



UNINTELLIGIBLE BODIES: SPATIO-PSYCHO REPRESENTATION IN SAMUEL BECKETT'S ENDGAME

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DOI: [10.33329/rjelal.74.210](https://doi.org/10.33329/rjelal.74.210)



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ABSTRACT

This paper is a close-read analysis of Samuel Beckett's play, *Endgame* (1957). The paper explores interpretative possibilities of the play, through a study of the spatial and psychological representation of the unintelligible bodies of modern anti-heroes. How does mise-en-scene on stage provide for readings of Hamm, Clov, Nell and Nagg? Can Hamm and Clov be read as texts which dramatizes anxieties of the modern age, in a seemingly absent (con) text? These larger questions are opened up in through a close-reading of the primary text, *Endgame*.

KEYWORDS: Samuel Beckett, Absurd, Body, Modern Theatre

Martin Eslin in *Theatre of Absurd* (1962) writes "The Theatre of the Absurd shows the world as an incomprehensible place" (5). When Eslin writes, a decade after Samuel Beckett's *waiting for Godot* (1953), absurdity had ousted complacent dictations of meaning in the western stage. The classical privileging of tragedy was substituted by tragi-comedy, the integrating public ritual of theatrical was replaced by alienating spectacles, and the Aristotelian hero crumbled into the Sisyphean anti-hero. The modern stage reflected the anxieties of the age; post-war, post-holocaust and shell-shocked. As Jean-Francois Lyotard writes in *The Post Modern Condition* (1979), the second half of the Twentieth century expressed an "incredulity to metanarratives; overthrowing even the illusion of totalized meaning. This resulted in major shifts in theatrical conventions. The classically held dictums of Aristotelian unities of space, time and action, and cathartic identification with characters was replaced by an effect not far dissimilar from what Bertolt Brecht would call *Verfremdungseffekt* or Alienation Effect.

The twentieth century avant-garde movement thus brings in an altered performative

dynamics of space in theatre. Samuel Beckett's *Endgame* (1957), the primary text of analysis in this paper, stages such a peculiar kind of spatial and psychological interaction. While the "slice of life"/ Naturalist theatre treated subjects often as consequent to their surroundings, Theatre of Absurd--a genre which resounds Beckettian Modern/Post-modern stagecraft--dramatized human subject as simultaneously extensions of and alienated from his surroundings. Narrative actions were cordoned off to inaction claustrophobic cabins and characters devoid of resolve or motivations.

The human subject in *Endgame* is but only an extension of the theatrical space and props. Hamm and Clov, Nell and Nagg claim existence only within the space of the isolated, two-windowed, room and the ash bins respectively. Their identities are consequently validated through interactions with one another, within the particularity of the theatrical space. Consequently, the human subjects are presented on stage as simultaneously reflecting the space they inhabit as well as embodying it, physically or psychologically. The paper intends to close read such an engagement of space and the human subject Samuel Beckett's preoccupation with

the human subject in *Endgame*.

The setting of *Endgame* is a cloistered interior, of structure without reference. The interior could be a dilapidated house or underground sanctum. The lack of a particular reference universalizes the place. The lighting instructions are also specific. The stage is lit in gray light--neither full light nor complete darkness--summoning in a zone on uncanny indeterminacy. The presence of windows however arches towards the possibility of an invading external world. But, this is undercut by its inaccessibility. The curtains are perpetually drawn, inhibiting vision, and a ladder is used required for access. Further, the picture which is the only aesthetic possibility is also hung facing the wall. The mise-en-scene of *End Game* balances out any possibility of aesthetic transcendence with meaningless materiality.

Such a precarious balancing can be seen in the physio-psychical paradox which governs Hamm's characterization. Hamm physical fixation to the chair is iterated by his ensuing obsessing with maintaining its place. This is echoed by his incessant queries to Clov such as, "I was right in the centre, wasn't I?". This obsession with fixing oneself in a place is also paradoxical to his desire to escape existence. Hamm asks Clov repeatedly, "Why don't you kill me?" (.). This dichotomy between a desire for fixity and the absolute lack of will to maintain pervades the characterization in Beckett's place.

Further, the pervading sense of isolation in space and spatial relations subverts any transformative potential in the text. The isolated room in the *End Game* can be read along with the abstract and lonely open road of Beckett's *Waiting For Godot*. However, as opposed to the possibilities of externality, which an open setting facilitates in *Waiting For Godot*, the closed room in *Endgame* has only two windows, a flea and a rat as signs of external life- which are killed during the course of the play. Further, the open door through which Clov enters and exits functions merely as a theatrical trope which validates Clov's continual presence on stage, even while he is absent. The only other characters who are mentioned are from Hamm and Clov's past, Mother Pegg and Old Doctor, are no

longer alive. The sense of desolation and futility in the narrative echoes As Estragon's anguish in *Waiting For Godot* as he says, "Nothing happens, nobody comes, nobody goes, it's awful" (Act I). The plight of the "abandoned" modern man is rendered irredeemable. (Sartre, 1989) Beckettian representation of narrative time is non-progressive. While spatial relations on stage rendered more or less static, time's potency in effecting transformation of the same is rendered dysfunctional. Hamm and Clov are caught up in what Henri Bergson would call "durational time"; where the human subject's experience of time, is dramatized. Though nature alters its course through day and night, and Nell dies, linearity of time is only partially recognized. The alarm clock, which is the only material signifier is also rendered dysfunctional. However, Hamm seems partially aware of this existential bind as he says, "But we breathe, we change! We lose our hair, our teeth! Our bloom! Our Ideals!". Unlike Vladimir and Estragon's inability to perceive linear time in *Waiting For Godot*, Hamm recognizes it but cannot reconcile with it. The experiential time in which the fragmented psyche of the characters is caught up in, thus overpowers the theatrical time more specifically through the prop of the alarm clock.

Further, there is a defamiliarization in the representation of the body in *Endgame*. Michael Foucault in *History of Sexuality* notes body is a site of cultural inscriptions which makes it socially viable and productive. This notion of a culturally sound body is countered and consequently dismantled, by the physically dysfunctional bodies of Hamm, Clov, Nell and Nagg. Hamm's blindness, his immobility to move and the repeated sensation of blood dripping in his head, Clov's inability to sit, Nagg and Nell's blind and degenerate old bodies deglamourize and defamiliarize the familiar image of the functional human body which the Naturalist and Realist theatres often presented on stage. This distorted image of the human body externalizes the inner psychological conflict of modern man and resists appropriation into epistemic systems. The body mirrors the difunctional spatiality and revolts against meaning-making.

The defamiliarized bodies further decay

meaningful actions. Hamm and Clov exchange threats towards change, but is consistently blunted by inaction. Words are thus reduced to work-games, lacking context. Beckett writes:

"CLOV. So you all want me to leave you.

HAMM. Naturally.

CLOV. Then, I'll leave you.

HAMM. You can't leave us.

CLOV. Then I won't leave you.

(Pause)

HAMM. Why don't you finish us?

(Pause)" (Beckett, 1963)

Towards the end of the play, when Clov appears to have taken action, we still don't see him exit the stage. His silent presence further validates his inability to take action, only to make the plot run a cycle again. Thus, the characters in the play are denied agency as Beckett substitutes inaction for action. This substitution is more aptly seen at the concluding lines of the play, *Waiting For Godot* :

"VLADIMIR. Well? Shall we go?

ESTRAGON. Yes, let's go,

(They do not move)" (Act II)

This nexus between action and inaction further grounds them in the Sisyphian paradox of fruitless perseverance and its cyclicality, which Albert Camus articulates in his essay, "The Myth of Sisyphus". However, unlike other existential heroes like Meursault in Albert Camus' *The Stranger* who is psychologically content and physically sensate, the characters of Hamm and Clov in *Endgame* are tired and exhausted.

The characters' technological dependence is also worth noting. Hamm's castor chair, needing "bicycle wheels" becomes material signifiers of their isolation from the natural body. Clov's scientifically measured steps appears mechanized. Further, Clov is unable to see without a telescope; telescope becoming an extension of his dehumanized body. Walter Benjamin in his essay, "The Storyteller" articulates the image of the modern man who is also alienated from his natural surroundings by the technological intervention. Although, his articulation stems from a different context, the dehumanization and the consequent alienation of

modern man from Nature is aptly captured by the image. Clov announces this fullness of this experience of alienation as he declares, "There is no more nature."

Further, the coupling of bodies in *Endgame* work as an antidote to psychological fragmentation. Hamm and Clov are paired together, and so are Nell and Nagg. The inherent dynamics of Hamm and Clov's homo-social relationship is a power-oriented one, that of a Master-Servant relationship. The dynamics of this relationship bears close similarity to Lucky and Pozzo's relationship in *Waiting for Godot*. Martin Esslin in his essay, "Samuel Beckett :The search for the Self" writes of Pozzo and Lucky emblemizing the relationship between body and mind, the material as well as the spiritual sides of man. Here the intellect is positioned as subordinate to the desires of the body (Esslin, 1968). This Cartesian duality between mind and body is seen in the relationship between Hamm and Clov as well. Hamm's physical inability to act is substituted by his verbal authority and Clov's psychological subordination is balanced by his physical capacity. The bodies thus become physically and psychologically co-dependent on each other, to sustain their perseverance of giving meaning to their lives. Hamm and Clov converse:

"HAMM. Why do you stay with me?

CLOV. Why do you keep me.

HAMM. There is no one else.

CLOV. There is nowhere else.

(Pause)" (Beckett, 1963)

Though the above line superficially predicates the sustenance of their relationship on their isolation from the external world, what is not apparent is the self-validation it offers. Hamm's worn out identity as a powerful rich man can only be reconciled by the presence of a subordinate Clov and vice-versa. The Hegelian dialectics within this master-slave relationship sustains a selfhood to them, which their fragmentary experiences otherwise deny. Clov's inability to leave Hamm, even towards the end of the play, emanates from the consequent fear of fragmentation. As Hamm warns Clov, "Beyond (the walls of the room) is the... other hell" of oblivion and fragmentation.

Similarly, the characters attempt to counter fragmentation by a validation through language. S. E. Gontarski in his essay, "An End to Endings: Samuel Beckett's Endgame(s)" notes Hamm's need for an audience to his stories for self-validation, such as when he offers Nagg a sugar plum to listen to his tale. Gontarski writes, "Nagg and Nell,... no longer function in life except that on occasion that they too are needed to witness Hamm's performance and to certify to his living or witness his dying" (418). The role of Clov is also more of an audience to Hamm's stories. Similarly, Nagg requires Nell for an audience to his tale of the tailor. Thus, the enterprise of storytelling becomes in *Endgame* more than a facile attempt to pass time. It becomes once again an attempt of self-validation and meaning-making, through a process of association. This is precisely why, when Nell is reported to have died in the ash bin, we see no longer of Nagg in the play. Having been physically non-existent in a degenerate body and in a confined space, the moment verbal validation ceases to exist, Nagg perishes. Thus, the possibility of recreating the past through stories, and consequently generating a coherent identity fails in *Endgame*.

There is also a breakdown of the semiotic possibility of language in *Endgame*, which in turn is reflective of the abstract setting in the text. The ability of language to systematically order the subject's thought process and consequently shape the subject's psyche disintegrates in the play. This disintegration can be traced in the following lines:

"HAMM . Go get the oilcan.
CLOV . What for?
HAMM .To oil the castors.
CLOV .I oiled them yesterday.
HAMM. Yesterday? What does that mean?
Yesterday!
CLOV. (violently)

That mean the bloody awful day, long ago, before this bloody awful day. I use the words you taught me. If they don't mean anything more, teach me others. Or let me be silent.

(Pause)". (Beckett, 1963)

The signifier "yesterday", which Clov uses,

fails to convey the intended signified to Hamm. Consequently, there occurs a disjunction in communication. This pattern of inconsistent communications recurs throughout the text. The failing memory of the characters, obvious from the incomplete story of Hamm about the man who came crawling to him, accounts for the bankruptcy of the semiotics of language. The function of memory in the play attempts to assert one's identity coherently, yet the internalized meaningless of existence dismantles such attempts. This loss of memory, which the characters embody, accounts also for the abstract setting of the play. The lack of a proper noun for the theatrical setting initiates a similar alienation of the spectators.

Further, the interaction of bodies in *Endgame*, explores the distinction between language and human subject. In the above excerpt, when Clov declares that he uses words which are taught to him, lest he would be silent, he essentializes the externality of language to the body. The possibility of a body to exist outside cultural significations, which Judith Butler challenges in her essay, "Foucault and the Paradox of Bodily inscriptions", is realized through the characterization of Clov. Clov acquires his formative self only through his interaction with Hamm. S.E.Gontarski in his essay, "An End to an Endings :Samuel Beckett's End Game(s)" writes, "Being always already an echo, Clov apparently is without substance, has no being of his own because he has no memory except that written by Hamm...Clov's history and so his memory are simply Hamm's afterthought.". Clov is thus a body distinct from language. The discourse which language produces around him is merely arbitrary.

Thus, the interaction of bodies within the Beckettian theatrical space interrogates the very constitution of human subject and the arbitrary formulations which hover around it. The sheer materiality of the rotting body of Nell, in the ashbin, signifies a movement within *Endgame* towards the fragmented psyche of the modern man and physical articulations of it in the theatrical space.

So, where do these unintelligible bodies of modern man lie within an understanding of theatre

as a mimetic art? Beckett's characters, while psychologically underdeveloped themselves, serve justice to mimesis in that they reflect the 'collective unconscious', in Jungian terms, of modernity. The conception of characters as reflective of the general desires or needs of social being, consequently reconfigures the understanding of bodies as sites of aspirations themselves, as opposed to active agents. Hamm and Clov are thereby not only curtailed to a space, whose boundaries they seek transform through the telescope--which emerges as an overarching metaphor for the want of (in)sight--but they also embody the same spatial aspirations in their psychological desire for free movement. Though man and setting tussle, they converge in that they share the same underlying features. The characters fight against the setting just as much the setting ascribes meaning to them. The war is for none to win.

Man as set against fate--and vice-versa--continues to be an ongoing battle in the Theatre of the Absurd. The metaphysical rumination which lies at the heart of the text is undercut by the literal within this peculiar depiction of spatial and psychological relations. Consequently, Samuel Beckett's *Endgame*, as the title of the play suggests, remains within the ambit of a game, whose result has been decided. The rules laid out, characters make their moves, but inevitable the bodies lack coherence, meaning deferred and the game is over.

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