Enclosed Spaces in Samuel Beckett’s *Come and Go* and Caryl Churchill’s *Escaped Alone*: Exploring Feminine Spatiality

**Abstract:** Despite obvious differences between the two plays, both Samuel Beckett’s *Come and Go* (1967) and Caryl Churchill’s *Escaped Alone* (2016) essentially represent structured interactions between female figures seated in enclosed spaces. It can be argued that these setups explore the theme of feminine spatiality. As Iris Young points out, based on Maurice Merleau-Ponty’s concept of phenomenal space, ‘if there are particular modalities of feminine bodily comportment and motility, it must follow that there are also particular modalities of feminine spatiality’ (39). And indeed, as Erik Erikson demonstrated in his experiment, women and men tend to use space differently: female gender is associated primarily with static position and enclosed spaces, in contrast with male preference of exterior scenes, movement and collapse (590).

While Churchill is known for her explorations of feminist themes, it can be argued that in Beckett’s late plays confined spaces and movement restrictions are not ‘gender-affiliated’ (cf. Bryden 1, 125); nevertheless, other critics point out that while most of Beckett’s characters largely defy social labelling, ‘they have, despite their fright wigs and greatcoats, gender’ (Diamond 45). It seems that this aspect should also be taken into account while analysing spatiality in *Come and Go*, since Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology, typically employed in analysing embodiment in Beckett’s plays, ‘excludes or cannot explain those specific corporeal experiences undergone by women’ (Grosz 108). The article offers, therefore, an analysis of the strategies employed by both playwrights in exploring feminine spatiality.

**Keywords:** Caryl Churchill, Samuel Beckett, women’s studies, embodiment, phenomenal space, feminine spatiality

*Come and Go* can be seen as an extremely hermetic piece, as both the characters and their circumstances remain shrouded in mystery. In fact, Karen Laughlin argues that the play’s extreme compression, open-endedness and indeterminacy will enthrall some viewers and alienate others\(^1\), less ready to respond to its ambiguity. Three female characters of undisclosed age, wearing hats and long coats, sitting on a bench and exchanging

---

\(^1\) Karen Laughlin, “‘Looking for sense…’: The Spectator’s Response to Beckett’s *Come and Go*”, *Modern Drama* 30, no. 2 (Summer 1987): 138–139, Project MUSE.
short pieces of dialogue in blank voices and long silences, coming and going according to a carefully choreographed, symmetrical pattern, reveal little and leave much to be surmised. In fact, the only thing that can be more or less certain about them is their femininity, which corresponds with Elin Diamond’s diagnosis that although the characters in Beckett’s dramas largely defy social labelling, they usually are ascribed a specific gender. Indeed, little else is known about the characters in the play; arguably, they are surrounded by an atmosphere of “some unspeakable secret” which seems to determine their past, present and future.

Perhaps it is to evade this ambiguity that most critical analyses of the play focus rather on the careful patterning of the characters’ movements and prevailing use of ellipsis. What is also stressed is the purgatorial (hellish?) landscape in the play, as “the women’s semi-visible and semi-corporeal indefiniteness suggests that the crepuscular space they inhabit may be not entirely of this … world.” This sense of purgatorial space is heightened by the reduction of the stage to a small, sparsely lit area, inhabited by partly hidden bodies (the characters’ faces are obscured by hats, their body shapes hidden by long, loose coats) and just-audible voices of the actresses (“as low as compatible with audibility”). The actresses are also supposed to move in a silent, ghost-like manner: the directions for costumes specify that they should wear “light shoes with rubber soles,” or even more specific: “shoes genre ballerina, exits silent.”

Maybe this eerie quality should explain why relatively little critical attention is usually paid to the characters’ gender. And yet, despite its shortness, the play includes rich allusions pointing to feminine symbolism. The opening line “When did we three last meet?” echoes the Weird Sisters in Macbeth; moreover, as Ruby Cohn indicates, links can be found to “the three graces, the three fates, the three sisters of folktales and Chekhov,” as well as to deities of vegetation (through their hats adorned with fruits and flowers in earlier versions of the text, also the name Flora).

This relative lack of commentary focused on the use of gender in Come and Go should perhaps come as no surprise, as a relatively modest portion of critical texts look

---

5 For a commentary on Beckett’s use of ghostly, “pale, gray, dim, soft, faint, diffuse, or subdued” light in his plays, see: Ruby Cohn, “Ghosting through Beckett”, Samuel Beckett Today / Aujourd’hui 2 (1993): 2. JSTOR.
7 Ibid., 356.
at Beckett’s plays from the feminist/queer critical perspective. Susan Hennessy, for instance, comments on Simone de Beauvoir’s “conspicuous absence” from Beckett studies and expresses her regret caused by the fact that the female body in the Beckettian dramatic canon is still read mainly through male theorists such as Merleau-Ponty. This is certainly a valid comment to be made, as in her book Volatile Bodies (1994) Elizabeth Grosz explains that “while Merleau-Ponty provides a number of crucial insights about the forms and structure of human embodiment, he nevertheless excludes or cannot explain those specific corporeal experiences undergone by women.”

The issue of “feminine corporeal experience” is elaborated on by Iris Young who argues that there is a specific way in which women inhabit space. “For many women as they move – she writes – … a space surrounds us in imagination that we are not free to move beyond; [thus] the space available to our movement is constricted space.” According to Young, there is a specific style of the “feminine body comportment and movement” which is acquired together with the inscription of the female gender: “[t]he more a girl assumes her status as feminine, the more she takes herself to be fragile and immobile and the more she actively enacts her own body inhibition.” The same conclusion was reached by Erik Erikson through his study on boys’ and girls’ playing patterns: he was surprised to discover that “certain configurations occurred strikingly often in the constructions of one sex and rarely in those of the other.” What Erikson realised was that girls typically depicted indoor settings, with high walls and enclosures, emphasising “inner space” or “enclosed space”; they would also choose sedentary arrangements rather than moving around. Of course, in the Beckettian canon the iconic immobile female body belongs to Winnie in Happy Days, with her capacity for movement increasingly restricted as the play progresses; yet echoes of the same predicament can certainly be found in the seated position of the woman in Rockaby, measured pacing of May in Footfalls and repeated circular movements of the three female characters in Come and Go. Another characteristic feature linked with the positioning of the female body in social and physical space, commented on by Nancy Chodorow and famously discussed by Carol Gilligan in her book In a Different Voice: Psychological Theory and Women’s Development (1982), is that in any given society women are more likely than men to define

---

12 Which is surprising given the significant renewal of interest in feminism and feminist criticism in recent years following the period which Elaine Aston referred to as theatrical “feminist fatigue”. See Sarah Gormann, Geraldine Harris and Jen Harvie, “Feminisms Now”, Contemporary Theatre Review 28, no. 3 (2018): 279.
15 Young, On Female Body Experience, 33.
16 Young, Ibid., 44.
17 Erik H. Erikson, “Inner and Outer Space: Reflections on Womanhood”, Daedalus. 93, no. 2 (Spring 1964): 588, JSTOR.
18 Young, On Female Body Experience, 39.
19 Young, Ibid., 43.
themselves in relation and connection to other people\textsuperscript{20}. In the social context, this means that women tend to perceive themselves first and foremost as daughters, wives, mothers, cousins, neighbours etc., while in spatial terms it suggests that they usually position their bodies not with reference to the space in which they find themselves but rather in relation to other people present in that space.

On the basis of the aforementioned studies, it is possible to suggest a certain pattern of women’s engagement with space, based on immobility, inhibited movement, preference for enclosed spaces and stressing connections and relations to others. And despite Mary Bryden’s insistence that “movement and stasis are no longer … gender-affiliated” in Beckett’s later drama\textsuperscript{21}, it seems that feminine spatiality, combined with the enclosed space on the stage marked with lighting, define the characters’ presence and movement in Come and Go. Moreover, these features clearly gained prominence in the process of revising the initial drafts of the play, as the subsequent drafts “grew progressively more stylized”\textsuperscript{22}, increasing balance and symmetry\textsuperscript{23}. They are also recognised by actors and directors participating in Come and Go productions. Brenda Bynum, who directed Come and Go for the Beckett/Atlanta Festival in 1987, described her feelings about the play as follows:

“\textit{I found myself as a director watching these women, seeing a kind of graceful dance which seemed to me to be there … It was as if Beckett were celebrating this mysterious aspect of woman and almost admitting that he didn’t understand it}” [emphasis – A. K.]\textsuperscript{24}.

Bynum goes on to declare that this play could never be staged using male actors, as “\textit{[t]he layers of interaction and the social connections seem clearly to be those of women}”\textsuperscript{25},\textsuperscript{26}. When asked specifically what makes the text so feminine, she names features such as “delicacy”, “acceptance”, and “fragility”\textsuperscript{27}. Yet how does Beckett manage to convey these layers of interactions and social connections so convincingly without ever fleshing out the characters?


\textsuperscript{21} Mary Bryden, \textit{Women in Samuel Beckett’s Prose and Drama: Her Own Other} (Lanham: Barnes & Noble Books, 1993), 125.

\textsuperscript{22} Cohn, \textit{A Beckett Canon}, 290.

\textsuperscript{23} Breon Mitchell, “\textit{Art in Microcosm: The Manuscript Stages of Beckett’s Come and Go}”, \textit{Modern Drama} 19, no. 3 (September 1976): 247, UTP Journals.


\textsuperscript{25} Ibid., 52.

\textsuperscript{26} And yet an experiment with cross-gender casting has been undertaken by Peter Brook and Marie-Hélène Estienne in their \textit{Fragments} (2006), where the three female characters are played by two male actors and an actress known for her gender-ambiguous roles (Marcello Magni, Khalifa Natour and Kathryn Hunter). Interestingly, the production seems to prove Bynum’s point: while the differences in the actors’ frames as well as their different postures and patterns of movement may bring out the comical element in the play, they certainly do not contribute to reinforcing the uniformity and cyclicality inscribed in the text.

\textsuperscript{27} Ibid., 52.
Arguably, a lot of the “feminine” impression comes from the use of space and positioning of the characters with reference to one another. Their slow, silent movements suggest that they are moving in a restricted space, even though in fact it is not the case (the area on stage where the movement takes place is drawn by light, without the use of any physical boundary) – as a result, it seems as if the restriction was internalised by the characters, or coming from within. In addition, they all gravitate towards the seated position and position themselves with reference to the other two (one of the characters sitting in the middle, with two others on each side). This tendency to refer oneself to others is stressed by the play’s final image, namely that of holding hands. Keir Elam argues that this spatial arrangement is supposed to have a ritual quality: the joined hands of Vi, Ru and Flo are meant to form a chain, marking their unity.

This impression is reinforced through the symbolic function of the “rings” which are mentioned at the end of the play. Just like the characters’ spatiality and the cyclical pattern of their movement, the rings are symbols of perfection, closed circle, finiteness – their metaphorical meaning made only more pronounced by their physical absence (though Flo says that she can feel the rings, the stage directions explain that no rings should be visible). The rings are supposed to bring the play full circle and give meaning to its ending, as in the production notebooks Beckett explains that the final words in the play are given to Lo (an earlier version of character name) precisely because she touches both other characters’ left hands (where wedding rings would be). The rings are a symbol of marriage or possibly a hint at the women’s unfulfilled hopes, but at the same time they also symbolise boundaries, enclosed space and interconnectedness – the very features associated with feminine spatiality.

* 

The connection between Come and Go and Caryl Churchill’s Escaped Alone, written half a century later, is not obvious, perhaps, but potentially significant. The indication that the two texts might be related in some way can be found in the characters’ lists:

```
“CHARACTERS:
Flo
Vi
Ru
(Ages indeterminable)

CHARACTERS:
Sally
Vi
Lena
Mrs Jarrett
They are all at least seventy.
```

In both plays, the only information that is provided about the characters is their names and age (or indeterminacy thereof). Moreover, the name Vi is repeated. Although in Churchill’s play there are four women instead of three, the fourth character, Mrs Jarrett, is a neighbour and outsider in the other three’s circle of long-standing friendship; she is also given monologues that go beyond the main setup of the play. The striking correspondence between the characters’ lists suggests that it might be worthwhile to look at the two plays together; yet it is difficult to find any meaningful correspondences in terms of their structure or dialogue. Perhaps, then, it is worth examining how the two texts explore the modes of feminine spatiality.

In contrast with the ghostly, undetermined setting of *Come and Go*, *Escaped Alone* is set in a backyard garden. There are four female characters (three friends, Vi, Sally and Lena, and one guest, Mrs. Jarret) and they all chat their way through a series of afternoon teas. In contrast with *Come and Go*, the dialogue is much less formalised and we learn slightly more about the characters’ lives. There are no whispered secrets whose content is denied to the readers (spectators); instead, Churchill makes frequent use of ellipsis. The characters do not engage in stage movement (there are no “comings and goings” throughout the performance); instead, they remain seated on their chairs for the entire duration of every scene. They also do not touch hands at any point. This does not mean, however, that there is no stress on connectedness and interrelationships in the play – rather than through touch, this is conveyed vocally in a scene where the characters perform a song together, singing in unison and clearly enjoying the harmony. Interestingly, Carlo Vareschi notices that in this particular scene the performers in the Royal Court original production looked “so absorbed, not so much in their own selves as in the song and in the group, to cut themselves off from the stage fiction into a separate reality”\(^{32}\), as if the vocal performance had the power of creating another, symbolic space – akin, perhaps, to the use of light in *Come and Go*.

Moreover, the setting and the spatial arrangement of the characters in *Escaped Alone* almost perfectly reflect the findings of Erikson’s study. Not only do the women sit in an enclosed space (in the original Royal Court production there was even a fence, so the space was properly demarcated), but also they remain seated rather than engage in active movement; moreover, the focus is on the group rather than any individual character. The circled space of the garden is strongly contrasted with short monologues by Mrs Jarrett, in which she conveys grotesque, apocalyptic images. These speeches are clearly situated both outside the circle of friends and also outside their static and seated spatial arrangement – in the original Royal Court production this was stressed through introducing an actual frame for the stage tableau and making Mrs Jarret step outside to deliver these particular lines.

In *Escaped Alone*, no reference is made to the rings but the image of the closed garden supplies a similar symbol of finiteness and enclosure. Despite the disturbing

apocalyptic visions described by Mrs Jarrett, the enclosed space of the garden remains unpenetrated throughout the play and it seems that at least one of the female characters finds disrupting her spatiality deeply distressing. This is the theme of a long speech by Sally about the fear of cats entering the house:

“... I have to keep them out, I have to make sure there’s no cats and they could be anywhere they could get in a window I have to go round the house and make sure all the windows are locked and I don’t know if I checked properly... I have to go round the windows again back to the kitchen back to the bedroom back to the kitchen back to the bedroom the bathroom back to the kitchen back to the door, the door might blow open if it’s windy suppose the postman was putting a large packet and pushed the door and it came open because it wasn’t properly shut and then a cat because they can get through very very small and once they’re in they could be anywhere.”

Sally’s speech can be read as an expression of a phobia and its irrationality but it also draws heavily on the imagery of “breaking the ring”, or invading enclosed space. The character mentions closing all doors and windows and going in circles around the house to make sure they remain closed. There is always a danger of something happening to these doors and windows, like the postman leaving a large parcel that would push the door, or they could simply not be locked properly. In the speech, a cat symbolises an unspecified, dangerous presence that can easily slide in as soon as the symbolic “ring” is broken, and, as Sally says, once this happens, there is no way of going back to feeling safe. The absurdity of the character’s fears escalates and eventually a link is made between the phobia of cat invasion and Sally’s body – she is afraid that the animal could get under her hand when she puts it out, which can potentially be linked with the fact that the pose with one’s limbs outstretched, moved away from the body, goes against the typical patterns of feminine spatiality. Eventually, the only thing that can calm the character is leaning on a close person’s support, which again stresses the reliance on human relationships and can be viewed as a symbolic equivalent of the locking of hands in the final image of Come and Go:

“I need someone to say there is no cats, I need to say to someone do you smell cat, I need to say do you think there’s any way a cat could have got in, and they have to say of course not, they have to say of course not, I have to believe them, it has to be someone I believe ...”

It could be understood then that the only antidote against the fear of the violation of the safe space is to reinforce another symbolic “ring”: the one made of human relationships and interconnections.

The above-mentioned aspects of construing feminine spatiality in Escaped Alone play, arguably, the same role as the circular movement and the holding of hands in Come and Go. From this perspective, the characters’ immobility and groupings

---

in the two plays are significant in a way that goes beyond the mere stage setup. Exploring these patterns of feminine spatiality allows the readers/spectators to gain access to the closed circle that is “full of speaking the unspoken”35 and affords them a “glimpse into the disorder that lies beneath the ordered surface”36, at the same time, potentially, pointing them towards significant intertextual links.

Bibliography

Erikson, Erik H. “Inner and Outer Space: Reflections on Womanhood”. Daedalus 93, no. 2 (Spring 1964): 582–606. JSTOR.

---


