

Endgame: A Series of Endings

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Abstract

Samuel Beckett's popular play *Endgame*, depicts a prison-like room with two windows that show a dead universe and a "corpsed world". Throughout his play, Beckett uses ideas, symbols, objects, and actions that reflect an ending. In *Endgame* the characters cannot choose; it seems that everything is coming to an end and they can do nothing about it; they have to accept it. The play's world is devoid of meaning, warmth, humor and all beautiful things. In most of his works Beckett shows that human faculties are deteriorating and *Endgame* is no exception. Hamm and Clov are not mobile; Hamm cannot stand and Clov just moves in a limited way. Nagg and Nell are confined in a dustbin totally without action and mobility. Hamm's chronicle is an unfinished one and one can generalize it to all Beckett's works as they avoid closure. In fact the play starts from the point where it's "nearly finished" and it ends the same.

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Samuel Beckett's popular play *Endgame*, which was written in 1958, depicts a prison-like room with two windows that show a dead universe and a "corpsed world". Throughout his play, Beckett uses ideas, symbols, objects, and actions that reflect an ending. Kennedy believes that the word "finished" with which the play begins suggests the idea of ending and it implies the ending of a game of chess, a story, a life, or a relationship (48). He also states that the audience is introduced to the last moments of an illness or the last scenes of a play as Clov utters these words, "finished, nearly finished" (48). In *Endgame* the characters cannot choose; it seems that everything is coming to an end and they can do nothing about it; they have to accept it. Whenever Hamm wishes to do something it just happens in his own imagination; in Esslin's words "man is no longer asserting a position, but enduring a fate"(114).

The play's world is devoid of meaning, warmth, humor and all beautiful things. Hamm is a lonely creature in a bare room and he is hardly able to interact with his servant Clov. The characters as Esslin states try to fill the time with memories of the past, minimal speech and even inaction (159). Azarmi compares the condition of the absurd man to that of a swan at the time of death. He declares that some days before his death, the swan goes to a hidden place in a swamp and starts to sing his last song (53-54). One can see this melancholic mood in *Endgame*: Hamm and Clov are alone and no signs of living creatures are seen; they are absurd men in an absurd world waiting for things to be finished.

In most of his works Beckett shows that human faculties are deteriorating and *Endgame* is no exception. Hamm and Clov are not mobile; Hamm cannot stand and Clov just moves in a limited way. Nagg and Nell are confined in a dustbin totally without action and mobility. Hamm is sitting motionless in a wheelchair and this implies an ending. Kennedy believes that although Hamm seems to be a victim, a motionless invalid, but he is a master as well. According to Kennedy it seems that Hamm has a choice to die or not to die: "... it's time it ended....And yet I hesitate... to end" (48). According to Kennedy Hamm has a dual role: "the sick man of comedy" or "the dying king of tragedy" (48).

One can come across many instances of pain that show that things are coming to an ending. Hamm's movements are limited to the cell-like

room and even at the end of the play he is motionless. He also suffers loss of vision: "It seems they've {eyes'} gone all white" (3). Hamm feels a big sore inside his breast and even his dog lacks a leg. Since Hamm as a man is coming to an end it seems that all other things are also deteriorating. The characters all show a kind of decay and their ending is emphasized by their physical inability. Nagg has lost his tooth. Nell and Nagg's sight has failed and they can hardly see each other. Their hearing has failed, too. They have had an accident and have lost their shanks. They are both cold and freezing. Moreover their son, Hamm, cannot sleep: 'if I could sleep I might make love" (8). Clov takes Nell's hands and says that she has no pulse. Clov's vision is also deteriorating; he has pains in his legs and he thinks that soon he will not be able to think anymore.

Nature and the living creatures have also reached the end of the line. The images that Clov gives of the outer world are all bleak: the zero vision, the dead world, the leaden waves and the grey light. Every single living thing seems to be dying like the rat in the kitchen. Hamm wants to hear the sea and so asks Clov to open the window but Clov claims that he cannot hear it. "There are no more navigators," says Hamm and so the sea is calm (28). The outside world is dead: "Outside of here it's death," and the ending is so close that Hamm believes that if Clov leaves him, he will be dead too (30).

"Zero" is what Clov thinks of the outside world. It won't rain anymore. "There's no more nature" states Clov. The seeds that Clov has planted did not sprout and Clov believes that "they'll never sprout." (6). the weather is as usual just like the time. The light is sunk. There are no gulls. Nothing is on the horizon, the waves are lead and the sun is zero. It is not night but it is grey: "Light black. From pole to pole"(14). All these things seems to be a "... farce, day after day" (14). Hamm wonders whether there are still fleas and Clov suggests that he has one.

Hamm's story is about a mad man who thinks that the end of world has come: "All he had seen was ashes" (19). Hamm says, "the whole place stinks of corpses" and Clov adds, "The whole universe" (20). While telling his story Hamm says, "...the sun was sinking down ...among the dead... It was a howling day... a hundred by the

anemometer. The wind was tearing up the dead pines and sweeping them...away" (22). He also calls the day bitter, dry and zero. Any sign of living makes them surprised since Hamm wonders whether there are still rats. The world is stripped of order as Clov says, "I love order...A world when all would be silent and still and each thing in its last place" (24). The word "last" also implies his desire for an ending. It seems that the seasonal cycle has stopped as the weather is as usual.

Esslin argues that the endgame may imply an ending for Hamm (133). Hamm is preparing to face death and his ending enables Clov to leave his master. as the curtain falls," the old ego dies," writes Esslin, "and the new is about to emerge." (133). When Hamm is ready to die the parents have already died. Hamm's fondness of the madman who thinks that the end of world has come shows his own desire for death and an ending. Hamm repeatedly asks: "Is it not time for my painkiller?" (20). It shows that he is waiting for an ending ; maybe one that soothes his pains and aches and makes him relieved but Clov's answer to his question is "No"; time is passing very slowly and so is torturous. Hamm's desire to die is also shown as he says "Me to play... Ah let's get it over "; in fact this is an endgame (29-30).

Hamm is surprised to see Clov returning to the room: "What? Neither gone nor dead?" (30). they are both waiting for the game to be ended "I want to sing ... Let's stop ...I'm tired of our going on, very tired," (32). Hamm agrees with Clov that they stop playing: "Then let it end,"(32). Hamm prepares himself for his last soliloquy; he equates existence with dying suggesting that dying is the result or the ending of existence; when Clov claims to see a small boy Hamm states: "If he exists he'll die there or he'll come here"(33). Hamm also states: "it's the end Clov. We've come to the end. I don't need you anymore" (33). Clov feels "too old, and too far, to form new habits"(34). Hence he wishes to end it. At the very beginning Hamm states: " ... it's time it ended, in the shelter, too" (2). But actually he hesitates to end and this hesitation continues even after the curtains fall.

Hamm and Clov think that they have had enough of something but they do not know what it really is. Ending and dying is both accepted and expected: Hamm threatens Clov: "I'll give you nothing more to eat";"

Then we'll die" is Clov's simple answer (3). Hamm waiting for the end asks Nagg and Nell to be quiet: "Have you not finished? Will you never finish? Will this never finish?" (10). Before dying Hamm predicts a dark ending for Clov, "One day you'll be blind like me... Infinite emptiness will be around you" (15-16).

Hamm is so tired of the whole situation that he begs Clov to end everything, "Why don't you finish us?" It seems that Hamm is a writer. When his story is finished Clov inquires whether he will make up another but Hamm feels, "...rather drained. The prolonged creative effort" (26). An inevitable slowing down toward an ending is stated by Hamm, "...we change! We lose our hair, our teeth! Our bloom! Our ideals!" (5).

As a sign of ending the characters do not seem to have a close relationship with each other. It seems that Hamm and Clov are father and son. Moreover Hamm has a father and a mother although they are passive in their ashbins. But it seems that it is not a close-knit family. Hamm prepares himself for death; Clov is ready to leave and it sounds as though Nagg and Nell are dead. Family disintegration is evident as Clov does not like Hamm anymore and Hamm continuously curses his parents.

As things are coming to an end, a spirit of fear and uncertainty pervade the characters' world. Kennedy compares the small room to Hamm's kingdom that is threatened by a flea that may reproduce (22). Hamm's kingdom is "corpsed" and according to Kennedy the characters strongly resist any sign of life like the flea or the rat and they seem to be frightened by them (51). He also asserts that the sudden appearance of a boy at the end is feared and regarded as a threat to an expected ending (52).

In spite of the fact that the play makes reference to an ending, there is an element of doubt about this ending implied by Hamm's nostalgic view of the past and the characters' reference to beautiful images of nature. Clov repeatedly states that he wants to leave Hamm but he does not; it seems that they both desire and fear the ending. Future is considered as a veiled threat and as Esslin says it is "at once terrible and fated" (115). Present is fading out as it is shadowed by an uncertain future

Spiritual despair is another sign of an ending. Kennedy believes that the characters are not waiting for future and they do not expect it (23). The act of worship is parodied by Hamm. Hamm, Clov and Nagg are unable to pray to "the old father-god" (135). So Hamm curses God as if he does not exist. It seems that at the end this old god is replaced by the small boy. Just like all other things, love is coming to an end and sadism and hatred take love's place. Clov is not able to love Hamm and Kennedy notes that love is mocked as Hamm says: "Get out of here and love one another. Lick your neighbor as yourself" (51). Hamm curses his father by calling him "accursed progenitor" and it seems as if someone has put a curse on the world that is moving down to an ending. Their relationship and their dialogue show that Clov and Hamm have a love – hate relationship with each other and at last their relationship according to Kennedy comes to an end by Clov's leaving Hamm (54). Although Clov acts as if he is a servant or even a nurse to Hamm sometimes in Kennedy's words this tenderness borders on sadism (54). Reference to past events shows Hamm and Clov's long-running relationship is coming to an end and at times Hamm and Clov are so cold toward each other.

Absence of love or at least the inability to love is at the core of all kinds of relationships in the play: the relationship between a master and his servant, a father and his son, and between the two lovers, Nagg and Nell. Esslin asserts that Hamm is a short form of hammer and the names of other characters mean nail in other languages: Clov is like clou in French, Nell is similar to the Italian nello, and Nagg is like nagel in German (50). All other characters are being hammered by the sharp-tongued Hamm. He orders Clov to do things for him and pitilessly asks Clov to shut his parents in their dustbins.

Hamm and Clov's melancholic mood is shown when Clov denies having even an instant of happiness. Clov resists satisfying Hamm's emotional needs: he won't kiss him, nor touch him. They do not even feel like laughing. Nell believes "Nothing is funnier than unhappiness." (8). The funny story that always made Nell laugh does not cheer him up anymore. There is not true love between them; Hamm keeps Clov as, "There's no one else", "There's nowhere else" (3).

Ending of communication is another element in a chain of endings and there is a feeble attempt at communication throughout the play. Kennedy states in some parts the language and dialogue is so simple and even is reduced to one word (47); Hamm soliloquizes several times throughout the play and in all there is a breakdown in communication. The whole play is about ending and as a result in his soliloquy Hamm tells the story of a mad man who thinks that the end of the world has come and in Kennedy's words it becomes an, "end-story within end-story" (50). Hamm tries to tell his story to somebody but Clov is reluctant to listen to it. Hamm feels the need of communication; he says to Clov, 'You haven't much conversation all of a sudden. Do you not feel well?' (28).

Symbolic actions in the play echo an ending. Kennedy believes that Hamm is like a king in tragedy that little by little comes to an end by throwing away his symbols of power like the dog and the whistle (62). It is satiric that Clov repeatedly says: "I have things to do "but actually there is nothing to do; the characters fail in their attempt to leave the place or even to cry so action gives way to inaction. Hamm discards all his possessions and he wants to be alone; he does not want a companion as he says to Clov that he does not need him anymore. Clov is tired of obeying Hamm's orders and he does not spring to action as he used to; he expresses his dissatisfaction, "If I could kill him I'd die happy" (12) and "Soon I won't do it anymore" (18). Kennedy emphasizes the ending of meaning besides other possible endings (52). Their condition is so absurd that Clov laughs at the idea of him and Hamm beginning to mean something. Hamm wonders, "We're not beginning to ... to... mean something?" and Clov ridicules the idea, "Mean something! You and I mean something!" (14).

One source states that Hamm is the king being taken to "check mate" (Kennedy 53); the implication being that the whole play is about the ending of a game of chess. Esslin compares Hamm and Clov's movements to those of a game of chess (133). They are motionless and at times they make some slight movements. Hamm wants to be in the center as in Esslin's words he wants to control and manipulate Clov; he wants to be master (133). Reference to certain objects raises the

possibility of an ending. Kennedy suggests that the use of bicycles is itself an indication of an ending because bicycles can fall apart just like mind and body (56). Hamm is freezing and he asks for a rug but "there are no more rugs" (28). The time for painkillers finally comes but, "There is no more painkiller" (30). Hamm wants Clov to put him in his coffin but "There are no more coffins" (32). The box of painkillers used to be full but now it is empty. As the play starts a whistle is hanging from Hamm's neck and a rug is over his knees but at last there are no more rugs and he throws away the whistle among all other possessions such as the dog and the gaff. There are no more bicycle wheels, and there is no more pap for Nagg. In all, not many objects are readily available but those that are present are like the alarm clock that is, "Fit to wake the dead!" (20).

Hamm expresses a desire to be unborn and to end the game; it shows his dissatisfaction with the idea of begetting and a desire to end it. According to Kennedy, Nagg, Hamm and Clov show three generations with the focus not on continuity but on "mistake of begetting" (58). The loveless relationship between Nagg and Hamm mirrors Hamm and Clov's sarcastic remarks and manners. It seems that as time slides into an ending, the curse of generating and reproduction passes from one generation to another. Kennedy clearly demonstrates the link between begetting and an ending: Nagg begat Hamm who begat Clov who will begat no one" (59).

Kennedy objects to the idea that the small boy at the end is a sign of hope; he stresses the fact that he is another sufferer coming to the world: "a potential procreator" and in turn, the repetition of the "endless cycle" (60). Hamm calls Nagg the, "Accursed progenitor... Accursed fornicator" (5). Hamm bitterly regrets being born and states, "You're on earth, there's no cure for that!"(22). Hamm tells Clov to be off and he says, "I'm trying. Ever since I was whelped"; in fact he has been trying to resist regeneration (6).

The stage direction and the setting show some sort of deterioration. There are a limited number of characters acting throughout the play and most of the time they are described as motionless with fixed gaze. Clov describes the kitchen as, "ten feet by ten feet by ten feet" (2).

The stage is decorated with the bare essentials; the overall setting is a cell-like prison with two windows that, "...stinks of corpses" (20).

Another sign of an ending is frequent reference to time. Hamm refers to the end of the day and the fact that it is coming to an end without having any fun: "...that's always the way at the end of the day" (6). Time is moving toward an ending since according to Kennedy the day that seems to be just begun is referred to as "the end of the day" and he also compares the ringing of the alarm clock to the bells of doomsday (49-50). He also considers Hamm's desire for extinction and the effort to kill the last flea as other signs of the end of time (50). Hamm cannot remember what yesterday is and there is also no future for him; the characters have no hope for future: "Do you believe in the life to come?" says Clov; "Mine was always that" answers Hamm (21). So Esslin believes that without past and without any future the universe is meaningless and one cannot think of any progression but just deterioration (115).

Esslin adds that time has not stopped completely; time is moving very slowly since finally the time comes for Hamm's tranquilizers: "it is slowing down towards its standstill" (159). According to the same writer the characters' life is like an evening and they are waiting for the night to come and then time will be stopped. Time never comes to a certain ending, and in Esslin's words the characters in this sense are "out of time" (160). As time moves toward an ending, it loses its direction and according to Esslin the characters are, "on the uncrossable threshold of infinity" (160). Hamm's and Clov's conversation shows an end to time's progression; "What time is it?" says Hamm, "The same as usual" answers Clov (3). Memories are wiped out and Hamm thinks, "...it's a day like any other day" (19).

Time has lost its meaning; Hamm says: '...time was never and time is over, reckoning closed and story ended' (35). He remembers a time when Clov loved him but Clov is surprised: "Once!" (4). In the play's world nothing is familiar; they cannot remember things clearly. It seems that this is the first time that they are hearing about the objects of the outer world and they become surprised. Hamm cannot even remember what yesterday means: "Yesterday! What does that mean? Yesterday!" (19). The slow movement of time makes Clov think that

yesterday was: "...that bloody awful day, long ago," (19). The gradual, merciless and the inevitable movement of time toward an ending as well as the absurd condition of characters is stated by Hamm: "Moment upon moment, pattering down... and all lifelong you wait for that to mount up to a life... I was never there... Absent always. It all happened without me," (29-31). Hamm's journey is limited to that confined room and this repeated cycle shows the ending.

As to the nature of the ending one can say that there is a circular movement of time, something like a life cycle; Hamm believes, "The end is in the beginning and yet you go on" and he also asserts, "Perhaps I could go on with my story, end it and begin another," (29). It shows that there is a torturous slowdown toward an ending that is no better than the beginning; Hamm also describes the ending as; "...the old shelter. Alone against the silence and ...the stillness.", "it will be all over with sound and motion, all over and done with," (29).

Although it is difficult to put an accurate interpretation on the play, Kennedy believes that the play's message is, "the ending is an endless process," (48). He adds that "no more" is the key phrase in the play that implies the ending of things (51). The ending excludes the possibility of finding comfort. There are hints that a new life is going to begin or the cycle is going to be repeated. The curtain falls with Hamm preparing to die and Clov deciding to leave but Esslin believes that it is very likely that the curtain rises and everything will be repeated again. He suggests that the characters will be just as they have always been, "only about to die or leave" (160). Ruby Cohn in the introduction of his book states that Hamm's chronicle is an unfinished one and he generalizes it to all Beckett's works as they avoid closure (18). He believes that in fact the play starts from the point where it's "nearly finished" and it ends the same (1).

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