

# **Nohow on: Three Novels Study Guide**

## **Nohow on: Three Novels by Samuel Beckett**

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## Plot Summary

"Nohow On" is one of Samuel Beckett's last works, and is comprised of three 'novels,' which are closer in form to short stories: "Company," "Ill Seen Ill Said," and "Worstward Ho." These works, both individually and in tandem, explore various themes, from confinement and memory, to loneliness and existence, to death and, of course, the process of writing itself.

In "Company," a man lies on his back in a dark room, and a voice comes to him from the darkness, beginning to narrate both what is happening to him at the moment (namely, lying on his back in a dark room) as well as his thoughts and memories of his earlier life. These vary from moments with his mother, his father's experience of his son's birth, moments spent with a lover, and so forth. At the end of the story, the man begins to crawl across the room, inventing a hearer for his story, to whom the story may actually belong, and falls repeatedly as he crawls. Finally, he is, the narrative states, as he always has been: alone.

"Ill Seen Ill Said" describes an old woman's last days in a cabin, alone. The woman also remembers her past, though in a far more abstract way than the man in the first story did. Her memories are mostly images: of a black figure on snow, of tombstones, of lambs. Nature plays an all-important role in this novel, and it is the least bleak of the three, as the synthesis of the woman into her surroundings, and her bleeding into nature, evokes a kind of joy.

Finally, "Worstward Ho" has no protagonist, per se, but rather is an exploration of metafiction and the writing process, as the reader plays an active role in creating a narrative, which is never truly a narrative, but only a progression of creation, led by Beckett. Here, the writing only provides such basics as "a body," or "a place," and the reader must make the links through whatever means possible. As such, the work is an important exploration of artistic expression in a random universe.



# Company

## Company Summary

"Company" is the first of Beckett's three novels, as well as the most traditional of them in form. In this short novel, a voice comes to a man who is lying on his back in the dark, and begins a narration of his present ("you are on your back in the dark," page 5) as well as his past. The man tries to figure out what is happening, and figures that the voice must be addressing someone, as it uses the second person, but not the first. However, it could be speaking to him, or to someone else; another, a 'hearer'.

The voice tells the man of his early life; how he made his mother angry, as a child, by talking about how far away the sky was. In addition, the story of his birth comes up, with his father walking down a road, waiting for him to be born. And, later, how a woman called Mrs. Coote came to visit his mother to tell her that he had been naughty. He remembers, as well, a hedgehog he thought he had saved as a child, only to return later to find out that he had trapped it in a box and it had died and decayed.

Meanwhile, the man still lies on his back, thinking of his position and considering the voice. He wants to give the imaginary hearer a name, such as H. The voice tells again of the day he was born, on an Easter Friday, and how his father's shade wandered the pastures. He is then reminded of his adulthood, meeting a lover in the summer house. She arrives late, and is, perhaps, pregnant.

While remembering the summer house episode, the man decides to call the hearer "M," and himself "W." He wonders whether it is him or the other who is meant to hear, and contemplates moving, and crawling. He remembers sitting under a tree with a woman, who told him to listen to the leaves. He crawls along the floor, falling repeatedly. This goes on for some time.

The man wants company, and 'sees' the hearer clearer, naked, covered with a sheet, his feet splayed. The man ends huddled in the dark, calculating how far he must have walked in his life; his words are coming to an end, and he realizes he is what he's always been: alone.

## Company Analysis

"Company" is the most figurative of the three novels contained in "Nohow On." However, it still borders on the abstract and contains a number of metafictional elements. As such, it serves as a good introduction to the other works in the book, which can be viewed as a progression towards the abstract, as each retains elements of the previous stories. Here, Beckett does provide a character, but the character is nebulously defined, and can really only be defined by the brief memories of the past that flit in and out of the scene. In this sense, the work (as with all of the works in this book, to some extent) is a meditation on memory itself.



Some critics have argued that these are Beckett's own childhood memories; whether or not this is the case, it is certainly tempting to read that interpretation into this novel, as the 'old man's' role is deliberately vague. Throughout the narration, he appears to be joined by a voice, then possibly a speaker, but the narration holds that in the end, he is 'alone.' This highlights several important parts of the text: most importantly, that the voice and the hearer were both constructions of the man, and only existed for him. Yet the man, longing for an audience, created both an audience and a narrative. However, by the act of being on the page, for the reader to explore, the man of course already has this, though does not seem to know it. If he does, then that places the reader in the position of the hearer, who is, in the end, imaginary.

This confusing circuit serves to make the point that the reader's role in fiction is of the utmost importance, and that everybody will bring something different to the page. This old man is not just a man, he is any man; the possible interpretations are infinite. Of course, this also emphasizes the man's pitiful loneliness, and the wretchedness of his existence: he is, after all, crawling and falling on the floor. This image is certainly not out of character for Beckett, who often emphasizes the loneliness of human existence, as well as its pain.



# Ill Seen Ill Said

## Ill Seen Ill Said Summary

"Ill Seen Ill Said" is the story of an old woman, at the end of her life, living out her time in a cabin and watching nature, part of a disorganized universe, remembering bits and pieces of her life. She watches Venus rise from the kitchen chair in her cabin, and thinks about the stones and the weeds outside; how one day she will be gone. She thinks of the moor, and some lambs, and how she is drawn to the stones. She has gradually become more and more drawn by the stones.

Perhaps her life is ending; she thinks of herself as less and less. She remembers, at night, a pair of boots buttoned badly. In the sky, there is a flash; the interior of the cabin becomes more and more clear, as skylights appear, then an inner wall, and perhaps something coming towards her. She remembers being a brunette, though she now has white hair. She considers a tomb, and thinks of her black figure making its way over the white snow on a winter evening. At this point, she begins to 'fade,' and perhaps dies.

The woman remembers being followed home by a lamb, and how she made it go by looking at it. She considers what appears to be a tomb: granite, on winter evenings, side-by-side with others. At the window, she pulls back the curtain, which is a black great coat. She is vanishing, and her smile, reminiscent of old kisses, is fading. It is time to go soon, after having returned after many winters. Her face remains for the moment, until the iris of her eye is engulfed by the pupil, and she is free.

## Ill Seen Ill Said Analysis

"Ill Seen Ill Said" marks a progression into the less figurative work to come, from the more 'traditional' (if it can be called that) story that precedes it. The gender of the 'protagonist' in this novel refuses any identification with the author of the work, providing an even more undefined character who serves as a blank screen for reader's interpretations. Here as well, natural elements become more important than in the previous work, though some carry over (for example, both the first story and this one reference lambs in the pastures). Nature, and in particular, stones, repeatedly return in "Ill Seen Ill Said," and in that sense, insist upon the woman's conflation with them. Note that the stone, in parts, seems to be a tombstone, particularly as the woman begins to fade away.

Her fading can be read in tandem with the fading of Venus in the morning, as well as with the passing of the seasons; indeed, snow is often mentioned for that reason, inviting various symbolic interpretations but insisting upon one (it can hide things, signify death, the end of a cycle, winter, and so forth). The woman as well sees stark contrasts between herself and the outside world, as she is a black figure and the snow is white; but this symbolism is repeated in different contexts, including with natural elements, so



is closer to an exemplification of the random paradoxes of the universe, rather than her discord with nature itself.

Death is certainly presented in a more positive light than in the previous novel, as the woman is fading into nature and her surroundings. Her past, her 'story,' is no longer significant; we can see this in Beckett's writing that the old kisses on her lips are impossible to imagine now. She has neither lover nor kin with her, and is nameless, as are they. Thus, her fading into her surroundings is a kind of joy, as her story mingles with theirs.



# Worstward Ho

## Worstward Ho Summary

"Worstward Ho" contains no characters, no plot as such, and is an exploration of language and its purposes. In this way, it dares the reader to bring his or her own interpretation to the page. The narration commands the reader to do a number of things, such as to consider a body, and a place, which would make a story. The narration returns constantly to a void and staring eyes; to the concept of a body, and a place. As illustration, it uses an old man and a child walking hand in hand, but remarks that the void is unchanged.

Throughout the narration, the concept of 'failing better' comes up several times, as the circular repetition of the above concepts takes place. There is joy as the man and the child plod, Beckett writes, and a woman's back. There is longing, and then blanks where the words go; the child disappears, and the man, and the woman. The void is almost not there, as the longing for erasure and disappearance grows, and then suddenly there is nothing.

## Worstward Ho Analysis

It is impossible to speak of the 'plot' of "Worstward Ho," for the writing sets itself up as deliberately against a plot. It is both a novel and a non-novel; the entire piece focuses on the paradoxes of writing, reading, and the artistic act. The writer both writes himself, and invites the reader to create ('saying' various things, picturing a body, and a place). Beckett's invented language emphasizes this profoundly, as he takes words in everyday lexicon and makes them into their opposite: unknow, ununsaid.

The constant reference to the void serves to remind the writer what is out there, that his audience are unknowable, but also the vast randomness and chaos of the universe. The return to failing, and failing better, expresses frustration at the futility of artistic expression, which is substantiated by the longing that appears later in the novel. The man, woman, and child are all placeholders, straw figures meant to serve as blank screens (much as the man, and then the woman, did in the previous works) upon which the reader can project their own images. This interpretation - that the writer and the reader both create - is repeatedly emphasized by the commentary, such as the observation that there can be blanks where the words went.

One can possibly read "Worstward Ho" as the logical progression of the previous two narratives. First, there is an unknown man with an identifiable past, searching for an audience and a narrative; then, a woman with only glimpses of an incomprehensible past fighting a narrative as she slowly fades away; and finally, there is just the process of a narrative itself, both created and un-created, constructed and de-constructed.





# Characters

## The Man

The man, from "Company," is the closest to a real character that Beckett provides in "Nohow On." Here, the man has a past, memories, and is in a space. While these are all, to some extent, undefined, they are nevertheless markers of a character, such as the fiction reader has come to expect. The man is defined by his past, with his mother, the day of his birth (apparently also the day of Beckett's birth, leading to a conflation of the man and the author), a meeting with his lover, and other such moments from childhood and youth. Nevertheless, in the "present," the man lies on his back in a dark room and listens to a voice narrating his movements, as well as his past. The addressee of the voice is unclear to the man, who imagines that there may be another hearer, and tries to give the hearer as much of an identity as possible, labeling him "M" and himself "W." While the man can, in some sense, be open to interpretation, he is certainly not just any man, and the reader must "create" using the skeleton identifiers that Beckett has put into place: that is, the man's memories.

## The Voice

The Voice speaks to the man in "Company" in the darkness. It refers to the man as "you," rather than "him" or "I," distinguishing it slightly from both the narration and the man himself. However, the voice knows everything about the man, and in the end, as the man is alone, the voice must have come from the man himself, whether or not he actually spoke. This hints at a need for narration in our lives, as well as the narration of memory and the necessity of finding a cohesive narrative in what are actually a string of random events.

## The Hearer

At various points, the man in "Company" refers to the hearer as "H" and "M." Of course, the hearer is also the "company" of the title itself, along with the voice. Nevertheless, these figments are not truly company as such, for of course they stem from the man himself. The man goes so far as to identify the hearer in the room as covered with a sheet, feet splayed, but he is alone in the end, the hearer having disappeared. The hearer is both the audience, the reader, and a figment of the man's imagination. This creates a closed circuit in which the man is, to a certain extent, a figment of the reader's imagination, while the reader is simultaneously the hearer, or the figment of the man's imagination.



## **Father**

The man's father in "Company," a nameless man who wants to avoid his wife's labor and stays out of the house as long as he can.

## **Dr. Hadden or Haddon**

The doctor who delivered the man in "Company."

## **Mother**

The mother of the man in "Company."

## **Woman**

The nameless lover who meets the man in "Company" in the summer house when he is a youth; she is possibly carrying his child.

## **Old Woman**

The old woman appears in "Ill Seen Ill Said" and is the closest to a protagonist that the story offers. She is very vaguely defined, living in a cabin in the woods, and is fading away, after having returned to the cabin after a long absence. Now, she pays attention to the natural things around her, but knows that she is flickering out into existing as part of nature.

## **Old Man and Child**

The imaginary constructs Beckett offers in "Worstward Ho" in place of characters.



# Objects/Places

## Place for Lying

The man in "Company" is lying somewhere; this appears to be on the floor, as he crawls without getting up, though it could also be a bed.

## Room

The enclosed space where the man in "Company" is lying.

## Connolly's Stores

The place where the man went with his mother, as a child, and asked her about the sky, annoying her.

## Hedgehog

The animal the man in "Company" tried to save, but which he ended up aiding in the death of, and had to witness its decay.

## Tree

The man in "Company" sat with a woman (either his mother or his lover, it is not stated) under a tree, and she told him to listen to the leaves.

## Summer House

The place where the man in "Company" met with the nameless woman.

## Venus

The planet the woman in "Ill Seen Ill Said" watches from her window.

## Cabin

The residence of the woman in "Ill Seen Ill Said."



## **Pasture**

Outside the cabin of the woman in "Ill Seen Ill Said."

## **Rocks**

Possibly the same as tombstones, in addition to being a natural element to which the old woman in "Ill Seen Ill Said" is drawn.

## **Grave**

The woman in "Ill Seen Ill Said" knows she is headed for this.

## **Watch**

The woman in "Ill Seen Ill Said" sees a watch face; this is an image that appears in "Company" as well.

## **Black Coat**

The woman in "Ill Seen Ill Said" uses this in place of a curtain.

## **Body**

One of the elements the narrator of "Worstward Ho" invites the reader to imagine.

## **Place**

Another of the elements the narrator of "Worstward Ho" invites the reader to imagine.

## **Void**

The constant presence in "Worstward Ho."



# Themes

## Metafiction

Metafiction, or fiction that reflects on the act of writing fiction, is one element of Beckett's great genius. All three novels, to some extent, reference the creation of a world through words, and reflect on the difficulties, paradoxes, and wonderment of this creation. In "Company," the process is referenced almost explicitly through the man's creation of a voice, which is a narrator for his life. This voice makes a cohesive story out of a series of random events, giving the man the sense of having lived. At the same time, the presence of the voice makes the man desire a hearer, or an audience, and thus try to create this figure as well. These two figures are implicit references to the process of writing, in which the writer uses memory to make some kind of story, and in the process, must create a reader who is both present and absent. In "Ill Seen Ill Said," the emphasis is less on the process of writing than on memory and life, but nevertheless, the fading of the woman with the fading of a more concrete narrative makes the form follow the content, which returns the writing to almost pure form, making a powerful comment on the nature of fiction itself. This comment is driven home in "Worstward Ho," where all characters disappear, except for Beckett and the reader, who are joined together in the process of creation and destruction. This highlights the reader's importance, and yet unimportance, to the narrative process, and thus points out the central paradox of fiction.

## Loneliness

Both of the two protagonists of "Nohow On," the man and the woman, are depicted alone in the present. The man has "company" only in the past, and presently only in his imagination; he is alone in all real senses of the term, though he has begun to create his own reality to mitigate this loneliness. The absence of any other in "Company" is central to the story, and even to the title itself. It is a story about company, but it is also a story about the lack of company, and what happens in the absence of company; we must always create company for ourselves, and are destined (or cursed) to do so. Similarly, the woman is alone; if she has company, they are all dead and buried, or present only in natural elements. The loneliness of "Nohow On" is perhaps best captured in "Worstward Ho," however; here, Beckett has removed all characters except for the writing and the reader - the ultimate act of solitude, or loneliness. This is emphasized by the reader's constant reminder that the void, the emptiness, is still present.

## Memory

Memory, especially memory in solitude, appears time and again in "Nohow On" and permeates each story. Memory, too, is a progression in these novels: the book begins with a very concrete narrator, who has particular memories of time and place, with other



characters who serve to keep him company, with the voice and his imaginary hearer in the dark. These memories are literally all he has; no objects or other concrete items are even mentioned in conjunction with the man in the present day, making these memories the most tangible things he has left - indeed, the only things he has left, as they are what spawn the creation of the voice, and hence, the hearer. The woman's memories in "Ill Seen Ill Said" become less and less concrete as she fades away, fading into an abstraction that comes into its own in "Worstward Ho." Here, the reader has no choice but to use his or her memory of places, people, and stories, as the narrator invites the reader to be an active part in the construction and destruction of the story. Of course, because the narrator is the one mandating the reader's participation, it is, still, the writer who is the original creator, at the same time that the reader must take this place.

# Style

## Point of View

The point of view, or rather points of view, that Beckett provides, are always conflicted — and, indeed, very deliberately so, as it is through point of view that Beckett is able to shape his themes of metafiction and the role of the reader, as well as the role of memory and the question of the audience. Particularly in "Company" and "Worstward Ho," there is a deliberate conflation of the reader, the writer, and the subject. The man in "Company" is the subject, but the man creates a narrative for himself - making him the writer - and then a listener for that narrative - making an audience, or a reader. The reader, at the same time, is creating the man through his or her imagination. Thus, the point of view is very confused, and always nebulous. This subject-ivity is highlighted by the disappearance of characters themselves and the takeover of what we have referred to as "Beckett," though it is, of course, Beckett's authorial voice. Beckett goes from focusing on the character of a particular man, to a woman who is only sketchily characterized, to simply the voice itself, and the reader's responses to the voice. Thus, if "Nohow On" can be said to have one particular point of view, that point of view must bounce back and forth between the reader's own point of view, the author or narrative voice's point of view, and the narrative voice's interpretation of the reader's point of view.

## Setting

Beckett ingeniously requests that the reader create a place in "Worstward Ho," thus highlighting the absence of any real setting for the book - or, at least, the absence of any provided setting. These stories are set in closed environments, in places from which the characters, such as they are, and the reader, have no escape - just as in life. They hint at a chaotic, random, and sometimes cruel (though very rarely joyous) universe. For example, we have the setting of a room, with no other description, then a cabin in nature, and finally infinity and the void. Again, Beckett appears to be going from the concrete to the abstract as he takes the reader on this journey. His stories are situated no where, at no particular time; thus, they are also everywhere, at every possible time. Where and when they are depends on the reader. They thus invite all possible significations, and do so to a greater extent the less traditional narrative that they provide.

## Language and Meaning

Beckett's language, like his structure, constantly insists on the paradox of fiction, of writing, of creation: each word implicitly, and sometimes explicitly, contains its opposite. In fact, Beckett invents many new words throughout this work - but note that they are all very nearly the opposite of other words in our everyday language, or indicate the absence of certain concepts: "unsay," for example, or "beyondless." Nearly every word



that Beckett invents has one of these forms, with the prefix un- or the suffix -less. Again, this insists upon the point that language is both the medium and the subject of "Nohow On"; it is what Beckett is writing with, but it is also what he is writing about - hence, metafiction. This is further emphasized by the commands he gives to the reader, as well as the more general involvement of the reader, in "Worstward Ho", as Beckett blurs the separation between the author, the subject, and the reader. Readers should note, as well, that as the book progresses (and, indeed, as each story progresses), Beckett pares away absolutely all necessary words - most usually articles, but often verbs as well. The kinds of words that remain are thus nouns, often abstract ones, and prepositions - describing the relationship between objects and ideas.

## Structure

Like most other aspects of "Nohow On," we can read the structure of the book as becoming either more and more fragmented, or more and more cohesive as it progresses. Each story begins in a fragmented way, but builds to longer passages of greater length and detail, almost as though the narrator were catching his breath. In addition, as previously noted, the story begins with the most figurative work and goes on to the most abstract, starting from what may be Beckett's life, progressing to what is decidedly somebody else's, and ending with just the narration itself. This is, in one sense, a devolving narrative, or a decomposing one, as story itself falls away in place of meditations on story and telling itself. On the other hand, it is also an evolution of thought, meant to show the reader's increased involvement in the process of creation itself. In this way, the book carries the reader along. Though "Worstward Ho" might seem nearly incomprehensible at first glance, the progression of the stories helps the reader accept it and become willing to put in the time, and work, necessary to make the piece function.





## Quotes

A voice comes to one in the dark. Imagine. (Company, p. 5)

Were it not of him to whom it is speaking speaking but of another it would not speak in the second person but in the third. (Company, p. 7)

Another devising it all for company. In the same dark as his creature or in another. Quick imagine. The same. (Company, p. 27)

Till feeling the need for company again he tells himself to call the hearer M at least. For readier reference. Himself some other character. W. (Company, p. 35)

Light dying. Soon none left to die. No. No such thing then as no light. (Company, p. 44)

You do not murmur in so many words, I know this doomed to fail and yet persist. (Company, p. 50)

But quick seize her where she is best to be seized. (Ill Seen Ill Said, p. 63)

This old so dying woman. So dead. In the madhouse of the skull and nowhere else. (Ill Seen Ill Said, p. 67)

It will always be evening. When not night. (Ill Seen Ill Said, p. 70)

If there may not be no more questions let there at least be no more answers. (Ill Seen Ill Said, p. 81)

True that light distorts. Particularly sunset. That mockery. (Ill Seen Ill Said, p. 89)

On earth's face. Instead of always the same place. Slaving away forever in the same place. (Ill Seen Ill Said, p. 96)

First last moment. Grant only enough remain to devour all. (Ill Seen Ill Said, p. 97)

All of old. Nothing else ever. Ever tried. Ever failed. No matter. Try again. Fail again. Fail better. (Worstward Ho, p. 101)

Say bones. No bones but say bones. Say ground. No ground but say ground. (Worstward Ho, p. 102)

Not yet to try worsen. Simply be there again. (Worstward Ho, p. 111)

Just enough still to joy. (Worstward Ho, p. 116)

Longing that all go. Dim go. Void go. Longing go. Vain longing that vain longing go. (Worstward Ho, p. 121)

Blanks for when words go. When nohow on. (Worstward Ho, p. 124)

All gnawing to be naught. Never to be naught. (Worstward Ho, p. 127)



## Topics for Discussion

What is the significance of the title, "Nohow On"? Can it apply to more than just the last novel?

At around or under fifty pages each, how can these works be classified as novels? Why would Beckett choose such a classification?

What similarities exist between the first two novels? Do the man and the woman share particular memories? Traits? Experiences?

What similarities exist between the first and the last novel? Does the last novel invite or reject this comparison?

What does Beckett's use of language tell us about the process of writing?

What characterizes the vision of the universe that Beckett presents? Is this a consistent vision?

What is the significance of the ordering of the novels? What would change if they were shifted around?

Discuss Beckett's use of language and its significance in contributing to the themes of the novels and the collection as a whole.