

AN ABSURDIST PLAY: SAMUEL BECKETT'S ENDGAME

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ABSTRACT

This study aims to examine Samuel Beckett's Endgame as an absurdist play considering certain aspects and characteristics of this kind of drama such as silence, pause, repetitions, no story or plot, no recognizable or definable decor, unconventional dialogue and interest in global and universal problems rather than contemporary issues. With the changing state of the world and especially due to the destructive effects of the Second World War, feelings of meaninglessness and nothingness spread over the world sending forth despair and disenchantment with the accepted values. Beckett, reflecting these issues in his plays, can be considered to be a prominent absurdist playwright and his play Endgame is a typical absurdist play which depicts the characteristics of this kind of drama and shows the emptiness and alienation in the modern world. In this study, by examining this play, it is depicted that with the absurdist drama the alienated modern world is successfully put on the stage and the familiar well-made plays have begun to be replaced by these typical examples of absurdist drama.

Keywords: Absurd drama, Meaninglessness, Silence, Pause, Repetition, Nothingness

ABSÜRT BİR OYUN: SAMUEL BECKETT'İN ENDGAME ADLI ESERİ

ÖZET

Bu çalışmanın amacı sessizlik, ara, tekrarlar, hikaye ya da olay örgüsü yokluğu, fark edilebilir ve tanımlanabilir dekor yokluğu, sıra dışı diyalog ve çağdaş meselelerden çok küresel ve evrensel sorunlarla uğraş gibi absürt tiyatro türünün belli noktaları ve özelliklerini göz önünde bulundurarak, Samuel Beckett'in Endgame eserini absürt bir oyun olarak incelemektir. Dünyanın değişen düzeniyle birlikte ve özellikle de İkinci Dünya Savaşı'nın tahrip edici etkilerine bağlı olarak, anlamsızlık ve hiçlik duyguları, kabul edilen değerlere karşı duyulan bir düş kırıklığı ve ümitsizlik saçarak dünya üzerinde yayılmıştır. Bu konuları eserlerinde yansıtan Beckett, önde gelen bir absürt oyun yazarı olarak kabul edilebilir ve Endgame isimli oyunu, bu oyun türünün özelliklerini yansıtan ve modern dünyadaki boşluğu ve yabancılaşmayı gösteren karakteristik bir absürt oyun olarak değerlendirilebilir. Bu çalışmada, adı geçen oyun incelenerek, absürt tiyatroyla, yabancılaşmış modern dünyanın başarılı bir şekilde sahnelendiği ve alışılan iyi yapılandırılmış ve olay örgüsü olan oyunların, absürt drama örnekleriyle yer değiştirmiş olduğu ortaya konmuştur.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Absürt drama, Anlamsızlık, Sessizlik, Ara, Tekrar, Hiçlik.

AN ABSURDIST PLAY: SAMUEL BECKETT'S ENDGAME

1. INTRODUCTION

The Theatre of the Absurd is the kind of drama that presents the absurdity of human condition and that combines characteristics such as silences, repetitions, unconventional dialogue, no recognizable decor, no story, no progression and no resolution. The term "the Theatre of the Absurd" was coined by Martin Esslin in his book of the same name. Esslin, in his book, claims that absurdist plays are the fulfilment of Albert Camus's philosophy and his concept of 'the absurd' which is reflected in *Le Mythe de Sisyphe*. As Esslin expresses "by 1942, Albert Camus was calmly putting the question why, since life had lost all meaning, man should not seek escape in suicide" (Esslin, 1980). And Camus, in the same work, says that "in a universe that is suddenly deprived of illusions and of light, man feels a stranger [...] The divorce between man and his life, the actor and his setting, is properly the feeling of Absurdity" (Camus, 1942). Obviously, this feeling of absurdity is closely related to the Second World War, its destructive effects all around the world and the feeling of meaninglessness it created. And Camus's existentialist views that see "human beings as moving from the nothingness from which they came, to the nothingness in which they will end through an existence marked by anguish and absurdity" (Harmon and Holman, 1995) can be thought to be the philosophical base of absurdism. In a way, the plays of the theatre of the absurd, not only deals with the despair and disenchantment with the accepted values and beliefs but also the process of going through the nothingness and through an incomprehensible existence.

Irish playwright, novelist, theatre director and poet, Samuel Beckett is considered to be a prominent absurdist playwright whose works have been translated into over twenty languages. In his plays, he usually deals with human suffering, the subject of despair and survival, with his characters generally grappling with meaninglessness in an incomprehensible world. "Characters engage in

dialogue or dialectical monologues that go nowhere. There is no progression, no development, no resolution" (Greenblatt, 2006). Absurdity which is, according to Beckett, the essence of human existence, is the main way he uses in order to depict the emptiness and alienation in the modern world. Furthermore, centering upon silences and repetitions, Beckett doesn't follow a traditional theatrical form and procedure in writing his plays. Worton explains Beckett's writing style as follows:

Instead of following the tradition which demands that a play have an exposition, a climax and a denouement, Beckett's plays have a cyclical structure which might indeed be better described as a diminishing spiral. [...] In this spiral descending towards a final closure that can never be found in the Beckettian universe, the characters take refuge in repetition, repeating their own actions and words and often those of others – in order to pass the time (69).

In the 1930s, Beckett wrote short poems that were collected in *Echo's Bones and Other Precipitates* (1935). Writing short stories as well, Beckett is best known for his plays, most of which he wrote in French and later translated into English. Among his most well-known plays are *En Attendant Godot* (*Waiting for Godot*, 1948-1949), *Fin de Partie* (*Endgame*, 1955-1957), *Krapp's Last Tape* (1958) and *Happy Days* (1961). These plays are often considered to be remarkable examples of the theatre of the absurd, of which Beckett was a master and pioneer.

After 1960s, Beckett's works started to tend towards compactness, by which he's also called a minimalist. A perfect example of this is *Breath* (1969), which lasts only for thirty five seconds. His other important plays *Play* (1962) and *Not I* (1972) are very short plays which include three characters and solely a mouth, respectively.

Apart from plays and poems, Samuel Beckett wrote novels and prose works, as well. His early novels *Murphy* (1938), *Watt* (1953) and the trilogy *Molloy*

(1951), *Malone Meurt* (*Malone Dies*, 1951) and *L'innommable* (*The Unnameable*, 1953) are considered to be important works of postmodern fiction. Later in the second half of the twentieth century, he wrote his prose work *Comment c'est* (*How it is*, 1961), which was written in a different style, in unpunctuated paragraphs.

Beckett, who was also thought to be a modernist writer, under the influence of French discussions about the use of language in literature, was in favour of the idea that a man of literature should never repeat the language he used before, as the language should change all the time. Samuel Beckett, who was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1969 and won international fame, died in 1989, just after publishing his last book *Stirring Still* (1989).

2. ENDGAME AS AN ABSURDIST PLAY

Endgame was first performed as *Fin de Partie*, with its original name at the Royal Court Theatre, London, on April 3, 1957. Before analysing the play in detail, it may be useful to explain the meaning of endgame and why Beckett chose this title for his play. Endgame is a term used to describe the last stage in a game of chess when only a few pieces are left on the board. Beckett, a chess player, seeing a similarity between the endgame of chess and that of life, considers death to be the certain outcome, as whatever a person does, he or she will die. Accordingly, in the play it seems as if the characters live the final stages of their lives, as they frequently talk about the past to which they cannot get through. Furthermore, their continual repetitive actions, such as Clov's using the ladder and looking out of the window or Hamm's calling Clov, can be likened to the moves in a game of chess when one is approximating the end. These repetitive actions may also be an indication of human condition, as human beings usually repeat their mistakes and routines. Moreover, Hamm who has the food supply and who has the power to

rule may be thought to symbolise the King in a game of chess. Similarly, Clov may be regarded to be the Queen, who has the potential to move better than Hamm and the other two characters Nagg and Nell, who can be likened to pawns, restricted in their bins, only allowed to make their heads appear. Clov may also represent the Knight in a chess game, as his actions are restricted in a certain direction and repeat themselves with vertical movements. At the beginning of the play, he goes to the right window, looks outside, goes to the left window and looks outside. Then bringing a ladder from the kitchen, he climbs to the right window, opens the curtain and looks outside, then descends, leans the ladder to the left window, climbs, opens the curtain, looks outside and descends. Throughout the play, he repeats his similar actions as if he draws the shape of L like a Knight in a game of chess. In a sense, "like pieces on a chessboard, the characters of Endgame are severely restricted in their movements, each obeying a different rule of motion" (Hale, 1992).

The characters in the play, Hamm, Clov, Nagg and Nell "live in a world in which there is no way to establish a significant relationship between themselves and their environment" (Harmon and Holman, 1995). Isolated from both themselves and the overcast world that's surrounding them, they are trapped in a room which they cannot leave. Hamm is a blind man who is unable to walk and Clov, "Hamm's present servant and 'son'" (Lawley, 1992) is unable to sit. "Hamm rules this diminished universe from his centre-stage wheelchair, as he barks his orders to Clov, who resentfully follows every order – moving the chair, checking the earth and sky" (Cooke, 1985). They are considered to be a pair, the former being a master and the latter being a servant. Although Clov frequently says that he'll leave Hamm, they cannot part company as they are dependent on each other – Clov can walk and see, thus helps Hamm and Hamm supplies food for them. "It does indeed seem that though Clov cannot stand to live with his difficult master, he

AN ABSURDIST PLAY: SAMUEL BECKETT'S ENDGAME

would not be able to exist without him" (Hale, 1992). Nagg and Nell, the other pair in the play, are Hamm's parents and having no legs, they live in dustbins, in a way condemned for their act of procreation. Throughout the play all the four characters routinely pass the time by blabbering, complaining, and telling stories.

As *Endgame* is an example of "the Theatre of the Absurd", in the following part, after explaining a characteristic of this movement, an example from the play associated with that characteristic will be given.

First of all, the plays of the theatre of the absurd have no story or plot to speak of, with neither a beginning nor an end. They portray not connected incidents telling a story but only a situation in an incomprehensible universe. Similarly, in *Endgame* there isn't a story or plot; instead the characters are stuck in a meaningless and unchanging world in which they repeat their actions in a ritualistic way. Apart from this, these plays are "often without recognizable characters and present the audience with almost mechanical puppets" (Esslin, 1980). Namely, in the theatre of the absurd, there are no recognizable characters that are defined by the social class they represent. Furthermore, "the fact that characters, freed from individuality, are abstracted in a way that they mostly present the main characteristics of the universal man" (Yüksel, 1992) is an important feature of the theatre of the absurd. Accordingly, the characters in *Endgame* are not recognizable characters of a certain society. Apart from being two different couples who need each other as living beings, they may also be abstracted as the components of a human mind. What Hale expresses in her article 'Endgame': 'How Are Your Eyes?' is a significant point to reflect on:

The four characters might represent diverse elements of a single human personality: Hamm would be the inner 'me', irrational and emotional (this would explain his sudden, savage mood changes); Clov would be the rational

'me' who maintains contact with the external world; Nell and Nagg could be simply memories that are weakening and disappearing (81).

In the light of what Hale states above, it can be assumed that, in *Endgame*, a single mind of a human being is depicted through the use of four characters, representing different sides of the personality.

In these plays, there are no recognizable or definable decor, costumes or stage articles. Accordingly in *Endgame*, there is only a bare room with two windows, a door, and a picture; there aren't costumes, a proper setting or decor. "Denying the audience the comfortable security of a recognizable world" (Greenblatt, 2006), the play opens with the description of the place the four characters are in: "Bare interior. Grey light. Left and right back, high up, two small windows, curtains drawn. Front right, a door. Hanging near door, its face to wall, a picture" (92). How the stage seems in *Endgame*, helps to create the dramatic effect Beckett wants to reflect in his play of the theatre of the absurd. Hale expresses her thoughts about the decor and setting in the play as follows:

The decor of *Endgame* [...] contributes to the impression of a world coming to its end. [...] and its bareness, grey light, and the grey nothingness of the barren, uninhabited world outside the windows all point to the distinct possibility that Hamm, Clov, Nell, and Nagg may be the last survivors of some dreadful catastrophe. [...] Even though a picture remains on the wall of the room, it is turned over so its decorative function is no longer served (72-73).

From what Hale states above can be deduced that, the decor, different from the conventional ones, contributes to the essential philosophical thought in the play, which portrays a world, nearing its end with only a few survivors.

Beckett expresses that "every word is like an unnecessary stain on silence and nothingness" (Beckett). This statement in fact reveals perhaps the most important characteristic of the theatre of

the absurd, that is the function of language. Instead of “witty repartee and pointed dialogue”, absurdist plays “often consist of incoherent babblings” (Esslin, 1980). In these plays, the language which has become dysfunctional as it can no more produce meaning, isn’t used as a tool for communication. Accordingly, in *Endgame*, although the characters seem to talk throughout the play, they can’t communicate and don’t understand what the other person is saying. A striking example of this is a dialogue between Hamm and Clov: “Clov: Who? / Hamm: What? / Clov: Who do you mean, he? / Hamm: Who do I mean! Yet another. / Clov: Ah him! I wasn’t sure.” (121). Though they seem to converse, they in fact cannot reach out to each other. In another dialogue, one can see the same situation:

Hamm: Answer me first.

Clov: What?

Hamm: Do you know what’s happened?

Clov: When? Where?

Hamm: (Violently.) When! What’s happened? Use your head, can’t you! What has happened?

Clov: What for Christ’s sake does it matter?

(He looks out of the window.)

Hamm: I don’t know.

(128-129)

As observed in the dialogue, their words do not produce meaning and they find themselves at the point they started - what they say doesn’t have any significance like the world around them. Clov also reinforces this idea by saying: “I use the words you taught me. If they don’t mean anything any more, teach me others. Or let me be silent.” (113). Schwab also expresses his ideas about dialogue and communication in the play with the following statements:

Neither is the dialogue situated in any intelligible context, nor does it derive from any representative function of speech or even a minimal amount of

coherence. Moreover, it is full of contingencies, and these would be a stumbling block for any successful communication [...]. Their dialogue lacks representative qualities and hardly makes ‘sense’ to us (89; 91).

In fact, in *Endgame* and most of the absurdist plays, language is used to show that it has lost its function; as nothing certain exists in the world, it’s impossible to get through to certain meanings.

Another point that should be set forth is the fact that, in absurdist plays, silence, pause and repetitions are important dramatic elements from which the audience get the meaning. Throughout *Endgame*, one can observe these elements of the plays of the theatre of the absurd. For instance, in a dialogue between Hamm and Clov, pauses and silences form the basis of their conversation:

Hamm: Outside of here it’s death!

(Pause.)

And the rat?

Clov: He’s got away.

Hamm: He can’t go far.

(Pause. Anxious.)

Eh?

Clov: He doesn’t need to go far.

(Pause.)

Hamm: Is it not time for my pain-killer?

Clov: Yes.

Hamm: Ah! At last! Give it to me! Quick!

(Pause.)

Clov: There’s no more pain-killer.

(Pause.)

(126-127)

In this excerpt and other similar passages in the play, silences and pauses break the continuity of words, thus creating an effect of not being able to communicate and fostering the sense of meaninglessness. Furthermore,

AN ABSURDIST PLAY: SAMUEL BECKETT'S ENDGAME

according to Worton, silences in the play have different aspects:

The pauses [...] enable Beckett to present: silences of inadequacy, when characters cannot find the words they need; silences of repression, when they are struck dumb by the attitude of their interlocutor or by their sense that they might be breaking a social taboo; and silences of anticipation, when they await the response of the other which will give them a temporary sense of existence (75).

Apart from this, "the frequent 'pause', which is by far the most common stage direction in *Endgame*, helps to structure the play like a chess game where each player reflects silently before proceeding with his next move" (Hale, 1992).

Repetitions are also frequently encountered in the play, whose example can be given with a dialogue between Hamm and Clov, when Hamm insists that Clov use the telescope to look out of the window:

Clov: I've looked.

Hamm: With the glass?

Clov: No need of the glass.

Hamm: Look at it with the glass.

Clov: I'll go and get the glass.

(Exit Clov.)

Hamm: No need of the glass!

(Enter Clov with telescope.)

Clov: I'm back again, with the glass.

(105)

The word "glass" is repeated in almost all the sentences of the characters. In one of his articles, Weales expresses the following statements about this dialogue:

The repetition of the word glass gives the exchange a frame on which to build its rhythm [...] What is more, the necessary hesitation before Clov's last line (there will be a small break even if the telescope is ready for him just beyond the eyes of the audience) allows the passage apparently to end on

Hamm's lines, only to be revived on Clov's return to the stage. [...] Clov's line recalls the sound of glass, which has only just quit tinkling, and so offers the possibility of a laugh (a smile) of reminiscence (112-113).

Another point that should be set forth about the conversations between Hamm and Clov is the fact that their conversations are continuously stunted by the fact that whenever one of them says something, it is countered by the other character. Then the first speaker agrees with the argument and the conversation immediately ends. Just after that, they start to talk about another thing, as can be seen from their following statements:

Hamm: How are your eyes?

Clov: Bad.

Hamm: How are your legs?

Clov: Bad.

Hamm: But you can move.

Clov: Yes.

Hamm: (Violently) Then move!

(Clov goes to the back wall, leans against it with his forehead and hands.)

Where are you? [...]

Clov: Here.

Hamm: Why don't you kill me?

(95-96)

As it can be seen, their conversation about one topic suddenly ends and they start to talk about another subject. A dialogue in the middle of the play also exemplifies this:

Hamm: [...] Imagine if a rational being came back to earth, wouldn't he be liable to get ideas into his head if he observed us long enough. [...] ...we ourselves...at certain moments... (Vehemently.)

To think perhaps it won't all have been for nothing!

Clov: (Anguished, scratching himself.) I have a flea!

Hamm: A flea! Are there still fleas?

Clov: On me there's one.
(108)

In this conversation, the topic suddenly changes from a philosophical thinking to a flea, indicating that they cannot have a properly progressing dialogue; they're always interrupted and stunted. Apart from this, the language used in absurdist plays isn't the language of a certain social class or group of people. Not having cultural connotations, the language used in these plays is a general language that may be used by everybody in the world, as the one in *Endgame* in which the audience cannot see any particular cultural usages or peculiarities related to a specific group of people.

The theatre of the absurd doesn't deal with contemporary issues and problems, instead it makes reference to global or universal problems and questions. The plays, having no nationality, deal with general problems and question the place and function of man in the world. The fact that the world seemed meaningless and everything was supposed to go to nothingness, is reflected in the plays of the theatre of the absurd. In *Endgame*, what Beckett focuses on is "the sense of deadness, [...] leaden heaviness and hopelessness, that is experienced in states of deep depression" (Esslin, 1980). The four characters are the only survivors who have been able to escape from a great catastrophe which rendered the world outside dead. This deadness of the universe is made more clear by the specific conversations between Hamm and Clov. As part of their ritual actions, when Hamm asks Clov what he sees outside, he defines everything he sees with words such as 'grey', 'lead' or 'zero':

Hamm: The waves, how are the waves?

Clov: The waves? [...] Lead.

Hamm: And the sun?

Clov: (Looking.) Zero. [...]

Hamm: Is it night already then?

Clov: (Looking.) No.

Hamm: Then what is it?

Clov: (Looking.) Grey.

(107)

Another dialogue which defines the nonsensical and wasted world and universe is again between Hamm and Clov:

Hamm: Yes, but how would I know, if you were merely dead in your kitchen?

Clov: Well...sooner or later I'd start to stink.

Hamm: You stink already. The whole place stinks of corpses.

Clov: The whole universe. (114)

As it can be seen Clov says that the whole universe is stinking, meaning it has lost all its meaning and everything on it has died out. In other words, "the patient and his caretaker, who are completely abstracted from the outer world, consider the universe to be a meaningless emptiness" and "what matters is the collapse of not only the characters in the room but also the whole civilisation and humankind" (Yüksel, 1992). Furthermore, in this world of catastrophe, life is painful. "Hamm repeatedly asks Clov for a pain-killer, and Clov always answers that the time for it has not yet come, until the end when he informs him, 'There's no more pain-killer'" (Astro, 1990). In this world, it's not possible to escape from the fact that existence is painful and everything is in ruin.

3. CONCLUDING REMARKS

Endgame, as a typical example of Beckett's absurdist drama, depicts the feelings of meaninglessness and nothingness in the surrounding world and by using the elements such as silence, pause, repetitions, unconventional dialogues, no recognizable decor and no plot, this alienating effect is strengthened. In *Endgame*, it can be seen that the feeling of meaninglessness and chaos the world is in, is made concrete by the story about a tailor. "The concept of an imperfect world sacrificed

AN ABSURDIST PLAY: SAMUEL BECKETT'S ENDGAME

to a nonexistent creator is figured" (Astro, 1990) in the story, in which an Englishman orders a pair of trousers to his tailor. However, when the tailor continuously puts him off, the man gets angry and says that: "In six days, do you hear me, six days, God made the world. Yes Sir, no less Sir, the WORLD! And you are not bloody well capable of

making me a pair of trousers in three months!" (102-103). The answer the tailor gives is striking: "But my dear Sir, my dear Sir, look [...] at the world [...] and look [...] at my TROUSERS!" (103).

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