

Relationships of the Self: An Analysis of *Murphy*

Basma Harbi Mahdi Al-Azawi

Department of English, College of Languages,
University of Baghdad, Baghdad, Iraq

Abstract

The paper explores the notions of selfhood and the state of fragmentation as a way of exposing human paradoxes. This selfhood is revealed to be essentially fragmented. The complexities of actual self-experience in the modernist period have fragmented and fractured Man, who is overwhelmed with a sense of nothingness, non-connectiveness, and disengagement. This condition is what Samuel Beckett tries to convey in *Murphy* (2000). The aim of this paper is to study the layers of self that are operating in the novel through Murphy's fragmented social and inner selves. Beckett parodies the traditional artistic and novelistic interest in human action. His novel, *Murphy*, undermines the characters' actions, and its language exposes the essential absurdity of its social subject. The construction of the self is seen in terms of the language used, the descriptive judgment of which is ultimately rendered meaningless. The disconnection between the mental and physical realms leads eventually to the creation of the isolated and alienated self.

Key Words: alienation, contingency, language, modernity, selfhood

Cite as: Al-Azawi, B.H. M. (2017). Relationships of the Self: An Analysis of *Murphy*. *Arab World English Journal for Translation & Literary Studies*, 1(2).

DOI:<http://dx.doi.org/10.24093/awejtls/vol1no2.4>

Introduction

The fragmented self is a recurrent theme in the modern literature in which it may take the form of a character that experiences a splitting or a fracturing of consciousness. Civilized society fragments the natural man by changing him into a mere social function and by suppressing many of his potentialities and desires. In such a world, Man lives in a state of fragmentation, striving vainly to find an identity. Brown (1989) argues that

a variety of factors are involved in the phenomenon – most obviously, the general diffusion of social alienation, the rise of the psychoanalytic movement, the disorientation brought about by the shock of the Great War and increasing experimentalism of almost all the contemporary artistic movements (p.1).

Man is estranged from his true being, overwhelmed with a sense of nothingness, alienation, non-connectiveness, and disengagement. Man tries throughout his life to find order in the universe. However, he fails because he cannot understand or find an identity of his own. With the status of one's selfhood unresolved, one can give no meaning to oneself nor to the world.

Samuel Beckett is concerned with representations of the fragmentary self and how such representations construct selfhood as essentially fragmentary. Brown (1989) states that "the fragmentary self is rendered as selfhood where all parts and aspects are of the same interest; where everything is equally valid" (p.107). By complicating the traditional notion of the self, Beckett seeks to convey the reality of "self-fragmentariness". Brown (1989) believes that "the self's suffering and moments of strange ecstasy are expressed in everything [Beckett] has done" (p.177). Beckett constructs his characters such that they "seem at once so detached from the material world and so helplessly trapped within it, at once so complex and roughly awkward" (Figlerowicz, 2011, p.77).

Fragmented Self in *Murphy*

This study is concerned with exploring the layers of self that are operating in *Murphy* through Murphy's fragmented social and inner selves. In *Murphy* (2000), Beckett attempts to problematize and complicate the traditional notion of the self by showing its inherent fragmentation. His work examines the concept of the self and its connection to the written word. Gendron (2004) confirms that Beckett evokes "elements of traditional narrative and of the self in order ultimately to problematize any beliefs we might have about narrative and about the writing/written subject" (p.1). Beckett's complication of concept of the self functions as a means to convey the complexities of actual self-experience in the modernist period. Katz (1999) explains:

Beckett's prose has been increasingly described as a labor of refusal – a refusal not only of what traditionally has made possible narrative and the novel, but also of the major conventional supposition concerning the primacy of consciousness, subjectivity and expression for the artistic act. (p.1)

Beckett parodies the conventional literary modes of a character development by presenting a fragmentary self that exposes the paradoxes of being human. The arbitrariness and randomness

of Murphy's existence is connected in a way with selfhood and its realization. The traditional hero is always in search of an identity, while Beckett's hero, as Cornwell (1973) suggests, "flees from it: his quest is for anonymity, for self-annihilation" (p.41). In *Murphy*, we witness this very flight and retreat.

By making the protagonist's name the novel's title, Beckett seems to parody the possibility of disclosing the nature and reality of human character in depth and to show the inability of language to reveal that reality. Skerl (1974) comments that *Murphy* emphasizes man's conflict with "the basic irrationality of existence and his inability to comprehend or communicate this ultimate reality" (p.474). Miller (1999) confirms that Beckett "replaces self-reflexive consciousness as a literary organizing principle with means that emphasize social and semantic contingency . . . at the heart of the word (including the word "I")" (p.195), and his choice of the novel's title reflects this shift. To elaborate on this point, I refer to Lodge's argument, which states that the realist writers of earlier modernist fiction tend to use the names of persons for titles, while the modernist writers prefer metaphorical and semi-metaphorical titles (Miller, 1999). But Beckett's title hardly reflects the tendency of the earlier modernist writers. On the contrary, his title, Miller says, is a kind of empty sign, common name, or pun that intensifies the "contingency of the reference of an undistinguished name [like Murphy] . . . to a particular character" (p.195).

Murphy deals with the distinction between the mental and physical worlds or as Steinberg (1972) puts it, "the distinction between the external and internal" (p.93). When Murphy is first introduced, he

[sits] naked in his rocking-chair of undressed teak, guaranteed not to crack, wrap, shrink, corrode, or creak at night. It was his own, it never left him. The corner in which he sat was curtained off from the sun . . . Seven scarves held him in position. (1-2)

His first encounter happens within the context of confinement. Murphy creates for himself a bounded existence in which his frustration with social embodiment is arbitrated through the delight he finds in "imagined transcendence":

He sat in his rocking chair in this way because it gave him pleasure! First it gave his body pleasure, it appeased his body. Then it set him free in his mind. For it was not until his body was appeased that he could come alive in his mind, as described in section six. And life in his mind gave him pleasure, such pleasure that pleasure was not the word. (2)

Murphy tries to locate his sense of the self in the realm of imagination. The body, for Murphy, is a kind of imprisonment, an extension of the physical world from which he is alienated. According to Murphy, mind has become a realm in which one can experience freedom; the only realm that one can manipulate. Therefore, Murphy considers mind and body as "two separate worlds" that can never "be united, though they might cooperate at times" (Cornwell, 1973, p.42). However, Murphy fails to completely free his mind from his body, for the two worlds overlap. Incapable of unifying mind and body or of bearing "the burden of consciousness," Murphy, Cornwell (1974) points out, "retreats from himself" (p.42).

Miller (1999) comments that Murphy's character could be viewed in relation to his social background, and his retreat "can be seen as a response to increasing pressures threatening the presumably autonomous subject of consciousness" (p.186). But Murphy's character reflects Beckett's doubts about "consciousness as a basic artistic value" (p.186). Therefore, his mind/body struggle could be considered "a defensive protest against the social forces that constantly undermine his illusory autonomy" (Miller, 1999, p.188). In fact, Beckett rejects the modernist emphasis on consciousness as a tool for the reclamation of the past, as reflected in texts.

Murphy's "tactics" for dealing with the commonality of the social fabrics are associated with his body. He attempts to do is to turn his body against the social. One example that illustrates this is Murphy's trick and attempt to get another cup of tea, or "1.83 cups approximately" (84), which expresses "its merit as a little triumph of tactics in the face of the most fearful odds" (82). Apparently, Murphy's pleasure is derived from his ability to manipulate his body.

For Murphy, social meaning is subject to a state of regularity, which is reflected in Neary's futile cycle of bar stools upon which ". . . he sat all day, moving slowly from one stool to another until he completed the circuit of the counters, when he would start all over again in the reverse direction" (56). Neary's circuit expresses an essential stability within the limits of the "big world," in which "[t]he sun shone, having no alternative, on the nothing new" (1). The very regularity of the novel's action creates a "closed system," as things were, are, and always will be the same. This system will continue until "the system is dismantled".

Kennedy (1989) thinks that "the total loss of certainty concerning both the self and its language(s) becomes a powerful negative/creative force that drives Beckett's work towards the limits of art" (p.14). As we see in *Murphy*, these "limits of art" are reflected in the limitations of language as a medium to define a self. Beckett mocks the traditional artistic and novelistic interest in human action, by undermining the characters' actions and through the novel's language, which functions here to parody the social subject by exposing its essential absurdity. In fact, from the very beginning, Beckett portrays his characters as mostly puppets and caricatures, where any attempt at providing an in-depth character analysis would seem frivolous.

Kennedy (1989) refers to Murphy as an "anti-hero"; his alienation is "both actual and philosophical. His life . . . cannot connect mind and body, and cannot reconcile his need for 'self-immersed indifference to the contingencies of the contingent world' with his passion for Celia" (p.107). According to Murphy, the modern world is defined by the contingency of human connections. This sense of contingency is reflected in the relationship between Murphy and Celia: "The part of him that he hated craved for Celia, the part that he loved shrivelled up at the thought of her" (8). Celia is like the body for Murphy; abhorrent and needed. In fact, Murphy's life is subject to chance. Steinberg (1972) remarks that "While chance is that which allows for untold possibilities in early romantic literature . . . in modern literature, chance is that to which man is subservient, from which he cannot escape, and hence of which he is a prisoner" (p.93). It is by chance that Murphy meets Celia, by chance that he obtains a job, by chance that the gas goes on in the w.c, which eventually leads to Murphy's death.

The opening of section two indicates the reduction of the self to its minimum. Murphy is paradoxically identified by his connection with Celia. However, identity is detached and disconnected from any sense of understanding. Jones (2000) argues that “identity in Beckett is consistently shown to lie not in the sequential and motive logic of the narrative presentation of distinguishable protagonist, but elsewhere” (p.189). According to Jones (2000), the “sense of self cannot be reduced to the analysis of the constitution of psychic identity in language” (p.189). Murphy’s alienation is reflected in his inability to form meaning from within the social. The problem of Murphy, or of any divided and alienated subject, is reflected in the failure of both self and language. Celia finds in her connection with Murphy a kind of essential collapse of sense:

She felt, as she felt so often with Murphy, spattered with words that went dead as soon as they sounded; each word obliterated, before it had time to make sense, by the word that came next; so that in the end she did not know what had been said. It was like difficult music heard for the first time. (40)

The futility of language to communicate meaning refers to that rupture between intention and the ultimate insignificance of the utterance itself. Jacques Lacan (1981) expresses that the concept of the “word” itself is a “presence made of absence”; for Lacan (1981), a “process of replacement occurs that co-founds and obscures the real” (p.39). This is Murphy’s case; his use of language takes place in opposition to the rules of meaning, as a function of the social. Therefore, Murphy’s inability to provide a verbal context for meaning reveals that essential paradox within the limits of the physical world. The construction of the self is seen in terms of the language used, the descriptive judgment of which is ultimately rendered meaningless. Within the realm of the physical or actual world, Murphy does not have any agency. He is acted on and articulated through his apprehension via objectification. The language and the needs of that world are not his own; rather, they are forces to which Murphy is passively subjected.

Murphy lives on “small charitable sums.” He refuses to work but is forced by the persuasive appeal of his prostitute, Celia, with whom he lives to seek a job. Celia wants to help Murphy to achieve thereby a reconciliation between body and mind. An opportunity to work comes to him through the character of Austin Ticklepenny, “Pot Poet/ From the county of Dublin” (84). Murphy works as an attendant at the Magdalen Mental Mercyseat. According to Murphy Ticklepenny’s “role” at the MMM delineates the division between Murphy and the social. What represents a prison to Ticklepenny is Murphy’s “home.” For Murphy, the M.M.M. is a kind of mental escape, a refuge from the actual world. There he can get his “long-sought mental autonomy from the contingencies of everyday life” (Miller, 1989, 190). However, this move and displacement lead to his accidental death. In the asylum, he hopes to enjoy mental freedom, to find “the part of him that he loved” (109). For Murphy, the M.M.M. represents the space of his “little world”:

Murphy’s mind pictured itself as a large hollow sphere, hermetically closed to the universe without. This was not an impoverishment, for it excluded nothing that it did not itself contain. Nothing ever had been, was or would be in the universe outside it but was already present as virtual, or actual, or virtual rising into actual, or actual falling into virtual, in the universe inside it. (107)

Murphy's space of the mind is self-creating. His mind is "a closed system, subject to no principle of change but its own, self-sufficient and impermeable to the vicissitudes of the body" (109). Murphy's mind is not an "apparatus" but a space that embodies a kind of "orderly disorder".

In *Murphy*, Beckett identifies the "three zones" of Murphy's mind; "light, half-light, dark, each with its particularity" (111). The dark zone, to which Murphy retreats, is defined as "commotion and the pure forms of commotion" (112). Ackerley (2004) suggests that even though Murphy

pursues a willed retreat into the dark zone, the loss of his conscious autonomy is overcome by his regrettable but fundamental sanity; that is, he cannot both retreat to the third part of his mind to succumb to the fascination of its unconscious contents, *and* be conscious of so doing (p.42)

For Murphy, the third zone is the most appealing zone, where he can experience absolute freedom from desire and "individual consciousness." The space of the M.M.M. provides Murphy with the imaginary security of a self-contained system. In this "closed system"

There was the mental fact and the physical fact, equally real if not equally pleasant. . . . The mind felt its actual part to be above and bright, its virtual part to be beneath and fading into dark, without however connecting this with the ethical yoyo. The mental experience was cut off from the physical experience; its criteria were not those of the physical experience. (108)

Hence, the mental world, for Murphy, is isolated from others, or in other words, from the physical world. In fact, Murphy is the product of his own system, and the inner space of the M.M.M. corresponds to those divergent "points of view" that outline the breach between self and other. In fact, Murphy feels "himself split in two," and his identification with the patients, and their spaces, is a result of this splitting of the self:

The patients were described as "cut off" from reality . . . The function of treatment was to bridge the gulf, translate the sufferer from his own pernicious little private dunghill to the glorious world of discrete particles, where it would be his inestimable prerogative once again to wonder, love, hate, desire, rejoice and howl in a reasonable balanced manner and to comfort himself with the society of others in the same predicament. (177)

It is this disconnection between the mental and physical realms that leads to the creation of the isolated and alienated self. Throughout the novel, Murphy hopes to retreat totally into the mental world. However, Murphy's belief that it is possible to withdraw from the actual world and his acquaintances prove to be a self-deception, for in reality, Murphy is part of the physical world. The two boundaries, therefore, remain unsettled. The fluctuation between the potential and the real defines Murphy's fragmented self. His being needed by others represents the limits of his being:

Murphy then is actually being needed by five people outside himself. By Celia, because she loves him. By Neary, because he thinks of him as the Friend at last. By Miss Counihan, because she wants a surgeon. By Cooper, because he is being employed to that end. By

Wylie, because he is reconciled to doing Miss Counihan the honour, in the not too distant future, of becoming her husband. (202)

Murphy pursues a retreat from “the big world” into “the little world.” However, as Cornell asserts, “Murphy is continually drawn back into ‘the big world’ by the demands of his body” (p.42). Murphy is the centre upon whom all depend. This may lead the reader to assume that Murphy is the hero of the novel for Murphy is the only character who is not described as a “puppet”. Farrow (1991) notes that “Murphy is not a merely character . . . he is the type of controlling model for all the other characters (as his name, the Everyman among Irish surnames, indicates)” (p.52). However, Murphy could be seen as both an everyman and an individual. He might be exceptional in his realization of the social “tactics” that define his identity.

At the beginning, Murphy attaches himself to Neary because he thinks that Neary will show him how to free his mind from his body. However, in fact, Neary intends only to reverse the confinement of the body to the mind. When he meets Mr. Endon, Murphy hopes to discover some knowledge of himself. The games of chess that Murphy plays with Mr. Endon reinforce his identification with the patients and his construction of “home” and “connexion” within the M.M.M. Murphy seeks to find an identity in his connection with the “Other”, and his self-objectification is to integrate himself into the “Other.” His creation of the self reveals the way in which the divided self is unified with the “Other.” Mountz (2009) explains that “by placing one’s self at the centre, the “other” always constitutes the outside, the person who is different” (p.328). However, the novel shows the impossibility of such a unification. Murphy’s position as both inside and outside the social reflects his eventual alienation from the object of his desire.

The immobile nature of the game of chess, in which “neither player would have lost a piece or even checked the other” (187-188) creates, for Murphy, a kind of constancy of “place,” and connection with the patients. After looking through the window of the padded cell and into the eyes of Mr. Endon, Murphy loses the ability to “see”. He cannot remember his mother, his father, nor even “the men, women, children and animals that belong to worse stories than this” (251). What he sees is only “[s]craps of bodies, of landscapes, hands, eyes, lines and colours evoking nothing” (252). Murphy sees the “unseen” that forms Mr. Endon’s vision (250). This desire for the “unseen” explains Murphy’s desire to sit in the dark. Murphy does not like physical light, for it diverts him from the inner life; it is in the dark that he sees what he wants to see the “unseen.” While he is sitting in the dark, Murphy imagines that the third zone of his mind is the darkest, suggesting that freedom lies in the unseen of one’s dark zones in one’s inner life.

The final game of chess between Murphy and Mr. Endon, in which Murphy is repudiated, precipitates the end of the text and the end of Murphy himself. Murphy’s search for “home” and “self” is preceded by a sense of loss. Thus, freedom through identification with the “Other” is impossible for Murphy. Within this loss, there is a breakdown into nothingness:

[Murphy] dropped his head on his arms in the midst of the chessmen, which scattered with a terrible noise. Mr. Endon's finery persisted for a little while in an after-image scarcely inferior to the original. Then this also faded and Murphy began to see nothing, that colourlessness which is such a rare postnatal treat, being the absence (to abuse a nice distinction) not of *percipere* but of *percipi*. His other senses also found themselves at peace, an unexpected pleasure. Not the numb peace of their own suspension but the positive

peace that comes when the somethings give way, or perhaps simply add up, to the Nothing. (246)

There is a deadening of affect, an essential separation of the self from context. Murphy's inability to escape his socialization reflects the absurdity of doing so. He is like the game, bound to the rules of the system of the actual world. This attempt at self-isolation ends in his accidental death. Death seems the only solution for Murphy to escape the confinement of the "inner corner" in which he finds himself locked. His corpse is scattered as his fragmented self is in life. Murphy's ashes are scattered on the floor of the bar, and "swept away with the sand, the beer, the butts, the glasses, the matches, the spits, the vomit" (275). Therefore, in the end, "Murphy's whole system of values is overturned: neither his name nor his mind is any proof of identity but only this scarlet maculation of his basest part" (Miller, 1989, p.197); the large birthmark on his right buttock.

Conclusion

In conclusion, what we have in *Murphy* is a world where "men . . . are more acted upon than acting" (Steinberg, 1972, p.95), a world where "livings . . . [are] being made away" (Beckett, 2002, p.67) and from which Murphy escapes into his "little world" (his closed system) where certain aspects of the self could be realized and articulated. However, Murphy could not survive his closed system of lucidity and desire. In the end, what Murphy confronts is the void of the self and that deceptive freedom, which is "the freedom of that light and dark that did not clash, nor alternate" (252).

About the Author

Dr. Basma Harbi mahdi Al-Azawi is an English Language instructor in the English Department, College of Languages, University of Baghdad. She has PhD in English Literature from the University of Calgary, Canada, and M.A. in American Literature from the University of Baghdad. Her areas of interest are Postcolonial, English, and American Literature.

References

- Ackerley, Chris. (2004). THE UNCERTAINTY OF SELF: Samuel Beckett and the Location of the Voice. *Samuel Beckett Today*, 14, 39-51.
- Beckett, Samuel. (2000). *Murphy*. New York: Grove Press.
- Brown, Dennis. (1989). *The Modernist Self in Twentieth-Century English Literature: A Study in self-Fragmentation*. New York: St. Martin's Press.
- Cornwell, Ethel F. (1973, January). The Flight from Self. *PMLA*, 88, (1), 41-51.
- Farrow, Anthony. (1991). *Early Beckett: Art and Allusion in More Pricks Than Kicks and Murphy*. New York: The Whitston.
- Figlerowicz, Marta. (2011, Winter). Bounding the Self: Ethics, Anxiety and Territories of Personhood in Samuel Beckett's Fiction. *Journal of Modern Literature*, 34, (2), 76-96.
- Fletcher, John. (1972). *The Novels of Samuel Beckett*. London: Chatto & Windus.
- Gendron, Sara. (2004, Autumn). "A Cogito for the Dissolved Self:" Writing, Presence, and the Subject in the Work of Samuel Beckett, Jacques Derrida, and Gilles Deleuze. *Journal of Modern Literature*, 28, (1), 47-64.
- Jones, David Houston. (2000). *The Body Abject: Self and Text in Jean Genet and Samuel Beckett*. Oxford: Peter Lang.

- Katz, Daniel. (1999). *Saying I No More: Subjectivity and Consciousness in the Prose of Samuel Beckett*. Illinois: Northwestern UP.
- Kennedy, Andrew K. (1989). *Samuel Beckett*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP.
- Lacan, Jacques. (1981). *The Language of the Self: The Function of Language in Psychoanalysis*. Trans. Anthony Wilden. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP.
- Miller, Tyrus. (1999). *Late Modernism: Politics, Fiction and the Arts Between the World Wars*. Berkeley: University of California.
- Mountz, Alison. (2009). The Other. In Carolyne Gallaher, Carl T. Dahlman, Mary Gilmartin, Alison Mountz, and Peter Shirlow, *Key Concepts in Political Geography* (pp. 328-338). London: SAGE Publications Ltd.
- Skerl, Jennie, Fritz Mauthner and Samuel Beckett. Fritz Mauthner's (1974, Autumn). Critique of Language in Samuel Beckett's *Watt*. *Contemporary Literature*, 15, (4), 474-487.
- Steinberg, S. C. (1972). The External and Internal in *Murphy*. *Twentieth Century Literature*, 18, 93-110.