

ENDGAME

“Nothing to be done” are the opening words of *Waiting for Godot*, and the line characterizes the entire drama. Likewise, the opening words of *Endgame*: “Finished, it’s finished . . .” set the theme for this drama. These are the last words that Christ murmured on the cross: “It is finished.” It is the end of the game. Beckett himself once described *Endgame* as being “rather difficult and elliptic” and as “more inhuman than *Godot*.”

Part of the difficulty of the play lies in the condensation of the language. *Act Without Words I*, of course, has no language in it, but in *Endgame*, Beckett reduces language to its smallest denominator. It is even difficult for many to glean even the barest essentials of the drama. First, we cannot even be certain as to the nature of the setting itself. On the stage, we see a rather sparse, dim room with two small, high windows, one that looks out on land and the other on sea. There are two “ashbins” (ash cans) and a large object covered with a sheet. At first, the ash cans are also covered with a sheet, and thus the opening setting resembles a furniture storage house without any sign of life. The setting alone suggests various approaches to the play. The characters are confined to this bare room, which could suggest such diverse things as the inside of the human skull with the windows being the eyes to look out onto the world, or as one critic has suggested, we are within the womb. Outside the room, there is only devastation, with no sign of life (except maybe a small boy, if he exists, who (perhaps) appears towards the end of the play). The setting, therefore, is typical of Beckett; it is bizarre and unfamiliar, one that can evoke multiple associations and interpretations.

Against this decaying setting, the action (or non-action) of the drama is enacted, and it begins as it ends, with the words “it is finished,” and the rest of the play deals with the end of the game. Unlike traditional drama, *Endgame* has no beginning and no middle; it opens at the end of a chess game, or at the end of life, or at the end of the world, and there is only “the impossible heap” that is left outside. In addition to the biblical echoes of Christ’s last words, there are also various allusions throughout the play to the Christian story and to other biblical parallels. There are also Shakespearean allusions, along with multilingual puns and various, strategic chess moves. (For example, at the end of a chess game, only a few pieces remain on the board. Clov, with his

cloven feet, hops about the stage as does the chess knight (or horse), and he is seen moving the “king” (Hamm) about the board one square at a time, but essentially he allows the king to remain stationary (whenever possible). Consequently, among the difficulties of the play are the non-action and the language, which has been reduced to a virtual non-language, but which is nevertheless filled with allusions to a great body of diverse literature.

At the opening, Hamm, who is blind, and Clov, who cannot sit, speak disjointedly about their life together; they are bored with one another and have lived together too long, but Clov can't leave because there is “nowhere else,” and he can't kill Hamm because “I don't know the combination of the cupboard.” Hamm controls what food or sustenance there is—thereby forcing the others to be subservient to his wishes. After Hamm inquires about his pain-killer and asks some seemingly irrelevant questions about some nonexistent bicycle wheels, Clov departs; the lid on one of the ash cans lifts, and Nagg, Hamm's father, looks out and asks for food. We hear that Nagg has no legs, only stumps, and is always kept in one of the ash cans. Clov returns and gives Nagg a biscuit, and as Nagg begins to nag about the biscuit, Clov forces him back into the ash can and closes the lid. After a brief discussion about Clov's seeds, which “haven't sprouted” (an allusion to Eliot's *Wasteland*), Clov departs.

Nagg reappears in his ash can and knocks on the adjacent ash can. Nell, Nagg's wife and Hamm's mother, appears and they reminisce about how they lost their legs in an accident on a tandem bicycle in northern France. Then they remember another incident which happened long ago, when they were engaged and were rowing on Lake Como. Then, Nagg told a story about a tailor who took longer to make a pair of striped trousers than it took God to make the world. But, according to the tailor, the trousers were better made than is the world. Hamm then whistles for Clov, who returns, and Nagg and Nell are forced back into their ash cans and the lids are replaced.

After Clov takes Hamm for a spin about the room and returns him to the exact center of the room, Hamm wants Clov to look out a window and report to him. Clov must get the stepladder (he has either shrunk or else the windows have risen) and the telescope. He looks out and reports that there is “Zero . . . (He looks) . . . zero . . . (He looks) . . . and zero.”

After a discussion about the state of the earth (they wonder what would happen if a rational being came back to the earth), Clov discovers a flea on himself, which occupies his complete attention. Afterwards, Hamm wants to get on a raft and go somewhere, and he reminds Clov that someday Clov will be “like me. You’ll be sitting there, a speck in the void, in the dark, forever.” (The blind Pozzo in *Waiting for Godot* also says approximately the same thing: “One day I went blind, one day we’ll go deaf . . . one day we shall die . . . is that not enough . . .”) Hamm then promises to give Clov the combination to the cupboard if Clov will promise “to finish me.” When Clov refuses, Hamm reminds Clov of the time long ago when Clov first came here and Hamm was “a father” to him. This thought causes Hamm to ask for his toy dog to play with.

Suddenly, Hamm asks about Mother Pegg and if her light is on and whether or not she is buried, but Clov replies that he has had nothing to do with her or her burial. Then Hamm wants his “gaff,” or stick, to move the chair; also, he wants the wheels (casters) oiled, but they were oiled yesterday, and yesterday was like all other days —“All life long the same inanities.” Hamm wants to tell his story, but when Clov refuses to listen to it, Hamm insists that he awaken Nagg to listen to the story.

Hamm’s story involves a man who comes crawling towards him on his belly. The man wants “bread for his brat.” Hamm has no bread, but maybe there is a pot of porridge. The man asks Hamm to take in his child—if the child is still alive. Hamm can still see the man, “his hands flat on the ground, glaring . . . with his mad eyes.” The story will soon be finished unless Hamm decides to “bring in other characters.”

Hamm whistles for Clov, who excitedly exclaims that he’s found a rat in the kitchen. Despite the fact that Clov has only exterminated “half the rat,” Hamm says that can wait; for the present, they must all “pray to God.” After several futile attempts to pray, Hamm concludes: “The bastard! He doesn’t exist.”

When Hamm’s father begins wailing for a sugar plum, he reminds his son of how he used to cry in the night. Nagg and Nell let him cry, even moved him “out of earshot” so they could sleep in peace. Someday, Nagg warns, Hamm will cry out again for his father. He then sinks back into his ash can and closes the lid behind him.

Clov begins to straighten up the room (“I love order”), and he

wonders how Hamm is progressing with his story (his chronicle). Hamm says that he has made some progress with the story up to the point where the man wants to bring a small child with him to tend Hamm's garden, but the creative effort has exhausted him.

Hamm then inquires about his parents. Clov looks into the ash cans and reports that it looks as though Nell is dead, but Nagg is not; Nagg is crying. Hamm's only reaction is to ask to be moved by the window where he wants to hear the sea, but Clov tells him that this is impossible. After he checks on Nagg once again, refusing to kiss Hamm or even to give a hand to hold, Clov exits to check on the trapped rat in the kitchen.

Alone, Hamm ruminates almost incoherently about life and possible death and then blows his whistle for Clov; he inquires whether or not the rat got away and about his pain-killer. It is finally time for it, he says, but now "there is no more pain-killer." Hamm then wants Clov to look through the windows and give him a report. Clov looks out "at this muckheap," but it is not clear enough to see anything. Hamm wonders "what happened." For Clov, whatever happened doesn't matter, and he reminds Hamm that when Hamm refused to give old Mother Pegg some oil for her lamps, he knew that she would die "of boredom."

Clov, when ordered to get something, wonders why he always obeys Hamm, and Hamm suggests that perhaps it's because of compassion. As Clov is about to look out through the telescope, Hamm demands his toy dog. When Clov throws it to him, Hamm tells Clov to hit him with an axe or with his stick, but not with the dog. He would like to be placed in his coffin, but "there are no more coffins." Clov looks out the window toward "the filth" and says that it will be the last time; this is to be the end of the game. Suddenly, he sees something that "looks like a small boy." Clov wants to go see, but Hamm is against it. Hamm then announces that "it's the end, Clov; we've come to the end." Hamm says he doesn't need Clov anymore, and Clov prepares to leave. He makes a final speech to Hamm: "You must learn to suffer better . . . if you want them to weary of punishing you." Clov then exits while Hamm asks one last favor, but Clov doesn't hear it. In a few moments, Clov reenters, dressed for traveling. He stands impassively while Hamm continues his chronicle about the man coming to him, wanting to bring a child. At the end, Hamm calls out to Nagg and then to Clov. With no answer, he then covers his face with his handkerchief as the curtain falls.

One could easily conclude from the above that nothing happens, and this is part of Beckett's purpose. The world ends, according to T. S. Eliot, not with a bang but with a whimper. In this play, most of the things that Western civilization has stood for seem no longer to matter—God, family ties, respect for parents, love, prayer, loyalty, and religion—everything is meaningless here as the end of the game is being played; everything outside is zero. The only people remaining are sterile and despairing (one rotting); they “have had enough of this thing.”

In *Endgame*, as in so many of his other plays, Beckett utilizes several sets of polarities which characterize most of his plays (*Act Without Words I* is something of an exception to the rule). Among the most obvious polarities here are (1) Hamm versus Clov: Hamm, when he is uncovered, is seen immediately to be a mass of decaying flesh in contrast to Clov, whose name is the same of a preservative spice—thus (2) decay versus preservative; (3) standing versus sitting: Clov must constantly move about the stage to preserve the status quo of the situation, giving us the polarity of (4) movement (Clov) versus non-movement (Hamm); (5) sight versus blindness: not only is Hamm decaying, but he is also blind and must rely upon Clov to see all things for him. The (6) master versus slave polarity is similar to the Pozzo–Lucky polarity; Pozzo and Hamm as masters are blind and must be led (or attended to) by the slaves, Lucky and Clov; (7) inside versus outside polarities are emphasized by the (8) left and right windows, through which Clov is able to report what is going on outside; (9) Nagg and Nell, the parents of Hamm, seem to suggest the muckheap which Beckett sees mankind as being. Ultimately, the concept (10) of life versus death informs most of the play. Whereas twice in *Waiting for Godot*, Vladimir and Estragon consider suicide by hanging, the idea of death pervades this entire play, from its title (the End of the Game) to the presumed death of Nell during the play and includes death images throughout the play—all indicating the possible death and fall of civilization as we know it. These, at least, are part of the complex polarities and images which Beckett uses in investigating man's absurd existence in an absurd world.