

# “Is it not time for my pain-killer?”: *Endgame* and the Paradoxes of a Meaningless Existence

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**Abstract:** *This article analyzes the nonsense and violence embedded in the very “logicality” of language in Endgame, and how this aesthetic mechanism creates an entropic universe in the play. It also focuses on Beckett’s insistence on the vagueness of temporality, on habit and on human memory as products of constant repetition which transfigure the reified empirical world of History into the aesthetic realm of this play, whose central axis revolves around an absurdly repetitive stasis. This repetitive stasis triggers the characters’ gloominess in face of their impotence to break free from their farcical and cyclical repetition of beginnings and endings.*

“The end is in the beginning and yet you go on.”

Samuel Beckett’s *Endgame* (1958) could be defined as a dramatic work that presents a post-nuclear holocaust landscape in which a repetitive cycle of beginnings and endings suggests a post-apocalyptic mood. This mood, in turn, drains away any possibility of heroism and grandeur, with the result that the characters’ need to find meaning in a meaningless existence is both the source of and reason for their torture. Given that, I intend to focus on the way Beckett aesthetically exposes the nonsense and violence embedded in the “logicality” of language. I also intend to show how this strategy creates an entropic universe in the play, in which the failure of language to produce clear references and communication that is free from ambiguities and misunderstandings creates an impasse between the obligation to express and the absence of means or of will to do so. I shall reveal how this entropic universe and its insistence on temporality, on reminiscence, on habit and on human memory as products of constant repetition can aesthetically transfigure the reified empirical world of History into the fictional world of *Endgame*. In this world, the characters’ gloominess in face of their impotence to break free from their farcical and cyclical repetition of beginnings and endings transfigures the poverty of communicable experiences of twentieth-century man, as well as the traumas he is subjected to, looking for a way out of a ruinous environment, knowing simultaneously that “(...) there is no cure for [being on earth]” (Beckett 125).

*Endgame* opens with Clov performing his daily ritual of drawing back the curtains – “he goes out, comes back immediately with a small step-ladder, carries it over and sets it down under window left, gets up on it, draws back curtain” (Beckett 92). He does the same with the window right and then proceeds to uncover two ashbins, removing “the sheet covering them, [folding] it over his arm” (Beckett 92-93). Briefly laughing, he lifts their lids, stoops and looks into them. Having done that, he goes on to remove the sheet covering Hamm, who is discovered “in a dressing gown, a stiff toque on his head, a large blood-stained handkerchief over his face, a whistle hanging from his neck, a rug over his knees, thick socks on his feet” (Beckett 93) and apparently asleep. In the interval between Hamm being uncovered and his subsequent waking up, Clov delivers his toneless opening soliloquy, in which he states that it is “finished, it’s finished, nearly finished, it must be nearly finished” (Beckett 93), establishing the thematic tension between an eagerly sought-after ending to either the characters’ lives or to their soul-deadening lifestyles, on the one hand, and, on the other, their powerlessness to activate the necessary means to that end. Clov realizes as he proceeds with his soliloquy that he “can’t be punished any more” (Beckett 93), which hints at his longing to leave Hamm for good, a yearning that underpins his disgruntlement throughout the play.

Hamm, who is totally dependent on Clov, is dying in a world that is also apparently reaching its end. Confined to a wheelchair, and being unable to see, due to his eyes having “gone all white” (Beckett 94), he relishes the thought that existence might fade to nothing. He wonders whether there can be “misery loftier than [his]” (Beckett 93) and, amongst claims that it is “enough, it’s time it ended, in the refuge too” (Beckett 93), declares that “it’s time it ended, and yet [he] hesitate[s] ... to end” (Beckett 93). Hamm reluctantly discards the continuing prospects of life such as food and his painkillers, which he repeatedly requests as the play goes on, by asking if it is “not time for [his] pain-killer” (Beckett 95). In addition, throughout the play, Hamm curses his own parents, Nagg and Nell, who have lived confined in two ashbins since they lost their legs in a bicycle accident:

NAGG: Do you remember –

NELL: No.

NAGG: When we crashed on our tandem and lost our shanks.

[*They laugh heartily*]

NELL: It was in the Ardennes.

[*They laugh less heartily*]

NAGG: On the road to Sedan.

[*They laugh still less heartily.*] (Beckett, 99-100)

Hamm’s opening soliloquy is reminiscent of the king in a chess game who is attempting to evade checkmate as long and desperately as possible. The proud yet gloomy tone of his speech is echoed in his later soliloquies, in which his pride, gloominess and hesitancy are often mingled with his prophetic relish upon noticing that the end is near:

HAMM: One day you'll be blind, like me. You'll be sitting there, a speck in the void, in the dark, for ever, like me. [*Pause.*] One day you'll say to yourself, I'm tired, I'll sit down, and you'll go and sit down. Then you'll say, I'm hungry, I'll get up and get something to eat. But you won't get up and you won't get anything to eat. [*Pause.*] You'll look at the wall a while, then you'll say, I'll close my eyes, perhaps have a little sleep, after that I'll feel better, and you'll close them. And when you open them again there'll be no wall any more. [*Pause.*] Infinite emptiness will be all around you, all the resurrected dead of all the ages wouldn't fill it, and there you'd be like a little bit of grit in the middle of the steppe [*Pause.*] Yes, one day you'll know what it is, you'll be like me, except that you won't have anyone with you, because you won't have had pity on anyone and because there won't be anyone left to have pity on. (BECKETT, 109-110)

The conscience of being “nearly finished” (Beckett 116) exposes Hamm’s struggle to outlive Nagg and face death alone – “there I’ll be, in the old refuge, alone against the silence and... [he hesitates]...the stillness” (Beckett 126). “If I can hold my peace, and sit quiet, it will be all over with sound, and motion, all over and done with” (Beckett 126). Hamm foresees that the time when “there’ll be no more speech” (Beckett 116) is coming, since he is aware that Clov is bound to leave him for good. Their being “(...) obliged to each other” (Beckett 132) triggers an “old endgame lost of old, [of] play[ing] and los[ing] and hav[ing] done with losing” (Beckett 132), which not only evinces their impotence to change their very condition, but also unveils the chess-like structure upon which the play is based.

*Endgame* takes the chess motif as its structural principle, out of which the play derives its metaphorical dimension. Its central conflict is a metaphorical chess game which revolves around the relationship between Hamm, supposedly the master, and Clov, his servant, who was taken in by Hamm as a child and therefore feels obliged to him in a certain way. Hence, the moral tie such a *noblesse oblige* often implies results in a tense atmosphere that pits Clov’s will to go away – “I’ll leave you” (Beckett 120) – against his obligation to stay with Hamm – “Then I shan’t leave you” (Beckett 110). As a result, the characters get entrapped in a viciously dull routine which in the end constitutes and reinforces a life of farce, lived “day after day” (Beckett 107), “day[s] like any other day” (Beckett 114), fraught with “the same inanities” (Beckett 114). Through the movements of the two protagonists, who resemble the King and the Knight in the chess game, as well as through those of Nagg and Nell, the two pawns, Beckett creates a dramatic universe in which the characters’ dragging lives have lost their appeal in face of the stalemate they fail to evade. The characters thus submit to the rules laid down by the metaphorical chess game in the same way as they seemingly yield to chance or destiny, as their failure to discontinue the deadening effects of their routine rather frequently suggests.

Neither a screen through which the psychic movements of the characters can be seen nor an “instrument for direct communication” (Worton 68), the language of *Endgame* is particularly fascinating. Its syntactic and intertextual range makes “the spectator [and/or reader] aware of how we depend on language and of how much we need to be wary

of the codifications that language imposes upon us” (Worton 68). Hamm repeatedly attempts to draw Clov into conversation, demonstrating his dread of being left alone. He asks Clov to forgive him for having made him “suffer too much” (Beckett 95), a request that acquires the nuance of an order as Hamm addresses Clov in a louder tone: “[*Pause. Louder*] I said, forgive me” (Beckett 95). Clov’s reply – “I heard you. [*Pause*] Have you bled?” (Beckett 95) – suggests that there is to be no forgiveness for Hamm.

Much of the relationship between Hamm and Clov and, specifically, much of the latter’s manipulation of the former, reversing the master-servant dynamics, is made possible by the gapped language upon which the plot is structured, as can be seen in passages such as:

HAMM: Where are you?

CLOV: Here.

HAMM: Come back!

[*Clov returns to his place beside the chair*] Where are you?

CLOV: Here. (Beckett 95)

The deictic nature of the adverb “here” is precisely the element through which the vagueness of Clov’s directions can manifest itself more overtly. Adverbs like “here” have their referent defined according to the context, which, in the above dialogue, is missing. If Hamm were not blind, that would not be an issue, since the problem of the failure of language could easily be resolved by other means, such as seeing. However, Hamm’s blindness provides a tragi-comic scenario in which Clov fools Hamm by giving him vague directions that the latter will not be capable of following, since “here” could mean both “anywhere” and “everywhere”. As Hamm cannot see, the only thing he is left to do is to believe Clov, which exposes the former’s fragility in a bitterly ironic manner, reversing their master-servant relationship. The central paradox underlying this irony lies in Hamm being submitted to Clov’s word games. Despite being the most powerful character as well as apparently being in control, Hamm can never be sure when he is being tricked by Clov. The consequent uncertainty embedded in Hamm’s consciousness generates a symbiotic relationship in which “the concatenation of words and phrases and the concurrent erasure of reference constitute a dual movement in Beckett’s [*Endgame*], a “twofold vibration” that is at the same time incessant cancellation and endless generation” (Berensmeyer 491). Given that, Beckett’s language can work “against its limits in the desire to transcend them and to [cause the reader to achieve] a higher level of perception” (Berensmeyer 473) of the absurd of his own reality and his own condition as human, which is presented in an aesthetically absurd fashion.

We could argue, then, that Beckett, rather than structuring his play in terms of “narrative sequence, character development, and psychology in the conventional sense” (Haney 40), prefers using poetic images to portray the process by which “awareness moves from ... a historically mediated experience to a state beyond linguistic and cultural

boundaries” (Haney 40). Therefore, passages like “I see ... a multitude ... in transports ... of joy. [*Pause.*] That’s what I call a magnifier” (106), stand out as examples of this rhetorical device, as the multitude in transports of joy described by Clov becomes the visual image which metaphorically refers to the possibility of finding life outside that “bare interior” (Beckett 92) of their deadening routine. Through his use of poetic imagery combined with the Brechtian “alienation effect”, “Beckett shows what it is like to be aware in a single moment, rather than drifting in the slipstream of culturally mediated discursive patterns of thought” (Haney 40). The use of “poetic images, which substitutes for conventional plot, results for the audience in a series of epiphanies on the nature of conscious experience” (Haney 40), having the characters realize that there might be a living world outside that shelter, and that they might find a way out there.

Not following the tradition that demands that a play have an exposition, a climax and a denouement, *Endgame* presents a “cyclical structure which might indeed be better described as a diminishing spiral” (Worton 69), given its nihilistic tone. The play stages images of entropy “in which the world and people in it are slowly but inexorably running down” (Worton 69), descending towards a final closure which gives them the feeling that “something is taking its course” (Beckett 98) in a post-holocaust world in which “there is no more nature ... in the vicinity” (Beckett 97), and there is “no more pain killer” (Beckett 127) to ease the pain of being alive. Hence, in this spiral descent towards a final closure (which, in the universe of *Endgame*, is never reached), the characters “take refuge in repetition, repeating their own actions and words and often those of others, in order to pass the time” (Worton 69), and look for consolation in a lifelong struggle fraught with “the same questions, the same answers” (Beckett 94).

The cyclical, repetitive nature of beginnings and endings presented in *Endgame* is primarily constructed through fragmented language which, most of the time, is itself repetitive, as we can see in the very first lines of the play, when Clov tonelessly says: “finished, it’s finished, nearly finished, it must be nearly finished” (Beckett 93). After a pause, he resumes, still toneless, saying that “grain upon grain, one by one, and one day, suddenly there’s a heap, a little heap, the impossible heap” (Beckett 93). These lines represent, at the syntactic level of the text itself, the circularity implied both in the structure and on the thematic levels of *Endgame*. Thus, the repetition of the word “finished” – mentioned four times – as well as of “heap”, which starts out as a little heap and eventually grows into an impossible one, shows how the motif of repetition is deftly rewritten in the realm of form, i.e., how it is changed into an icon through aesthetic devices in the course of the play. In addition, the opening words of *Endgame* foreshadow the ending of the “story”, showing that “the end is in the beginning” (Beckett 126), providing evidence of the existence of a cyclical structure continuously working itself out. Thus, lines like “it’s the end of the day like another day, isn’t it, Clov?” (Beckett 98), “Why the farce, day after day?” (Beckett 99), “the same as usual” (Beckett 105), and “It’s the same” (Beckett 106), confirm the entrapment of the characters in their own futility, tortured by the emptiness of their dull routine. As a result, they realize that “the

bigger a man is the fuller he is” (Beckett 93), a statement ironically completed by “and the emptier” (Beckett 93), evoking a paradox that points to the contradictions of human experience. Ultimately, these lines work as aesthetic instruments whose function is to maintain the circular structure of the play, rewriting the motif of repetition in different instances and levels of signification.

Those considerations lead to another important aspect of *Endgame*, namely, the relationship between temporality and language, where the latter determines or gives hints about the former. In other words, it is only through the characters’ dialogues, as well as through their constant word-play, that we perceive the passage of time, as clear-cut references to conventional ways of measuring it are lacking. Therefore, passages like:

HAMM: Yesterday! What does that mean? Yesterday!

CLOV [violently]: That means that bloody awful day, long ago, before, this bloody awful day. (Beckett 113)

are illustrative of the close relationship between language and time mentioned above. The logic underlying the play on the referentiality of the word “yesterday” opens up the discussion about the limits as well as the relation between past and present in terms of both linguistic and, most importantly, aesthetic categories. The tension between past and present points to the breakdown of communication and the consequent destruction of individualism as catalysts that lead to the deterioration of the characters’ human condition. Through the interplay between past and present, pulled together by Hamm’s stories, *Endgame* “deranges a single consciousness into several counteracting, self-negating voices, thereby making it impossible for any coherent voice to exist” (Seelig 378) either in time or space. As a result, time comes to a halt in a monadic fashion, so as to render it impossible that the characters look back on the Benjaminian pile of ruins that their past experiences seem to be. The past is neutralized by the present, in such a way that references to it are nothing but vague, which results in a series of compulsive repetitions which in turn become the evidence of a homogeneous present time of mechanical reproduction of attitudes and feelings, devoid of any content beyond frustration and gloom. If we assume, as Walter Benjamin does, that “language represents the highest stage of disenchantment, insofar as it has exorcised all earlier deficient *mythical* images of nature and cosmos, while at the same time it has mimetic relation to the environing world” (Wolin 244), then we can argue that the disenchantment of the characters, initially encountered at the thematic level, moves onto the structural level of a sort of language that gradually frees itself from any ties with referentiality. Consequently, we are faced with a discourse that is incessantly in crisis, which in turn takes us back to the psychological turmoil of the characters themselves, whose life and world views “remain ensnared in the web of unfulfilled life, the sphere of eternal repetition or the always-the-same” (Wolin 244). The character’s inability to find a way out of that entropy, along with their emptiness and futility, constitute “the prototypical experience of modern man who has

been “cheated out of his experience”; (...) the model of experience in hell where one is never allowed to complete what one has begun” (Wolin 234).

The entropic universe of *Endgame*, with its omnipresent word-play, goes far beyond mere aesthetic or stylistic categories, and ultimately rewrites into fiction the empirical world of History. The repetitive stasis the play propounds is the axis that enables such a process. ‘The work of art “reflects” society and is historical to the degree that it refuses the social, and represents the last refuge of individual subjectivity from the historical forces that threaten to crush it’ (Jameson 34-35). Thus, “*Endgame* insinuates that the individual’s claim of autonomy and of being has become incredible. But while the prison of individuation is revealed as a prison and simultaneously as mere semblance – the stage scenery is the image of such self-reflection –, art is unable to release the spell of fragmented subjectivity; it can only depict solipsism” (Adorno 127). History is then excluded, as it has “dehydrated the power of consciousness to think history, the power of remembrance” (Adorno 125). Therefore, drama becomes gesture and consequently falls silent, in a kind of desperate silence stressed in *Endgame* either by the constant use of “pauses” determined in the stage directions or by the hesitating and somewhat reticent tone often suggested in passages like “this ... this ... thing” (Beckett 114), “I’ll have called my father and I’ll have called my ... [he hesitates] ... my son (Beckett, 126), and “A few words ... to ponder ... in my heart” (Beckett 131). Thus, decline – the result of history – appears in the text, disclosing the “implacable advance of the forces of production in the modern age, which rapidly renders all remnants of tradition obsolete (Wolin 217) – what does yesterday mean after all? Those forces, in turn, end up penetrating “all aspects of existence, so that ultimately even the human faculty of perception itself is diminished” (Wolin 217) and the hesitation of the characters, as well as their powerlessness to find a way out of their shelter, becomes the aesthetic manifestation of their diminished perception. Bearing that in mind, we can argue that not only “has the quality of experience deteriorated in modern life to an unprecedented degree, but the subjective capacity to detect this development, and thus possibly redress it, has likewise been seriously eroded” (Wolin 217).

*Endgame*’s absurdity is thus achieved as the result of its immanent dialectic between form and content, given that this process presents the antithesis in which the image of self it embodies is an imitation of something non-existent. In other words, it is in the absurdity of the situation posited by the play itself that “not meaning anything becomes the only meaning” (Adorno 138), and that the “mortal fear of the dramatic figure, if not the parodied drama itself, is the distortedly comical fear that they could mean something or other” (Adorno 138), as suggested by:

HAMM: We’re not beginning to ... to ... mean something?

CLOV: Mean something! You and I, mean something! [Brief laugh] Ah that’s a good one! (Beckett 108)

The characters laugh at the idea or possibility of their meaning something, this very possibility sounding like nothing but a joke to them. Hence, *Endgame* insinuates that “the individual’s claim of autonomy and of being has become incredible” (Adorno 127), since art can only depict solipsism. The image of “the individual as a historical category, as the result of the capitalist process of alienation and as a defiant protest against it, has itself become openly transitory. The individualist position belonged, as polar opposite, to the ontological tendency of every existentialism” (Adorno 126), and *Endgame* aesthetically captures this paradox in its absurd kenotic “reality”. Thus, Beckett’s “dramaturgy in its narrowness and contingency, its emphasis on repetition and language games, as well as in its one-of-a-kind use of individual experience as literary motif, could nowhere locate the authority to interpret itself as a cipher of being, unless it pronounced itself the fundamental characteristic of being” (Adorno 126-127).

Ultimately, we can argue that Beckett’s play is an entropic universe built around a discourse that insistently challenges the logicity of everyday language; temporality, mechanical rituals, and soul-crushing routines are depicted by the emphasis on repetition and the circular nature of facts. *Endgame* contains an immanent dialectic between form and content which is sufficiently intricate to capture and unveil the paradox between an individual position and an existentialist ontology, offering as synthesis an aesthetic of the absurd. Beckett’s play is a linguistic and aesthetic chess game in which the very questioning of the nature of meaning, and the consequent challenge to the nature of interpretation, places the theatregoer in a structural stalemate.

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