are "brief, hair, nail, scars, torn, henceforth, un lustrous". (Lodge 85) the repetition helps creating tension and drama in which the reader is captured.

All what is known about the character—minimalistically speaking--- is that it is a creature- because there is no any clue whether the character is an animal, male, or female who seems imprisoned in a limited space "White walls one yard by two white ceiling one square yard never seen". The place is minimalized as well. The struggle in a minimalized place is very clear because the character is imprisoned and not free so that drama is implied. The character has body, legs, hand, heels, palms, head, hear. They are associated with the word 'fixed' most of the time. No speech not even a word is heard only a monotonous pattern of words interrupted by the word 'ping' whose literal meaning had made no logical linkage to the elusive presented narration. (Menteşe) The repetition of "Ping" has two faces. The first one is to imply that there is nothing but emptiness. The second is to minimize the ontology of the character to this emptiness. However, these two faces serve increasing the drama in the text.

David Lodge's interpretation of "Ping" as "the rendering of the consciousness of a person confined in a small, bare, white room, a person who is evidently under extreme duress, and probably at the last gasp of life." (Lodge 85-89). Lodge, in the processes of decoding the ping, adds that the allusion to the Christ, in the tomb not on the cross, is worthwhile due to the repetitive use of the word sewn which joined and fixed legs, the head, mouth, toes, nose, and ear. (88)

The word sewn is one of the few bold words in a foggy text. It is the past participle of 'sew' suggesting the absence of the doer of the sewing process. The word sewn also alludes to a thread and a needle, the tools by which the process of sewing is done. The whole image of sewing suggests a universal invisible power which forces the character to be fixed and hardly could utter an incomprehensible "murmur" (12, 21, 23, 27, 28, 30, 33, 39, 44, 70). That force may symbolizes political, social and, cultural codes and concepts which constitute the awareness of the human being who seems to be disturbed and wants to flee to the nothingness. Nothingness becomes the only alternative one may find under repression.

However, what the reader can deduce from the text is more probable due to feeling and imagination rather than to reasoning. In this sense, Raymond Federman, who was a close friend and mentor of Beckett, in his famous lecture "The Imagery Museum of Samuel Beckett" delivered in (2006) following his friend's death, has said about "understanding Beckett that one should not even try, instead one should use one's sense and imagination to appreciate the imagery." (Menteşe 11) The same thing can be said about "How It Is". Fredrik N. Smith depicts Beckett's trial to grasp the instability of the process of writing as it occurs when he said that "the conflict is between imagination and revision"(quoted in Adelman 81-90).

The reader can find that "Ping" confirms Greaney's suggestion that Minimalism enriches the possibility of multi-meanings for the same literary work: Prof. Menteşe, in this regard, concludes in her paper about "Ping" that the text presents "a high degree of awareness of language" which is the merely entertainment in the lack of achievable meaning.(Menteşe 21). On his part, Kopschitz concludes that the text is open to multiple interpretations because of the potential language it uses. The language Beckett used is masterly unchained by minimalizing the use of articles, pronouns, adverbs.

The ability of Beckett to paint in words, is as Federman acknowledged when he states that Beckett is "painter in his work" (quoted in Menteşe 11), and the musicality of the word 'ping' intervals a fading, portrait which weighed down by the colors --white, grey, light blue, light rose. It almost creates a cinematic outcome which encourages an amateur directed to make a movie of 4:32 minutes which is named, "Ping." (<https://vimeo.com/17420465>)

On the other hand, "How It Is" which is a monologue ---said by its narrator who is crawling continually in the mud as he recalls his past experience--- alienated into three diverse periods. The title is Beckett's literal translation of the French phrase, comment c'est (how it is), a pun on the French verb commencer or 'to begin'.

According to Adelman, the novel can be criticized from different point of views. Philosophically speaking, it can be linked to Beckett's relation with Camus and Sartre. Whereas aesthetically, it can be regarded as an aesthetic illustration by drawing on Beckett's critical statements in the three dialogues. The aesthetic reading underscores the vain compulsion to impose unity and meaning on human experience through arts. In some points, the novel is considered as a representation of the artist's struggle against and submission to, suicide. On the social and political levels, it can be interpreted as a creation through torture of social being.(Adelman 81-90)

The text is divided into three parts as follows:

1. "before Pim" - the lonely narrator journeys in the mud-dark until he meets another creature like himself thereby forming a "couple". This stage may represent the creature's being in a fetus' state
2. "with Pim" - the narrator motionlessly is in the mud-dark until Pim deserted him. This stage can be seen as a one's being alive after delivery when he/she has his/her spirit.
3. "after Pim" - motionless in the mud-dark, the narrator goes back to his previous loneliness. This stage can be the moment of death when any one loses his/her spirit.

These three stages may reflect Beckett's vision regarding human being journey in the life, before being born---Spiritless. Then with one's spirit, then after the release of the spirit in the form of death.

"How It Is" can also be described as "a typically bizarre Beckettian situation." (dark)"(Beckett, 1964, 45) <https://booksyo.wordpress.com/2015/11/13/how-it-is-by-samuel-beckett/> :

"find someone at last someone find you at last live together glued together love each other a little without being loved be loved a little without loving answer that leave it vague leave it"
(Beckett 50)

The situation Beckett tries to depict in the above excerpt may refer to the nature of human fate. Because man is created out of mud and will return to it again after death. One who is made as a nice shape out of mud will be soon shapeless just like mud itself. The drama is increased here, because the mud-man's struggle symbolizes the human struggle

"life involves dragging oneself through the dirt, looking for other people, finding them, losing them, eating, shitting, vomiting. How it is. How life is. And there is another kind of struggle, the struggle to give form, or meaning, to one's existence, in among all that dirt, and the shitting and the vomiting. Who are you? What are you doing? What have you done? What will you do? Before. Now. After. An attempt to give structure to something – life – that is inherently without structure. We all do this. We divide our time on earth arbitrarily – days, weeks, months, years, hours, etc. – and we define our lives and ourselves by arbitrary events, like meeting Pim. There is certainly something in all this."(<https://booksyo.wordpress.com/2015/11/13/how-it-is-by-samuel-beckett/>)

In a letter written by Beckett to Donald McWhinnie who worked at BBC Radio Drama in April 6th, 1960, an explanation was given about his extraordinary text as the invention of a

"man' lying panting in the mud and dark murmuring his 'life' as he hears it obscurely uttered by a voice inside him... The noise of his panting fills his ears and it is only when this abates that he can catch and murmur forth a fragment of what is being stated within... It is in the third part that occurs the so-called voice 'quaqua', its interiorization and murmuring forth when the panting stops. That is to say the 'I' is from the outset in the third part and the first and second, though stated as heard in the present, already over." (James 461-62.)

Here, Beckett by minimalizing the time into present time only, he increase the tension which makes the reader feel the drama that the character suffers from. Past tense, in this sense, is deliberately neglected.

Talking about the theme in "How It Is" one can say that it is very dramatic. It may mirror the conflict of shape to come out from shapelessness by means of Leopardi's common sense of the world as mud (*E fango è il mondo*) and consequently, a kind of barrier between good and evil, Heaven and Hell, or life and death. Moreover, it mirrors Dante's image of souls tossing down mud in the Stygian marshland of the hellhole (Canto VII, 109-126, in Palma's translation):

"Set in the slime, they say: 'We were sullen, with no pleasure in the sweet, sun-gladdened air, carrying in our souls the fumes of sloth. Now we are sullen in this black ooze' – where they hymn this in their throats with a gurgling sound because they cannot form the words down there." (Dante 77)

Dante's *The Divine Comedy*, a poem which falls in three parts just like "Before Pim,...etc", : *Inferno*, *Purgatorio*, and *Paradiso*. It can be seen as a fountain for the drama in "How It Is". The subsequent excerpt is an instance of the text's minimalism. It has solid, poetic, and unpunctuated technique:

"the knees drawn up the back bent in a hoop the tiny head near the knees curled round the sack Belacqua fallen over on his side tired of waiting forgotten of the hearts where grace abides asleep" (Beckett, How It Is 55)

Minimalism in "How It Is" is like that in "Ping". It creates dramatic tension that would be lost if there is any sort of redundancy in the text..

Conclusion

Throughout these two texts, "Ping" and "How It Is", Beckett presents dramatic effect by the use of dense and minimalized language, setting, characters. Minimalism is very clear in both texts. It causes a sort of tension within the texts that creates a kind of struggle that the reader tries to release by continuing reading till the end.

What is important here, is that Beckett's earlier works went on in circular form while "Ping", "How It Is", and all that follows them runs in place. These places are minimalized as well.

In this sense, it is clear that drama is dominant in Beckett's works even in short stories or novels. It is created by the use of minimalism in every points in the texts and that comes in accordance with and proves what has been hypothesized earlier in this paper.

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