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Samuel Beckett's *Endgame*, the reimagining of Tragedy

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Abstract

This study delves into the intricacies of Tragedy in Samuel Beckett's *Endgame*, a work that defies traditional Tragic conventions with its flat plot style. Through an exploration of various interpretations and definitions of tragedy, the study highlights the notion that the fundamental value of Tragedy in the works of literature, lies in the concept of catharsis. The study also examines the theories of the *Theatre of the Absurd*, as a movement that aims to convey the futility and purposelessness of life, arguing that it effectively wakes the audience up to the reality of decay and death. Drawing on Martin Esslin's Absurdist theater, and the work of Jean Paul Sartre concerning the Existentialist philosophy, the paper portrays the Absurdist movement as a necessary and benevolent evil that liberates the human mind, which is also instrumental in illuminating Beckett's reimagining of Tragedy. The paper will further on argue that

despite being deemed incongruous within traditional works of Tragedy, the *Endgame*'s form is secondary to its effect, since it utilizes an unconventional method in eliciting a cathartic response in the audience, elevating it to the status of a problematic Tragedy, but a Tragedy nonetheless. It is further on delineated that Beckett's perspective on humanity is bleak and uncompromising, as all the characters introduced in his play are equally miserable creatures bewildered by illusions of grandeur, with no agency or signifying identity such as Hero or Anti-hero applicable to their futile existence. Ironically, the debates surrounding whether or not *Endgame* qualifies as a proper Tragedy may align with Beckett's original intentions, as he reimagines his singular design by allowing catharsis while denying the consolations and closures offered in classic Tragedies.

Keywords: Samuel Beckett, *Endgame*, Tragedy, Aristotle, Martin Esslin,

Introduction

"A beginning is that which does not itself follow anything by causal necessity, but after which something naturally is or comes to be. An end, on the contrary, is that which itself naturally follows some other thing, either by necessity, or as a rule, but has nothing following it. A middle is that which follows something as some other thing follows it. A well-constructed plot, therefore, must neither begin nor end at haphazard, but conform to these principles."

- Aristotle, *Poetics*

"Tragedy is not concerned with human justice. Tragedy is the statement of an expiation, but not the expiation of a codified breach of local arrangement, organized by the knaves for the fools. The tragic figure represents the expiation of the original sin, of the original and eternal sin of him and all his 'soci malorum', the sin of having been born"

- Samuel Beckett

Prior to delineating *Endgame*'s breathtaking use of tragedy, let us illuminate the elusive definitions and interpretations regarding the ever-pervasive word, "Tragedy". As the originator of tragic theory, Aristotle's *Poetics* has often been cited as the ultimate authority regarding the nature of "authentic" Tragedy, virtually building the edifice of tragic literature upon the pillars of dramatic unities, noble characters and their downfalls, hamartia, and the theatricalization of unconventional familial

affairs¹. Furthermore, Aristotle firmly believed that "Tragedy is an imitation of an action that is admirable, complete and possesses magnitude; in language made pleasurable, each of its species separated in different parts; performed by actors, not through narration; effecting through pity and fear the purification of such emotions. By 'language embellished,' I mean language into which rhythm, 'harmony,' and song enter. By 'the several kinds in separate parts,' I mean, that some parts are rendered through the medium of verse alone, others again with the aid of song"². Regardless, it is no secret that Aristotle is constantly criticized, either because his cherished model for tragedy is conveniently a descriptive (and not prescriptive) definition, or because his analysis is too strict and narrow to involve all types of dramatic form, especially regarding the humanity's existential plight. Consequently, his model so blatantly and tragically (pun intended), excludes many plays which are considered to be undisputed masterpieces of tragedy, be it Shakespearean ones, or even the revered extant Greek tragedies themselves³. The need for a universal definition of tragedy has been felt so strongly in the recent years, with Michelle Gellrich arguing that "the essential premises about dramatic consistency, intelligibility, and unity, articulated in the Poetics and later absorbed into the mainstream of literary study. can be effectively secured only if obstinately unsystematic and destabilizing movements of language and action in tragedy are bypassed or somehow brought to heel"⁴. Nevertheless, when it comes to Tragedy, no universally agreed upon definition exists, and as Stephen Booth once claimed, "The search for a definition of tragedy has been the most persistent and widespread of all non-Religious quests for definition"⁵.

The preliminary assumption put forth in this paper is that under all the layers of monolithic principles and arbitrary shackles of proper form and content, what makes a work of literature qualify as Tragedy, is the concept of catharsis⁶. The cathartic value of Tragedy is an opportunity to release the mountains of pain, loss and frustration built-up in one's soul⁷. This process of emotional release is further on coupled with the fact that by observing catastrophes in art, one can put his/her personal suffering in perspective, which in turn allows humans to come to terms with the ugliness of the world and its creatures⁸. This process can indeed be considered the core value of tragedy in the works of art and literature.

¹ Averroes, and Averroës. *Averroes' Middle Commentary on Aristotle's Poetics*. Burns and Oates, 2000.

² Aristotle. *The Poetics of Aristotle*. Createspace Independent Publishing Platform, 2017.

³ Belfiore, Elizabeth S. *Tragic Pleasures: Aristotle on Plot and Emotion*. Princeton UP, 2014.

⁴ McDonald, R. *Tragedy and Irish Literature: Synge, O'Casey, Beckett*. Springer, 2001.

⁵ McDonald, R. *Tragedy and Irish Literature: Synge, O'Casey, Beckett*. Springer, 2001.

⁶ Munteanu, Dana LaCourse. *Tragic Pathos: Pity and Fear in Greek Philosophy and Tragedy*. Cambridge UP, 2011.

⁷ Belfiore, Elizabeth S. *Tragic Pleasures: Aristotle on Plot and Emotion*. Princeton UP, 2014.

⁸ Nuttall, A. D. *Why Does Tragedy Give Pleasure?* OUP Oxford, 2001.

Absurdist notions

The term *Theatre of the Absurd* originated with Martin Esslin, who after extensive research, recognized an intoxicating pattern of thought emerging in multiple works of dramatic literature during the 20th century. Discovered, it was a manifestation of an intricate web of Absurdist literature, desperately attempting to make manifest the inexhaustible pain of living in a world devoid of reason and logic⁹. Take care to pay close attention to the notion of "Absurd" in this context, noting that it is not at all meant to convey the concept of ridiculousness as in the colloquial use of the term. Rather, this concept, as abstract as it might sound, was presented in an attempt to shed light on the pervasive sense of purposelessness and fatuousness in mortal life, and it was to be considered an ominous portent of the decaying constitution of human doctrines of philosophy¹⁰. The Absurd in other words, is to signify the search for answers in an answerless universe¹¹.

Unsurprisingly, one's mind tends to reverberate with echoes of existentialism when processing these notions, and appropriately so, since the essence of existentialist philosophy is what mainly constitutes the absurdist movement. A movement, which is in its core, is a declaration that Existence precedes Essence, and therefore man is a lonely self-aware creature on earth, condemned to be free and responsible for all his futile actions¹². This is in part derived from the work of Jean Paul Sartre, as he believed that human beings live in constant anguish, not solely because life is miserable, but because mankind is condemned to be bewildered. Sartre's theory of existentialism states that since there are no grand designs in place for the fate of each individual, it is only by existing and acting a certain way that one can give meaning to one's life. Put simply, since there are no guidelines for one's actions, humanity is forced to design arbitrary moral codes, and to invent some sort of morality to live by¹³.

The *Theatre of the Absurd* is brutally effective, since by design, it manages to immerse the audience in a dismal decaying world until they choke on the aroma of death to the point of suffocation. This is largely achieved not by paroxysms of rage concerning the irrationality of existence, but by managing to coalesce the subject matter and form, leading to concrete tangible images of the circus of existence¹⁴. Building on the cathartic value of Tragedy, Esslin didn't see the Absurdist movement as prophets of doom and gloom, but as liberators of human mind. He saw them as necessary evil, blasphemous yet benevolent, and finally succeeding in waking up the human species from the illusion of heading towards the Promise land¹⁵. Note that

⁹ Bennett, Michael Y. *The Cambridge Introduction to Theatre and Literature of the Absurd*. Cambridge UP, 2015.

¹⁰ Kaufmann, Walter. *Existentialism from Dostoevsky to Sartre*. Pickle Partners Publishing, 2016.

¹¹ Hinchliffe, Arnold P. *The Absurd*. Taylor and Francis, 2017.

¹² Sartre, Jean-Paul. *Existentialism and Humanism*. M. S. G. House, 1977.

¹³ Cox, Gary. *Existentialism and Excess: The Life and Times of Jean-Paul Sartre*. Bloomsbury Publishing, 2016.

¹⁴ Hinchliffe, Arnold P. *The Absurd*. Taylor and Francis, 2017.

¹⁵ Dominte, Carmen. *Re-Thinking Character in the Theatre of the Absurd*. Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2020.

Esslin famously said of the absurdist movement that “It is a challenge to accept the human condition as it is, in all its mystery and absurdity, and to bear it with dignity, nobly, responsibly; precisely because there are no easy solutions to the mysteries of existence, because ultimately man is alone in a meaningless world. The shedding of easy solutions, of comforting illusions, may be painful, but it leaves behind it a sense of freedom and relief. And that is why, in the last resort, the Theatre of the Absurd does not provoke tears of despair but the laughter of liberation ¹⁶.”

Beckett's Endgame and the rebirth of tragedy

It is undisputable that even if we bypass all the traditional assets of a classic Tragedy, Beckett's work still seems very much incongruous, simply because his work is too unpredictable and hazy, lacking even a single stable stylistic trait around which tragic loss could revolve. Therefore, even the most non-sectarian definitions of Tragedy would still be in conflict with Beckett's drama, which seems too mercilessly and remorselessly flat to reach the Tragic status ¹⁷.

Esslin argued, to put it simply, that the form of Beckett's work, especially *Endgame*, is secondary to its effect. He was empathizing his original argument about the true essence of tragedy, introduced as the cathartic value of the portrayal of loss, asserting that “It is, moreover, highly significant that this emotional impact, in apparent contradiction to the recondite intellectual content of Beckett's work, is indeed an exhilarating one. How is it that this vision of the ultimate void in all its grotesque derision and despair should be capable of producing an effect akin to the catharsis of great tragedy?” ¹⁸. Therefore, if we look beyond the absence of traditional pillars of Tragedy in *Endgame*, we will find the cathartic response that it manages to create in the audience, elevating it to the status of an unconventional work of Tragic literature. Besides, rather than relying on traditional plot structures and character development, Beckett chooses to emphasize the absurdity and futility of human existence through his characters' cyclically repetitive actions, and their fragmented and disjointed dialogue ¹⁹. His use of dark humor and bleak imagery further underscores the sense of existential despair that pervades mortal consciousness, and his unconventional approach to Tragedy challenges audiences to reconsider their assumptions about what constitutes a tragic work of literature ²⁰. In doing so, he forces the audience to confront the fundamental questions of human existence, such as the nature of suffering, the limits of human agency, and the improbability of redemption in a seemingly meaningless world.

Regardless, Beckett never had any pretense of being a traditional tragedian anyway ²¹. In fact, as far as

conventional Hellenic conceptions of Tragedy go, Beckett is a bitter traumatized personality writing under heavy influence of his nightmares regarding WWII ²². In asserting that “where in fact is the tragic to be found? Beckett cannot believe in, or at least cannot create, a genuine tragic hero – powerful, proud, yet essentially good save for the tragic flaw. Beckett's anti-heroes do not aspire, so they can never fall”, Critics like Vivian Mercier have tried to justify Beckett's incongruity by arguing that his work is built upon anti-heroism rather than heroism, and so it works against our previous perceptions of Tragedy ²³.

This paper perceives that evaluation to be predicated upon an argument that is open to interpretation. Note that one could reasonably argue that Beckett discarded heroes and anti-heroes all the same, simply due to the fact that in his opinion, these two notions would indicate a degree of significance, or even worse, some kind of resolution ²⁴. Beckett's worldview is characterized by a deep sense of existential despair, in which he portrays all of humanity, with no exceptions, as equally insignificant and helpless. For Beckett, human beings are deranged consumers, surviving briefly on delusions of grandeur, only to be ultimately consumed by the nothingness of existence. He rejects the notion of heroes or anti-heroes all the same, seeing as all individuals are uniformly bewildered and deluded by their own sense of purpose and importance ²⁵. Rather than offering a glimmer of hope or redemption, Beckett's work presents a bleak and unyielding vision of human existence, in which the very nature of life is both a burden and a source of guilt. Beckett notes that “Nothing is funnier than unhappiness, I grant you that... Yes, yes, it's the most comical thing in the world. And we laugh, we laugh, with a will, in the beginning. 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”, and in this sense, his portrayal of humanity is unflinching and uncompromising, epitomizing the harsh realities of human mortality and insignificance in the face of the vast, uncaring nothingness outside the window ²⁶.

So far, Beckett has successfully reimagined the tragic genre, both semantically and syntactically. And much to the consternation of Aristotelians as they cite Aristotle in asserting that “A well-constructed plot should, therefore, be single in its issue, rather than double as some maintain. The change of fortune should be not from bad to good, but, reversely, from good to bad ²⁷.”, Beckett portrays a chronic inaction born out of a disjointed narrative, and vehemently eschews the grandiose sense of closure so prevalent in traditional Tragedies. Furthermore, Beckett's *Endgame*

²² Uhlmann, Anthony. *Samuel Beckett in Context*. Cambridge UP, 2013.

²³ McDonald, R. *Tragedy and Irish Literature: Synge, O'Casey, Beckett*. Springer, 2001.

²⁴ Gale, Cengage Learning. *A Study Guide for Samuel Beckett's "Endgame"*. Gale, Cengage Learning, 2016.

²⁵ Demleitner, Patrizia. *Samuel Beckett's "Endgame": The Continuation of "Waiting for Godot"?* GRIN Verlag, 2006.

²⁶ Ionica, Cristina. *The Affects, Cognition, and Politics of Samuel Beckett's Postwar Drama and Fiction: Revolutionary and Evolutionary Paradoxes*. Springer Nature, 2020.

²⁷ Belfiore, Elizabeth S. *Tragic Pleasures: Aristotle on Plot and Emotion*. Princeton UP, 2014.

¹⁶ Esslin, Martin. *The Theatre of the Absurd*. Vintage, 2004.

¹⁷ Graver, Lawrence, and Raymond Federman. *Samuel Beckett, the Critical Heritage*. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1979.

¹⁸ Esslin, Martin. *Mediations: Essays on Brecht, Beckett, and the Media*. Taylor and Francis, 2022.

¹⁹ Dominte, Carmen. *Re-Thinking Character in the Theatre of the Absurd*. Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2020.

²⁰ Cascetta, Annamaria. *Modern European Tragedy: Exploring Crucial Plays*. Anthem Press, 2015.

²¹ McDonald, Ronan. *The Cambridge Introduction to Samuel Beckett*. Cambridge UP, 2007.

manages to engrave in the audiences' mind, an everlasting collage of inadequate human existence, proving repeatedly that nothing really transpires in our mortal life and that there are no meaningful events²⁸. As the characters engage in meaningless conversation and pass an interminable amount of time under the illusion that something is happening or "something is taking its course",²⁹ we come to the realization that the grey room with the two windows is essentially a cabin in an endless train, floating in the eternal shades of grey. The train has not stopped, but it is surely not going anywhere. It is not going in circles, but it is definitely not going forward or backward either. The train is not still, but it's not fixed in its position as well. The train of existence, constituted of as many cabins as there are human lives, is simply suspended in a grey abyss, floating and decaying until there is nothing left to decay. Note that Beckett's imagery in this context puts him very much under the heavy influence of Greek mythology, since the greyish image of the place so closely resembles that of Chaos, the first of the primeval gods. As the myth goes, Chaos was the lower atmosphere, which surrounded the earth (invisible air and gloomy mist). Furthermore, his name, Chaos, is known to literally mean the gap, or the space between heaven and earth, which presents an even more compatible visual imagery to that of the room in *The Endgame*³⁰.

As the play is performed over and over again, the notion of "something is taking its course" becomes ever more salient, since upon closer inspection, the phrase seems to be the secret door out of the labyrinth of *Endgame*. The sentence represents the instinctual illusion embedded in the human psyche, one that implies that the passage of time equals some sort of meaningful progress in life. This specific illusion, along with many more, has been the primary drive of the entire human civilization since the dawn of time, and Beckett wastes no time in ridiculing it, managing to put its preposterous nature into perspective from the very onset of the play³¹. Using *Endgame*, he taunts the audience just as life taunted him, and therefore by careful design, the actions of the characters and the motives driving them are opaque, and even unfathomable, making them horrifyingly hard to understand,³² and then after a few moments of observation, terrifyingly easy to identify with. This repetitive cycle of momentary alienation/association works to maximize the effects of the play, since it manages to keep the audience in a constant state of shock, perpetually activating and deactivating the cathartic quality in his play.

In many of Beckett's works, and *Endgame* specifically, the point of view is a poisonous knife used to tear down the

illusion of human significance and uniqueness³³. Note that there really isn't a reliable point of view in *Endgame*, and one can't really see the play through the eyes of the characters, which is mainly due to the fact that it doesn't matter what the characters see anyway. They aren't anything significant and by the same token, neither is humanity as a whole³⁴. This is in fact an iconoclastic break from the traditional rules of tragedy because the audience isn't dealing with any faulty heroes brought to their doom as the result of some sort of dramatic hamartia. Moreover, there isn't any painful process of character development in the play, and in fact, there wasn't any need for it in the first place. Put simply, the characters are pathetic confused lumps of meat, muddling through the mud of life like worms in a fishing boat, thinking and deluding themselves into thinking that they were once glorious, and maybe will revert to that state at some point in the future. Bear in mind that this is a very valid interpretation indeed, as Victor Cahn calls this view of man "comic-pathetic"³⁵. In the context of the Absurd, this notion finds meaning as both the situations and the characters of *Theatre of the Absurd* frequently border on the farcical, yet the overall effect is quite serious since the plays deal with the bitter realities of an absurd universe.

Over and above that, *Endgame* allows Beckett to present the play under an overarching shadow of doubt regarding the futility of human self-awareness³⁶. Scientifically speaking, there was in fact a time during human evolution when mankind hadn't yet evolved to be aware of their own existence, meaning that concepts such as free will or arbitrary patterns of thought couldn't have existed back then. In other words, everything used to be purely instinctual and hereditary, and Beckett argues, empathically, that we never really evolved beyond that era. There is no denying the undisputable progress that the human species have made over the course of history, yet *Endgame* asserts that the blind instinctual animalistic desire to keep consuming and procreating until one reaches oblivion still rages on inside of us. The characters in the *Endgame*, dispensable wastes of oxygen as they are, manage to arouse sympathy and even hope in the audience, as the play's quality of catharsis moves parallel to each character's search for meaning. Since these characters are primal creatures, they have not yet evolved enough to have a meaningful self-awareness, and they fail to realize the futility of attempting to understand Chaos.³⁷ This is no secret affair, and as arrogant evolved creatures, the audience can see this failure in their pitiful sentiments towards the characters. Nonetheless, the audience still fails to realize, that just as our lackluster yet accurate reflections in *Endgame* seem to be, we are isolated

²⁸ Graver, Lawrence, and Raymond Federman. *Samuel Beckett, the Critical Heritage*. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1979.

²⁹ Ionica, Cristina. *The Affects, Cognition, and Politics of Samuel Beckett's Postwar Drama and Fiction: Revolutionary and Evolutionary Paradoxes*. Springer Nature, 2020.

³⁰ Crimp, Catherine. *Childhood as Memory, Myth and Metaphor: Proust, Beckett, and Bourgeois*. Routledge, 2017.

³¹ Demleitner, Patrizia. *Samuel Beckett's "Endgame": The Continuation of "Waiting for Godot"?* GRIN Verlag, 2006.

³² Dominte, Carmen. *Re-Thinking Character in the Theatre of the Absurd*. Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2020.

³³ McDonald, Ronan. *The Cambridge Introduction to Samuel Beckett*. Cambridge UP, 2007.

³⁴ Demleitner, Patrizia. *Samuel Beckett's "Endgame": The Continuation of "Waiting for Godot"?* GRIN Verlag, 2006.

³⁵ Bareham, Tony. *Tom Stoppard: Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead, Jumpers, Travesties: A Casebook*. 1990.

³⁶ Kaelin, E. F. *The Unhappy Consciousness: The Poetic Plight of Samuel Beckett an Inquiry at the Intersection of Phenomenology and Literature*. Springer Science and Business Media, 2012.

³⁷ Crimp, Catherine. *Childhood as Memory, Myth and Metaphor: Proust, Beckett, and Bourgeois*. Routledge, 2017.

carbon-based animals as well, with the meaning of life beyond our comprehension. Beckett is showing us a raw and crude reflection of ourselves, and much to his chagrin, we verify all his convictions by failing to realize that we were never watching a play, but a mirror.

Conclusion

Quite ironically, all these arguments about whether or not *Endgame* is a proper rebirth of Tragedy might actually be what Beckett had planned all along. This is deduced from the fact that after careful analysis of Beckett's *Endgame*, it would be safe to conclude that he deliberately subverted the traditional expectations of Tragedy, in an effort to deny the audience any sense of closure, while holding the iconic cathartic quality of Tragic literature in place. Beckett's *Endgame* leaves his singular mark on the face of the theater, as instead of conforming to conventional structures, he chooses to present a bleak and unrelenting vision of human existence, where characters are trapped in a cycle of futility and hopelessness, and therefore leaving the audience with a sense of unease and discomfort. On top of that, by depriving his characters of any hope for redemption or resolution, or even a concluding downfall, Beckett confronts the audience with the ultimate Tragedy as he reimagined it - the absence of closure and the presence of cathartic value, in the face of inevitable loss.

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