

'Regards' to the Stancher: Heroic Absurdism in Beckett's *Endgame*

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Samuel Beckett’s *Endgame* is noteworthy for its omissions. The play fails to present a cogent narrative, realistic characters, or clear metaphorical boundaries. The dialogue is disjointed and rambling, and the imagery is sparse. Yet, these omissions are the very things which transmogrify this startling play into a triumphant treatise on the human condition. Critics have devoted extensive study and reflection to *Endgame*, offering a variety of interpretations ranging from the obvious to the obscure. Beckett himself acknowledged the difficulty of interpreting *Endgame*, noting that it is “rather difficult, elliptic, mostly depending on the power of the text to claw” (qtd. in Raponi NP). Given this interpretive challenge, many critics have fallen into the trap of calling *Endgame*—and, vicariously, Beckett—nihilistic, referring to the radical belief which suggests that there is absolutely no room in this meaningless world for any kind of satisfaction. In fact, an obituary which appeared in *The Washington Post* in the wake of Beckett’s death suggested that both the dramatist and his work were characterized by “morbid humor and bitter nihilism, a peculiarly apt voice for a century stunned and sickened by oft-renewed brutality” (Post NP). Other critics have likened *Endgame* to Dadaist art, an ‘anti-art’ movement which sought to reduce artistic conventions and structure to the absurd so as to demolish all possibility for meaning or morale.

Certainly, *Endgame* generates a mood of intense despair, as the characters flounder for meaning and purpose. Yet, a close reading of the text should lead one to conclude that Beckett stops short of blatant nihilism. To understand the play, it is helpful to look to Albert Camus’s theory of heroic absurdism, which he constructs in his *Myth of Sisyphus*. Camus, while acknowledging the absurd emptiness of knowledge and structure,

argues for a kind of rebellious self-awareness which prevents absolute despair and allows for ironic humor and resolve. In light of Camus's theory, *Endgame* creates space for satisfaction even as it strips away conventional forms and expressions of meaning.

To properly consider *Endgame* through the lens of heroic absurdism, it is important to first address Camus's theoretical position. Camus, a famed writer who produced such influential French novels as *The Stranger* (1942) and *The Plague* (1947), presents a philosophical critique of structure and meaning in *The Myth of Sisyphus*, an extended essay in which he offers a fairly exhaustive discussion of his position. The final, titular chapter offers a summary analysis of Camus's theory. He presents Sisyphus, the mythological character who was condemned by the gods to an eternal punishment of pushing a rock up a hill, "whence the stone would fall back of its own weight" (Camus NP). Indeed, argues Camus, the process is one of endless, cyclical toil, an eternal exercise in futility.

One sees merely the whole effort of a body straining to raise the huge stone, to roll it, and push it up a slope a hundred times over [...] then Sisyphus watches the stone rush down in a few moments toward that lower world whence he will have to push it up again to the summit. He goes back down to the plain. (NP)

Yet, for all the tragedy of the myth, Camus sees something rather profound. He suggests that in the descent from the heights to the "lairs of the gods," in the failure to achieve a goal, in the futility itself, Sisyphus is "superior to his fate. He is stronger than his rock." And in this rebellious self-awareness, Camus identifies a kind of satisfaction. He stops short of calling it 'purpose', but it is reason enough to keep living—reason to stave off death, the ultimate abandonment of all constructs.

Camus checks his theory with a heavy dose of realism. “When the images of earth cling too tightly to memory,” he writes, “when the call of happiness becomes too insistent, it happens that melancholy arises in man’s heart: this is the rock’s victory, this is the rock itself” (NP) Yet, the irony of heroic absurdism is that melancholy prompts resolve. Fate belongs to the individual; his lot in life is to recognize that the “night has no end, he is still on the go. The rock is still rolling” (NP). At the moment he recognizes this truth, he gains power over it; he is the master of his own inevitability. Indeed, says Camus, “the struggle itself toward the heights is enough to fill a man’s heart” (NP). Is it an ideal happiness? No—but it is sufficient, according to Camus. He does not, in the end, provide a mechanism for meaning or purpose; rather, he provides for satisfaction through the recognition that there is no meaning or purpose. Once one recognizes this fact, one can live boldly, coping with those dreadful moments of ‘Gethsemane’ and daring the cosmos to do its worst.

While *Endgame* seems to fit with Camus’s theoretical scheme, it is important to precede a textual explication with some contextual elements in order to establish a solid argument for heroic absurdism as an appropriate lens through which to view the play. Beckett published *Endgame* in 1957, twelve short years after World War II. His audience was well aware of the consequences of violence. In addition to the horrific effects of warfare on population levels and health/well-being, the European landscape itself was traumatized by chemical fallout from the bombs (Lenntech NP). In a supposedly advanced society, technology had led only to devastation.

Of course, warfare was only one element of the period which gave rise to a sense of prevailing absurdity. The trickle-down effects of post-Darwinian evolution and Higher

Criticism cast significant doubt on traditional philosophical assumptions, while cultural materialism and the emerging media seemed to obliterate critical thinking and conscientious art (Horkheimer NP). Across Britain and the European continent, evidence of absurdity prevailed; after all the advances of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, after all the philosophical inquiry and educational development and cooperative effort, society seemed more fractured, alienated, and hopeless than ever.

Beckett wrote not only with social awareness, but also from personal experience. He served as a French Resistance Fighter in World War II; in this capacity, he saw first-hand the grave effects of violence and bloodshed in a supposedly rational world. He also had first-hand experience with relational absurdity, a theme he develops in *Endgame*. According to one critic, “Samuel Beckett received great recognition for his work—but not everyone savored his accomplishments. Beckett's marriage, in fact, was soured by his wife's jealousy of his growing fame and success as a writer” (Beckett 15). In fact, Beckett would later observe that he remained married not out of love but out of a sense of hopeless obligation to his wife, Suzanne. Through his social awareness, his military experience, and his relational problems, Beckett was intimately familiar with the breakdown of the modern project—the pursuit of a utopian civilization, bred from philosophical certainty and compelled by harmony—and heavily impacted by a prevailing sense of absurdity.

Of course, theory in a literary study is meaningful only as it pertains to a text. In this case, an explication of *Endgame* helps one to appreciate the extent and gravity of the theoretical application. The first significant element of the play to consider is its setting. Setting is significant in most textual analyses, but it is particularly crucial when

considering a dramatic work, since stage and lighting are among the first things the audience experiences. Beckett calls for a bare interior and grey light, with two opposing windows, two sheet-covered ashbins to the front left and an armchair on castors in the center. This somber imagery brings a few morbid ideas to mind. The isolation and sense of “lock-down” created by this room suggest a post-apocalyptic bunker. In fact, Hamm refers to the room several times as a kind of “shelter.” Perhaps a nuclear holocaust has wiped out the rest of civilization; this certainly seems plausible, given the “zero” change which occurs on the outside and the poor health of those within.

Moving beyond the apocalyptic tones of the bunker, the arrangement of the stage itself connotes death. Cast in a grayish light, the windows are eerily reminiscent of eyes, while the ashbins and chair seem to represent nostrils and a mouth (Raponi NP). Death is lurking in the very fibers of this skullish setting; indeed, the setting functions metaphorically as a tomb. It also functions as a womb, as the story develops a cyclical pattern of meaninglessness. The monosyllabic names of the characters themselves—Hamm, Clov, Nagg, and Nell—seem indicative of infantile garble, meaningless language uttered by children who are just beginning the arduous climb up Sisyphus’s mountain.¹

Moving into the loose narrative of the play itself, one can quickly identify absurdity as a presiding theme. Beckett defines absurdity in several ways, making certain to effectively demolish all the institutions in which people typically invest their confidence. In particular, he addresses absurdity in relationships, legacy, art, and faith.

Beckett explores the absurdity of relationships in terms of three character binaries. Nagg and Nell, Hamm’s parents who have the misfortune to reside in ash bins, represent

¹ Numerous critics have attempted to explain these names in terms of a number of concepts, and while I do not deny the complexity of Beckett’s metaphorical scheme, I think these interpretations are a stretch. My analysis is more reasonable—*of course*.

the absurdity of marriage and intimacy. They laugh heartlessly at repetitive jokes that are not funny. When they try to kiss, they cannot reach one another. Nell observes: “Why this farce, day after day?” To this Nagg replies: “I’ve lost me tooth.” They are incredibly cold, physically and emotionally—Nell shivers, trying to cry but incapable of producing tears. Nell dies at the end of the play, but both characters are in their death throes already; they are lost, floating on a bitter sea of despair. Their relationship is absurd; it is meaningless, trivial, a farce if ever there was one.

The second binary is between Hamm and his “dog.” Traditionally, dogs are thought of as ‘man’s best friend.’ But this dog is no friend to Hamm, primarily because it is not real—which, Beckett metaphorically suggests, is the condition of all relationships. It is interesting to note that the dog has only three legs; it cannot stand on its own. This symbolizes the way in which relationships fail to materialize into anything substantial in an absurd world.

The final binary is between Hamm and Clov. These two share an interesting co-dependence. In a sense, Hamm is the “master”; he gives Clov orders, who follows them not out of love for Hamm but because he is reliant on Hamm for sustenance. At the same time, Hamm is reliant on Clov; he is blind, immobile, dependent on Clov for his most basic needs. The two engage in meaningless, fractured dialogue throughout the play; they are cruel to one another, and although Hamm at one point questions whether their relationship is beginning to “mean something,” Clov ridicules this notion. Their relationship is in no way purposeful; it is driven simply by a utilitarian need to survive.

In addition to relational absurdity, Beckett comments on absurdity in legacy. The fascinating juxtaposition of father, son, and grandson in this womb/tomb environment

indicates that progress is a fantasy. Beckett—like Camus—believes that it is impossible to pull oneself out of the meaningless structures of human existence; short of death, the inevitable force which will eventually take them all, these characters must function in their despair. None has a particular advantage over the other. While Nagg is the eldest, his behavior is also the most infantile; after learning of Nell's death, he resorts to sucking on his biscuit, symbolizing that the absurdist cycle continues to spin without any real maturation or change.

While Beckett focuses primarily on the meaninglessness of relationships and legacy, he also addresses absurdity in art and religion. Throughout the play, Hamm attempts to create a story, through which he might either explain his situation or at least divert his attention from his absurd life. Yet no one else is interested, and he is unable to finish his narrative; in a world without meaning, story-telling is useless unless it serves merely to mark the hopeless stasis. Religion, similarly, fails to offer anything substantial. In a moment of particular despair, Hamm insists that his family should join him in prayer; they oblige him, but conclude that it is an exercise in futility. "The bastard!" cries Hamm, referring to God. "He doesn't exist."

All of this futility lends itself to a cyclical sense of meaninglessness. Hamm demands his dog, sends it away, and demands it again; Clov checks the outside world with his telescope repeatedly, always concluding that "zero" has changed. When the occasional signs of life crop up, such as the rat and the boy outside, the characters are dismayed; these "potential procreators" only reinforce their fundamental fear that this miserable existence is ongoing. Indeed, there is no apparent narrative in which these

characters can anchor themselves, and so they are left drifting, waiting for death to take them.

Enter the metaphor of chess, prompted by the titular reference to the ‘endgame,’ the final stage in which only a few pieces remain. In almost every instance, whichever player enters the endgame with a weaker position loses the game; the movements are memorized, rather than strategic, designed to stave off the inevitable rather than to achieve any kind of victory. The king, always the most important figure, becomes crucial in these stages; he moves around, fearful of the center in which he is most vulnerable. In the play, Hamm—who functions as a “king” in this apocalyptic world—requires Clov to move him around, as he is afraid of staying too long in the center of the room. “Me to move,” Hamm mutters over and over, pondering his situation. The pawns, while necessary to stave off the annihilation of the king, serve little purpose; they are summoned when they are needed, in much the same way that Hamm summons Nagg and Nell and quiets them when he tires of them. Their position in ash bins only contributes to their pawn-like image of insignificance. The only character in the play who is mobile is Clov; his movements, up and down the ladder and in and out of the room, are indicative of a queen or a knight, pieces which move to protect the king but which serve no inherent purpose. In the end, all of the players are awaiting the inevitable; while only Nell experiences death in the text, it is looming in the shadows of this ultimate, absurd endgame (Endgame).

Given the absurdity of Beckett’s play, one might wonder whether heroism is present at all. Indeed, it is difficult to identify at first, but it surfaces in two specific ways: through ironic humor and resolve.

For all the hopelessness of *Endgame*, the play maintains a distinct strain of dark, ironic humor which can be identified in much of the absurdity. Humor lurks in Hamm's interactions with the fake three-legged dog, in the broken kissing routine between Nagg and Nell, in their living situation (ashbins), in Nagg's infantile behavior, in Hamm's paranoid movement and in his endless, incoherent mutterings and stammerings. The very things which comprise the misery of these characters also define their ability to overcome and continue surviving; only by laughing at their situation can they keep from succumbing to it completely. Nagg highlights this situation when he laughs at Hamm's miserable allusion to a "heart in his head." Nell responds to his laughter, saying: "Nothing is funnier than unhappiness [...] Yes, yes, it's the most comical thing in the world." Only by ridiculing their shared misery can these characters keep themselves from drowning in it; through laughter, they maintain a kind of rebellious self-awareness, a sense that they are "bigger" than the rock they are pushing.

It is important to observe that Nell is unable to keep her sense of humor. "We laugh, we laugh, with a will, in the beginning," she says. "But it's always the same thing. Yes, it's like the funny story we have heard too often, we still find it funny, but we don't laugh any more." Nell has lost her perspective. Interestingly, she is the only character who dies in the play. Through her death, Beckett seems to suggest that losing one's sense of humor is akin to succumbing completely to the absurdity of life.

While humor presents one distinct way to cope with absurdity, Beckett creates space for a second heroic theme—*resolve*. One can identify resolve most clearly in the final lines of the play. Each of the secondary characters has by this point vanished from the stage; Nagg is in his bin, Nell is dead, and Clov has "exited"—although he has not

actually left; he remains “halted” by the door, signifying the cyclical nature of the narrative.

Hamm begins to mutter, bringing the allusion to chess to the forefront once more. “Me to play,” he says wearily, and then observes: “Old endgame lost of old, play and lose and have done with losing.” He appears to be caving to the absurdity of his situation; his “endgame” is leading inevitably toward death, and he knows it. One could not fault him for giving up completely, surrendering to the darkness which threatens to take him.

Yet—and this is the ironic crux of the play—Hamm’s final words betray an attitude that is simultaneously fatalistic and strangely satisfied. “Since that’s the way we’re playing it,” he says, “let’s play it that way and speak no more about it.” He spreads his handkerchief out on his lap. “Old stancher!” he cries. “You...remain.” He covers his face with the handkerchief, and remains motionless—and the gray lights fade out.

The ending of the play perfectly mirrors the beginning. Clov has not really abandoned Hamm, and Hamm has not given up on the game. He knows where he is headed; he faces the same fate which Nell confronted. Yet he has found a strange form of satisfaction in his absurd situation. Is there hope? No. Is there meaning? No—but Hamm is still alive. He is caught in an endgame, but he has not fallen yet. He is still fighting; he is still wearing his bloodstained “crown.” To put it in Camus’s terms, he is at the top of the mountain, waiting for the rock to slip to the valley once more. And in this moment, Hamm feels truly alive; he knows that he remains, that he will live another day to continue the endless fight. This is the heroism of the absurd; this is resolve in its penultimate form.

Samuel Beckett's *Endgame* is a play of crux and contradiction. The disjointed narrative creates a world without purpose, a world in which all conventional forms of meaning fall to pieces. Yet, dark humor and resolve evoke a sense of rebellious self-awareness, particularly in Hamm. This clash between absurdity and heroism is the very theme which Camus addresses in his theoretical critique; indeed, Beckett constructs a world in which characters cope with the hopeless reality of their situation, finding strange satisfaction in that awareness. "Since this is the way we're playing it, let's play it that way and speak no more about it." One can almost see Hamm, his face to the cold rock, sweat on his forehead, smiling through his tears as he realizes that he is very much alive.

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