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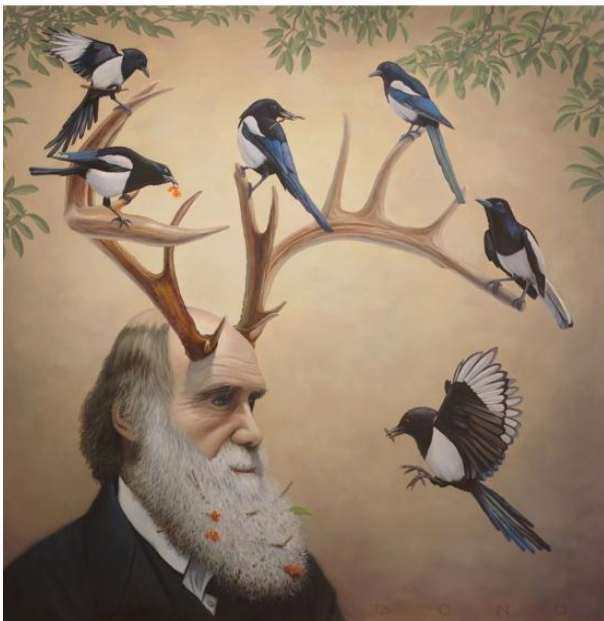
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## **The Use of Pathetic Elements in Beckett's *Endgame***

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### **Abstract**

*Endgame* is a play written by Samuel Beckett and it represents a number of elements that shows pathetic as despair and hopelessness. In addition, there is nothing happening during the play. The fact that the characters are not waiting for anything other than death has heightened the sense of despair and pathetic in the play, plus the feeling of being incarnated after death dominates all the characters. The paper presented sheds light on a number of elements that considered pathetic in the eyes of literary critics.

## El uso de elementos patéticos en *Endgame* de Beckett

### Resumen:

Endgame es una obra escrita por Samuel Beckett y representa una serie de elementos que muestran patética como la desesperación y la desesperanza. Además, no sucede nada durante la obra. El hecho de que los personajes no estén esperando otra cosa que la muerte ha aumentado la sensación de desesperación y patética en la obra, además de la sensación de estar encarnado después de la muerte domina a todos los personajes. El artículo presentado arroja luz sobre una serie de elementos que se consideran patéticos a los ojos de los críticos literarios.

### - Introduction: Beckett and the Theatre of Absurd

*Endgame* was Beckett's first full-length play. When it first came out in 1958 it received mixed reviews, with some critics' claim that Beckett was just doing the same thing over. As time passes by, however, people began to agree on the play's immense significance that later helped to cement Beckett's role as one of the most important play writers of the 20th century. Renowned literary critic Harold Bloom wrote that Endgame "remains a larger play than any other dramatist has given us in this century." (1988:8) Endgame is also considered as the best example of theatrical "minimalism" that would become enormously influential later in the 20th century. Minimalism can be defined as "*a style based on the simple premise that the less you put on stage, the more significant what is on stage becomes*"<sup>1</sup>. Beckett was aware of this style's significance as he revised the play repeatedly, as he wrote Endgame in French (which was not his native language) and then translated it into English just to ensure that he struggled with every word.

At the time it was written, not too long after WWII, apocalyptic visions were much in sight, and readers were preoccupied with the problem of finding meaning in a world full of suffering. Beckett had squeezed comedy from these visions of human pain; nonetheless, he never seemed to sympathize with his characters. He had also depicted through his characters that people who had suffered so much that they were long past hope. And yet, even in the absence of hope, they would still move on for reasons that they cannot understand themselves.

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1 Miriam Webster, 2003:558

Like any other absurd drama, *Endgame* basically projects the human condition, and it is considered as one of the best plays that represent Theatre of Absurd. That being said; Beckett was therefore one of the lynchpins behind the French theatrical movement called the Theatre of the Absurd. The Absurdist took a page from Existentialist philosophy which believes that life was absurd, beyond human rationality, and meaningless, all were described in the play, with its conception of circularity and non-meaning. Beckett's own brand of Absurdism melds tragedy and comedy in new ways, for example, Nell gives a good definition of his tragicomedy when she says, "Nothing is funnier than unhappiness" (Beckett believes this was the most important line of the play). This line contains the exact mixture of the morose and the comic that makes up the genre without quite explaining why unhappiness can be funny. There is, in fact, very little hope in the play. Beckett has imagined a situation in which things are already as bad as they can possibly get. What is more, the play ends on an ambiguous note. It's not even a decided tragedy. If Clov leaves Hamm, then Hamm and Nagg will die. And Clov will die too. If Clov stays, then he simply continues to give in to the master who treats him so poorly. He simply prolongs their deaths a little longer. The characters never cease to search for ways to infuse their situations with humor. The comedy keeps the play from being so depressing as to be unwatchable. What's more, though, when we laugh with the characters, we are also relating to them, even in their extreme, exaggerated circumstances. Laughter is a way of drawing us, the audience, into the tragedy, forcing us to sympathize with these characters rather than just pitying them from a distance.

Self-conscious form in the theater was another feature of Absurdism that is represented in the play, and there's no shortage in *Endgame*, from Clov's turning the telescope on the audience to Hamm's showy references to his own acting. But Beckett's self-consciousness is not merely for laughs. Just as the characters cannot escape the room or themselves, trapped in self-conscious cages, neither can the audience escape their lives for a night of theatrical diversion.

#### Plot overview

The setting is a bare interior with gray lighting. There are two small windows with drawn curtains, a door, and two ashbins covered by an old sheet. Hamm sits on a chair with wheels, covered by an old sheet. Clov stares at Hamm, motionless. Clov goes off-stage and returns with a stepladder and opens the curtains for both windows. He removes the sheet from the ashbins and raises the lid of both and looks within. He removes Hamm's sheet.

Hamm, in his dressing-gown, a whistle hanging around his neck, and a handkerchief over his face, appears to be asleep. Clov says, "It's finished." He says he'll go to his kitchen and wait for Hamm to whistle him. He leaves, then comes back, takes the ladders and carries it out. Hamm wakes up and removes the handkerchief. He wears dark glasses. He folds away his handkerchief, and questions whether anyone suffers as much as he does. He says "it's time it ended," but he "hesitate[s]" to end. He whistles to Clov to come in and starts to insult him and orders Clov to prepare him for bed. He asks what time it is, and Clov replies "Same as usual." Hamm asks if he has looked out to get him ready, but Clov doesn't move. Hamm threatens to hold back food from him, and Clov goes for Hamm's sheet. Hamm stops him and asks why does he stay with him; Clov asks why does he keep him. For Hamm, there's no one else; for Clov, nowhere else. Hamm accuses Clov of leaving him—Clov concedes that he's trying to do so—and that Clov doesn't love him. He asks why Clov doesn't kill him; Clov replies that he doesn't know the combination of the larder. From one of the ashbins, Nagg emerges in a nightcap. Nagg cries for his pap, but since there's none left, Hamm whistles for Clov to get a biscuit. Nagg complains, and Hamm directs Clov to close the lid on him. Clov says there's no more nature, and Hamm refutes this, arguing that their bodies and minds change. After some more debate, Hamm asks him what he does in his kitchen. Clov says he looks at the wall and sees his light dying. Nagg emerges from his bin, biscuit in mouth, and listens. Hamm tells Clov to leave, which Clov says he's "trying" to do and then does. Nagg knocks on the other bin, and Nell emerges. Nagg asks her to kiss him; they try but cannot reach, and Nell asks why they go through the "farce" every day. Their sight (and Nell's hearing) is failing. Hamm tells them to quiet down, and thinks about what he would dream of if only he could sleep. Nell rebukes Nagg for laughing at Hamm's misery. Nagg tells her a story about a tailor that has often made her laugh, especially the first time he told it to the day after they'd gotten engaged: a tailor keeps botching and delaying a customer's orders for trousers until the customer explodes and points out that God created the world in six days, while the tailor has taken three months for the trousers. The tailor tells him to compare the world with his beautiful trousers. Hamm calls for silence. Nagg disappears, and Hamm whistles for Clov and tells him to throw the bins into the sea. Clov checks Nell's pulse and says she has none. They discuss Hamm's painkiller medicine and Hamm's deceased former doctor. Hamm asks Clov to move him around on his chair and, as he can't see for himself, to hug the walls.

Hamm directs Clov to return him back to his spot in the exact center. Hamm tells Clov to check outside with the telescope. Clov's report is "Zero." Clov asks why they go through the farce everyday, and Hamm answers that it is routine. Hamm wonders if he and Clov are beginning to "mean something"; Clov scoffs at this notion. Clov scratches a flea on his body. Hamm is astounded that there are still fleas, and begs Clov to kill it, as "humanity might start from there all over again!" Clov gets some insecticide and sprinkles it inside his pants. Hamm proposes that he and Clov leave for the South. Clov declines, and Hamm says he'll do it alone and tells Clov to build a raft. Clov says he'll start, but Hamm stops him and asks if it's time for his painkiller—it's not—and asks about Clov's ailing body. Hamm asks why Clov doesn't "finish" them, but Clov says he couldn't do it, and will leave. Hamm asks him if he remembers when he came here, but Clov says he was too small. Hamm asks if Clov remembers his father—he doesn't—and says that he was a father to Clov. Before Clov can leave, Hamm asks Clov if his dog is ready. Clov returns with a three-legged toy dog, which he gives to Hamm. Hamm tells Clov to get him his gaff, and Clov wonders out loud why he never refuses his orders. He gets it for Hamm, who unsuccessfully tries to move his chair around with it. Hamm recollects a madman painter-engraver friend of his who thought the end of the world had come, seeing ashes instead of nature. Hamm asks how he'll know if Clov has left. Clov decides he'll set an alarm clock, and if it doesn't ring, it means he's dead. Hamm says it's time for his story, but Clov doesn't want to hear it. Hamm tells him to wake his father, and Clov looks into the ashbin of the sleeping Nagg. Clov reports that Nagg doesn't want to hear Hamm's story, and wants a sugarplum if he must listen. Hamm agrees, and Clov leaves. Hamm asks Nagg why he produced him, and Nagg says he didn't know that it would be Hamm. Hamm tells a story about how a beggarly man came crawling to him on Christmas Eve. The man revealed he had left behind a small boy in his distant home, alone, and wanted food for the boy. Hamm says he took the man into his service, and was asked if he would take the child, if he were still alive. Clov comes in and reports that there's a rat in the kitchen, and that he's exterminated half of it. Hamm says he'll finish it later, but now they'll pray to God in silence. They are all disappointed by the lack of a godly response, and Hamm believes God doesn't exist. Nagg remembers how Hamm would call him when he was scared as a child, and not his mother. He didn't listen to him, he says, but he hopes the day will come again when Hamm will depend on his father. He knocks on Nell's lid, but

with no response he retreats into his bin and closes the lid. Hamm gropes for his dog. Clov hands it to Hamm, who soon after throws it away. Clov cleans up the room, as he loves order, but Hamm makes him stop. Before Clov can leave, Hamm tells him to stay and listen to his story; he repeats the last bit, and says he's too tired to finish it, or to make up another story. He tells Clov to see if Nell is dead; he looks into the bin and says it looks that way. Nagg hasn't died, but he's crying. Hamm asks Clov to push his chair under the window, as he wants to feel the light on his face. He says he feels sunshine, but Clov says it isn't really the sun. Clov pushes Hamm back to the center. Hamm twice calls for his father, and tells Clov to see if Nagg heard him. Clov investigates and says Nagg isn't crying anymore, but sucking his biscuit. Hamm asks Clov to kiss him on the forehead, or hold his hand, but Clov refuses. Hamm asks for his dog, and then rejects the idea, and Clov leaves, vowing that either he'll kill the rat or it'll die. Alone, Hamm takes out his handkerchief and spreads it before him. He considers finishing his story and starting another, or throwing himself on the floor, but he isn't able to push himself off his seat. He ruminates on his eventual death, and then whistles. Clov enters with the alarm clock. He reports that the rat got away from him. Clov says it's time for Hamm's painkiller, which relieves him until Clov reveals there's none left. Hamm tells him to look at the earth. Clov reminds him that after Mother Pegg asked Hamm for oil for her lamp, and he refused her, she died of darkness. Hamm feebly says he didn't have enough, but Clov refutes this. Clov wonders why he obeys Hamm, and Hamm answers that perhaps its compassion. Clov finds the telescope. Hamm asks to be put in his coffin, but Clov says there is none left. Clov takes the telescope, goes up the stepladder, and sees a small boy out the window. He says he'll investigate with the gaff (a hook-like tool), presumably to kill off the "potential procreator," but Hamm says the boy will either die outside or come inside. He tells Clov that they've come to the end and he doesn't need him anymore, and asks him to leave him the gaff. Before Clov leaves, Hamm asks him to say something "from your heart." Clov repeats a few things "They said to me," and reflects on the pain of life. Hamm stops him before he leaves and thanks him for his services. Clov thanks him, and Hamm says that they are obliged to each other. He asks him to cover him with the sheet, but Clov has already left. He tries to move the chair with the gaff. Clov enters, out-fitted for his journey. Hamm doesn't know he's there, and throws away the useless gaff. He resumes telling his story about the man and his child, repeating how the man wanted his child with him. Hamm recalls it was the



moment he was waiting for. Hamm twice calls out “Father” and, not hearing anything, says, “We’re coming.” He discards his dog and his whistle. He calls out for Clov, but hears nothing. He takes out his handkerchief, unfolds it, and says “You...remain.” He covers his face with the handkerchief and sits motionless.

Pathetic Symbolism, Imagery, Allegory

- Religion

The play shows a number of pathetic elements from a religious point of view. The un-creation, for example, is the opposite of the Book of Genesis in the Bible, and Hamm playing God and is trying to bring the world back out of existence. When Hamm makes Clov look out of the windows for him. One window is the earth and the other is the sea. Hamm also wants to know, “Is it light?” (1.632). another example is when Hamm speaks of his fellow men as creatures, and wants to know about the gulls and the horizon and the sun. At one point, Hamm wants to build a raft (like Noah’s ark in Genesis 6-8) and go to see if there are other mammals. It should be noted that none of these things actually exist in the world anymore. Something has gone horribly wrong with the creation story. Everything has come to an end. In the face of the apocalypse, Hamm is trying to un-make the world, to undo God’s work; existence, for the characters in *Endgame*, is suffering, and Hamm works with symbolic gestures to try to bring it all to an end. A great deal of the suspense in *Endgame* comes from Hamm and Clov’s constant arguing. Clov repeatedly says that he will leave Hamm, but proves unable to do so. Hamm mistreats him, and in the middle of the play, we learn that Clov has probably been Hamm’s servant since childhood.

- Relationships

In the play, the master-servant relationship is given the center stage. The play, which is always on the brink of ending, is prolonged by the different ways that Hamm manipulates Clov and gets him to obey him. Without this master-servant relationship, the play would come to a halt (because Clov would bolt). A lot of people like to talk about how Beckett put a “state of mind” on the stage with his breakthrough play. The superego is the “boss.” That leaves the ego, which is basically what we think of as ourselves. The ego is caught between the base desires of the id, and the bossiness of the superego. It is like a servant with two masters. It’s not too difficult to read Hamm as the superego. Hamm is, for example, the most complex thinker and the one that asks that they all pray to God. In his very first line, Nagg cries, “Me pap!” (1.76) throughout most of the play, he doesn’t want much more than candy, attention, scratches, and kisses. That leaves Clov as the

ego, the exhausted servant caught in between two masters: the ego and the id, instinct and idealism. He thinks to himself, "When I fall I'll weep for happiness" (1.794). Read this way, *Endgame* captures the interplay between the different parts of our minds, our cravings and our self-demands. Clov is the desperate attempt to keep everyone happy, to maintain balance and order. As he says, "I love order. It's my dream. A world where all would be silent and still and each thing in its last place, under the last dust" (1.569).

- Cyclical, Repetitive Nature of Beginnings and Endings      *Endgame's* opening lines repeat the word "finished," and the rest of the play hammers away at the idea that beginnings and endings are intertwined, that existence is cyclical. Whether it is the story about the tailor, which juxtaposes its conceit of creation with never-ending delays, Hamm and Clov's killing the flea from which humanity may be reborn, or the numerous references to Christ, whose death gave birth to a new religion, death-related endings in the play are one and the same with beginnings. While Hamm and Clov are in the "endgame" of their ancient lives, with death lurking around the corner, they are also stuck in a perpetual loop that never allows final closure—Hamm claims he wants to be "finished," but admits that he "hesitate[s]" to do so. Just as death cannot arrive to seal off life, neither can Hamm or Clov escape to close the book on one existence and open another—note Clov's frequent failed attempts to leave the room (and his final return after vowing to leave) and Hamm's insistence on returning to the center of the room. Nell's death may be an aberration in a play where death seems impossible, but since she is the one character who recognizes the absurdity of the situation, perhaps she is rewarded by dying. Several of Beckett's dramatic designs elucidate this notion of a circular existence. As mentioned above, Hamm has a compulsive need to return to the exact center of the room after Clov takes him on chair-rides. His oblique comments about the environment—beyond the hollow wall in their hole is the "other hell"—suggest an allusion to Dante's *Inferno*, another work that used images of circularity. And just as Dante's infernal images emphasize the eternal misery of its inhabitants, Beckett's characters are stuck in eternally static routines. They go through the "farce" of routine actions, as they call it, because there is nothing else to do while they wait for death. Even the environment around them is static; everything outside is "zero," as Clov reports, and the light, too, is forever gray, stranded between light and dark. Beckett also makes use of repetitions to underscore the cyclical stasis in *Endgame*. The play systematically repeats minute movements, from

how many knocks Hamm makes on a wall and how many Nagg makes on Nell's ashbin to how many steps Clov takes. The repetitions prohibit the discernment of meaning, since there is never a final product to scrutinize. At the start of the play, Clov questions when individual grains become a "heap." In his view, the heap is "impossible"; any single grain is not a heap, and a "heap" is just an accumulation of single grains. When Hamm later considers how individual moments make up a life, the analogy should hold—it is an "impossible" life, consisting not of a life but of discrete moments, until death terminates it. At one point, Hamm excitedly believes he is "beginning" to make some meaning out of the environment, but he will keep beginning to make sense of it and never finalize the meaning.

- **Emptiness and Loneliness**

The constant tension in *Endgame* is represented by whether Clov will leave Hamm or not. He threatens and does sometimes, but he is never able to make a final decision. Likewise, Hamm continually tells Clov to leave him alone but drags him back before an exit is possible. Both wonder out loud why they stay with each other, but they give different reasons in long monologues why they put up with each other: their empty lives are filled only with unyielding pain, and none of life's typical consolations would help them—there is no reason for why they are on earth, as Hamm often says. Hamm and Clov's unwillingness to face this pain alone somehow makes the pain greater, and their complementary, dominant-submissive pairing (a staple of Beckett's plays) highlights their numbing dependency. In the play, Beckett compares Hamm and Clov's tense co-dependency to his own relationship with his wife in the 1950s; both wanted to leave the other, but were afraid to. Nagg and Nell have a happier marriage in part because Nell, at least, is willing to accept that they cannot rely on each other (she calls their futile kissing routine a "farce") and must exist in their separate ashbins.

- **Light and Darkness/ life and Death**

As it is known to many, light connotes life, hope, and optimism and darkness connotes death, despair, and pessimism. Clov says he watches his light dying in his kitchen; the unseen character Mother Pegg died of light-deprivation. Beckett's revises this somewhat clichéd trope by making his Seasonal Affective Disordered (SAD) world gray. In this medium shade, the characters hold out minimal hope for life while despairing under death's shade. Hamm's blindness is another gray lampshade. He says he can feel the light on his face, and he cleans his glasses despite the fact that he is blind. His blindness also lends an extra level of selfishness to his re-

fusal to give Mother Pegg his light, and then Clov looks out on the sea, but finds nothing. There is no ship, no sail and no fish which suggest that there is no development in the life of these characters. Death existence is prominent in the play. Clov looks out on the earth, but finds no tree and leaf. The play also possesses quite a number of allusions. The universe of *Endgame* is seen as purgatory that is a state of limbo for purification. The purgatory is a region where one sinks to wipe out the sin. The play suggests purgatory. The characters have committed a sin, so they are in the process of purification in purgatory. Their sin was their birth and the window in the play represents the hope of salvation. As the play consists of Death in life and Life in Death, it tries to convey the idea that the worst thing that can happen to us is to be born and the next best thing that can happen to us is to be dying. The death is a reality, so it is better to be prepared for death. In this sense it is pessimistic play. Killing the rats and the flies suggests the death consciousness. As far as the title is concerned; *Endgame* is a certain move in the chess. It is a term that describes an ending in chess where the outcome is already known. The reference of white and red is the pun for chess. In chess, someone loses and someone wins but in the play no one wins but all dies. The title of this play is symbolic in the sense that living the life is analogous to playing chess. All the characters are waiting for death. The death consciousness is alive throughout the play. That projects the helpless situation of human beings.

#### - Youth

Youth is another aspect in the play that shows how the whole set is pathetic. The boy in Hamm's story about the beggar, and the boy at the end of the play are two symbols of regeneration or youth. Hamm's story takes place on Christmas Eve, giving the sense that the boy is a Christ-figure. In fact, Clov's opening lines in the scene echo Jesus's last words. However, Hamm's story contrasts the withering state of the boy's youthful blooming and his beggar father, at the end of the play the boy becomes more explicit symbol of regeneration—as Clov calls him a “potential procreator.” In the Bible, Noah and his ark is a story of regeneration, but Hamm's is one of sterility, and youth is evidence that existence is cyclical and Hamm will live forever in a static misery.

#### - Physical Disabilities

In almost every play that Beckett has ever written, his characters' different physical handicaps. Hamm is blind and sitting in a wheelchair. He gets headaches. Nagg and Nell have no legs, and they are unable to see each other. Nagg is hard of hearing. Nell is unable to cry. Clov has stiff

legs and is unable to sit down. There are plenty of explanations for such disabilities. When Clov says that there is no more nature, Hamm says, "But we breathe, we change! We lose our hair, our teeth! Our bloom! Our ideals" (1.107). In the play, growth seems to be measured in terms of decay. Having a body seems to be a very undignified thing, and it brings all sorts of disgrace upon human beings, their bodies fall apart and get old. The minds of human beings imagine themselves as being extremely dignified, but the bodies are something that can constantly undermine this feeling of dignity. By exaggerating this so strongly, Beckett draws special attention to the broken bodies of his characters. It is yet another aspect of their misfortune, something that they have to struggle against.

### **Conclusion**

Endgame is a term used to describe an ending movement in chess where the outcome is already known. Beckett, as a devoted chess fan, saw the parallel between chess endgame and the final stages of life. He realized that death is the final outcome regardless of how a person plays the game, or lives his life, he will die. This imagery is presented through Clov and Hamm (red) and Nagg and Nell (white). The stage setting is important because it is set to look like a skull, with the two windows on the back wall form the eye sockets of the skull. In typical Beckettian fashion, the crime can be viewed as "life," meaning that they are doomed to repeat life forever. The subject of Endgame is whether Clov will leave Hamm. Their relationship, which alternates between slave/master and son/father, is also a mutually beneficial one. Hamm provides food and shelter, whereas Clov provides legs and eyesight. The relationship between Hamm and Clov is also confused by Hamm's biographical story, told daily and seemingly without an end (because a biography can only truly be ended when the person is dead). Beckett highlights one theme in particular, that of "finishing". This theme is presented right in the opening moments, with Clov saying, "Finished, it's finished, nearly finished, it must be finished.", and it is repeated throughout the play. However, what soon becomes clear is that things remain unfinished; actually finishing something represents death. One of the greatest fears that all the characters share is that of being reincarnated or resurrected after death. Thus they make an effort to kill all potential procreators such as the flea. This is taken to the extreme in the form of trying to kill the rat and later trying to kill the little boy.

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