

## On the Nihilism in *Endgame*

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With its presentation of the apocalyptic view of the world of four agonized survivors, *Endgame* conveys a strong sense of nihilism: the futility of existence, the universal misery, human's suffering, hopelessness and despair, which is visually, connotatively and allegorically expressed through the theme, the plot, the language, and the theatrical device. The play may be claimed as the most absurd play of the "Theater of Absurd".

*Keywords:* absurd, despair, nihilism

### Introduction

*Endgame* may be claimed as the most absurd play of the "Theater of Absurd". "Rather difficult and elliptic... more inhuman than *Godot*" (Mercier, 1989, p. 117), as Samuel Beckett himself describes. Critic Eugene Webb in his book *The Plays of Samuel Beckett* interprets *Endgame* as the psychological development of a single human personality (Webb, 1972, pp. 54-56); while Richard Dutton thinks the play is a tragicomedy, a study of the mystery of life (Dutton, 1986, p. 89). On the first sight *Endgame* appears too obscure to understand: fragmented language, too much allusions and connotations, unusual theatrical devices, lack of logic and clarity... but one aspect is so certain: the overwhelming depressed atmosphere, giving a sense of deadness and leaden heaviness. While this feeling grows stronger and stronger on further reading, a desolate view unfolds gradually. *Endgame* depicts an extremely terrifying spectacle of the end of the world, when the earth faces complete extinction and human species diminishes to four damaged survivors, despairingly lingering on the verge of death.

### I. A Dying World

The world in *Endgame* is bleak and perplexing. The tide no longer flows; nothing moves; nothing grows; everything is dead or dying. Life resources have run out: no more pap, no more painkillers, and even no more coffins. The imminence of death is felt even in the shelter. Life means nothing but torture to the last survivors. Hamm is confined to a wheelchair, blood intermittently flowing from his head, Clov is stiff-limbed, unable to sit down, while Nagg and Nell are immobile in their ash-cans—all suffer from their own defects. Hamm is well-justified when saying "I believe they suffer as much as creatures can suffer" (Worthen, 2002, p 535), for what afflicts them are not only physical handicaps but spiritual agony. In their static, meaningless life, there are neither values nor hopes left. Outside the shelter is the gray universe, the sun becomes "zero" and time is but a shapeless pile of moments. As the play starts, Clov moves around the bare house, repetitively performing the trivial routine, which suggests the metonymy and dullness. He briefly laughs for several times as if he can relieve

his sense of hopelessness by so doing. Every day he “looks at the wall to see his light dying” (Worthen, 2002, p 537) and keeps comings and goings to wait on the three others. He slaves out of habit, perhaps because it is the only activity left to him. Clov longs to leave the shelter, but till the play ends, he has not yet departed, for there is no escape. The problem is more irremediable to Hamm, “a speck in the void”, as he puts it. Tormented by the “infinite emptiness” and “the loftiest misery” (Worthen, 2002, p 535), he is like an imperiled King, desperately clings to his lost power and pride. There is nothing he can do but tell futile stories to relieve his pain. His two long monologues sound like hysterical cry before death. When the painkillers run out, Hamm is surely died of agony. Nagg and Nell, the legless old couple in ashbins, who are particularly moving in causing bitter-sweet laughs, are treated like useless refuse and irretrievably running down. Their memories of those old good days forever disappear with the death of the last loving human beings on earth.

Miserable as life is, it would be at least endurable if religious recourse is available. However, the belief in Christ has turned into skepticism:

Hamm: The bastard! He doesn't exist! (Worthen, 2002, p. 548)

The small boy outside may stand for some hope, but this possibility is denied by Hamm's proclaim “He cannot live outside the shelter.” In a word, in the *Endgame* world before the age of death, religious faith is shaken off, hope is replaced by despair, and life is reduced to a silly game, “a humiliating crawl to infinity” (Hatch, 1958, p. 146).

## II. Loveless Survivors

The inhuman relationship is a hallmark in the *Endgame* world. The last survivors of human species are bound together only by the necessity of interdependence. Hamm and Clov seem indispensable to each other—Hamm chair bounded, unable to reach the larder on his own, Clov mobile but not knowing the combination of the larder, though little love is lost between them: “It's we are obliged to each other” is how Hamm puts it at the end, whereas Clov's version is equally valid: “If I could kill him I'd die happy.” Clov cannot leave Hamm, as there is no else left in the world, and Hamm's store is the last remaining source of food, but Hamm also must die, as Clov is the only one left who can serve him. Even though locked in such a symbiotic coexistence, they try to acquire a kind of morbid pleasure in hurting each other mentally. Clov takes an insane delight in saying, “There's no more painkiller”, and when he wheels Hamm to the center, he doesn't act strictly to Hamm's order. While Clov deliberately opposes Hamm's will, Hamm places a malicious curse on Clov when he says, “One day you'll be like me...except that you won't have anyone with you” (Worthen, 2002, p. 543). To his senile parents, Hamm's attitude is especially cruel: he orders to bottle Nagg and screw down the lids. Perhaps Hamm eventually realizes that his cruelty might have contributed his misery when he attempts to retrieve the moments of love and when he asks Clov to kiss him good-bye. Mournfully, love has gone too far to thaw the present icy hatred. The last resort is beyond reach.

## III. Life as an Absurd Play

What has caused the end? Only some vague clues are available in the text. Perhaps there have been a nuclear war, a cosmic fatigue, or perhaps it is hatred among people that has caused the collapse of the world, as

demonstrated by Hamm's withdrawal of love; but these conjectures as to the reasons are less important than the effect: when the world is dripping to its end, how is the last survivors of mankind?

In critic Robert Hatch's words, *Endgame* is "a song of final dissolution by a minstrel-prophet with the logic of death in his mind and the conviction of life forever in his blood" (Hatch, 1958, p. 146). Hamm and Clov can see through all about their plight, "it's time it ended, in the shelter too" (Worthen, 2002, p. 535), but the will of living is still lingering, "And yet I hesitate, I hesitate to... end" (Ibid., p. 535). Throughout the play there are numerous, explicit references to actors' roles in a play: "soliloquy" "to play" "exit"... Maybe in Hamm and Clov's eyes life is but a farce, an absurd play, a meaningless round to fill one's role and then exit into eternity. One time Hamm asks Clov to kill the flea, lest it starts the first chain in the development of a new race, because the life circle is not worthwhile to start. Nevertheless, they have no courage, or unwilling to die, delaying, postponing, despairingly lingering on the verge of death.

There are no clear indications about the outcome of Hamm and Clov. As the Play ends, Hamm ceremoniously unfolds the handkerchief once more and covers his face as it is in the beginning—maybe he has poured all his thoughts out before waiting the end's coming in quiet agony. Thus the play finishes representing a syndrome of moments before extinction, but Hamm's last prolonged monologue, with its concluded tragic tones, puts an everlasting atmosphere in readers' imagination of the end of the world.

### Conclusion

With its presentation of the apocalyptic view of the world of the four agonized survivors, *Engame* conveys to readers a strong sense of nihilism: the futility of existence, the universal misery, human's suffering, hopelessness and despair, which is visually, connotatively and allegorically expressed through the theme, the plot, the language, and the theatrical device. Adding to what Samuel Beckett put, "more inhuman than *Godot*", perhaps it is no exaggeration to claim the play as the most absurd play of the "Theater of Absurd".

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