

**SUBSTITUTING THE ‘CHECKMATE OF DEATH’ BY THE ‘STALEMATE OF EXISTENCE’ IN SAMUEL BECKETT’S PLAY *ENDGAME***

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**Abstract**

The term ‘endgame’, standing for the final stage of the game of chess, which might end either in a checkmate terminating the game, or a stalemate leading to its endless continuation, received its development in the play carrying the same name *Endgame* by Samuel Beckett. Published in 1957, the zenith of the Cold War and nuclear conflict, the play is permeated with the feeling of emptiness of existence and depicts a universe after a nuclear disaster that is coming to its end, but which might, nevertheless, keep on replicating itself. Consequently, by employing the method of literary analysis, the paper aims to examine the ways Beckett’s characters, confined in a nuclear shelter and representing nothing but wretched shadows of their former selves, are obstinately trying to assert their identities in the world devoid of meaning. In addition, the paper argues that the fear of nothingness and desire to live makes them prefer the stalemate of meaningless existence to the checkmate of death.

**Keywords:** *Endgame*, Beckett, meaning, stalemate, checkmate

**SAMUEL BECKETT’İN *OYUN SONU* ADLI TİYATRO OYUNUNDA ‘VAROLUŞUN PATINI’ ‘ÖLÜM MATININ’ YERİNE KOYMAK****Öz**

‘Oyun sonu’ terimi satranç oyununun son aşaması anlamına gelir. Bu son aşama ya oyunu bitiren mat la sonuçlanır ya da oyunun sürekli devam etmesini sağlayan pat la sonuçlanır. Bu da Samuel Beckett’in *Oyun Sonu* adlı aynı adı taşıyan tiyatro oyununun gelişmesidir. Soğuk Savaşın ve karşılıklı nükleer cepheleşmenin en çok kızıştığı 1957’de yazılan tiyatro oyunu, gittikçe artan bir varoluşun değersizliği hissini yansıtmaktadır. Eser, sonu yaklaşan ama yine de tekrar etme olasılığı olan bir nükleer facia sonrasında evrenin kalıntılarını sergilemektedir. Dolayısıyla, bu çalışmanın amacı, edebi analiz yöntemi kullanarak, bir nükleer sığınakta mahsur kalmış ve eski benliklerinin zavallı gölgeleri dışında hiçbir şey yansıtmayan ve anlamı olmayan bir dünyada inatla kendi kimliklerini savunmaya çalışan Beckett’in karakterlerini incelemektir. Bununla birlikte, bu makale hiçlik korkusu ve yaşama isteği onlara ölümü mat etmenin yerine anlamsız varoluşun patını tercih etmelerine neden olmasını savunmaktadır.

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** *Oyun Sonu*, Beckett, anlam, pat, mat

**Introduction**

Concise Oxford English Dictionary defines the term ‘endgame’ as “the final stage of a game such as chess or bridge, when few pieces or cards remain” (Stevenson and Waite, 2011: 471). Though indicative of the process of ending, the definition, however, does not contain any implication of the ultimate result or possible termination of action, thus creating an atmosphere of uncertainty and elusiveness.

The notion of ‘endgame’ received its outmost development in the play carrying the same name *Endgame* by Samuel Beckett. Written in 1957, the peak of the Cold War and nuclear confrontation, the play is saturated with the growing sense of meaninglessness and futility of existence. The work portrays a universe that is nearing its end, but which could, nevertheless, continue repeating itself; while the end, that all characters seem to be gradually approaching, is both certain and indescribable. In fact, the same is true of the endgame stage in chess, which is by no means indicative of a certain outcome, rather a vague possibility of a checkmate/ stalemate situation, because “whatever one thinks, endgame puts it to the test” (Blau, 2004: 43). Therefore, secluded in what seems to be an underground bomb shelter, possibly after the occurrence of a

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nuclear war, the characters of the play - Hamm (blind amputee), Clov (Hamm's servant), Nagg (Hamm's father-amputee) and Nell (Hamm's mother-amputee) - seem to be struck by the total awareness of the absurdity and meaninglessness of human condition. Terrified by the possible recurrence of the nuclear chaos even in the atmosphere of absence of existence that they are submerged into, the four are eager to suppress any signs of regeneration. In this connection, the play is no doubt "a period piece as it chronicles humanity's problem of meaning, of needing to mean what it is given to mean at all costs" (Schiels, 2010: 305). Thus, despite the overall extermination of meaning in the outside world, the characters attempt to construct artificial meaning and order in their small microcosm through language and memories. Hence, they attempt to postpone death looming over their existence. The four continue asserting their identities in ways often absurd and base, so as to oppose the "zero" (Beckett, 1958: 3) of the outside and to delay the ultimate end of the game, which would terminate their lives that they cling to all through the play.

The idea of a nuclear shelter that the characters live in is a reflection of a distinct perimeter of a chess field – one of the areas where meaning and reason are still possible. Drawn on the analogy with a chess game, which is made up of a pattern of repetitive moves following one another, the characters' lives represent a cyclic pattern of repetition and an unavoidable linear progression towards nothingness. In this connection, the central dilemma of *Endgame* is represented in Hamm's words at the close of the prologue: "it's time it ended...and yet I hesitate to - (he yawns) - to end" (Beckett, 1958: 3). Thus, with the Shakespearean-like question 'to end or not to end?' in mind, Beckett acquaints the reader with the major premise of the play.

Consequently, by employing the method of literary analysis, the paper aims to examine the ways Beckett's characters in *Endgame* try to assert their identity by preferring the stalemate of limbo-like existence to the checkmate of death. The essay analyzes Hamm's king-like personality aiming to defy nothingness brought about by the nuclear disaster. It scrutinises Clov's knightly figure that is performing meaningless errands, going about routine duties and retaining the last traces of compassion towards Hamm. The paper examines the symbolism of two amputee poles – Nagg and Nell. The figure of Nagg is treated in the light of his sensibility, physicality, childishness and abundance of memories, while Nell is examined through the lens of sobriety and last traces of humanity towards her husband.

### **Literary Analysis of Characters in *Endgame* as Symbols of Human Preference of the Stalemate of Meaningless Existence to the Checkmate of Death**

#### **Hamm**

From the very beginning of the play, Hamm displays his inner anxiety about not being able to assert his identity, expressed in an almost theatrical in its nature soliloquy:

Can there be misery – loftier than mine? No doubt. Formerly. But now? My father? My mother? My...dog? Oh I am willing to believe they suffer as much as creatures can suffer. But does that mean their sufferings equal mine? (Beckett, 1958: 2)

Consequently, by placing his parents on the same plank with a dog and calling them "creatures" (Beckett, 1958: 2), Hamm establishes firm borders of his realm of "bare interior" (Beckett, 1958: 1) and "grey light" (Beckett, 1958: 1), "two small windows" (Beckett, 1958: 1) and "curtains drawn" (Beckett, 1958: 1). Hence, he raises himself above the rest of the residents of the shelter, objectifying them and, thus, pampering his self-esteem, unanimously proclaiming himself king in the battle with death, or "the dying king of tragedy" (Kennedy, 1989: 49) overflowing with "the grand monologues of the tired monarch" (Kennedy, 1989: 49).

Hamm's dominion consists of Clov – his servant and, consequently, a knight, half-disabled and restricted in his movements; and Nell with her husband Nagg – both, amputees and cripples. The two live in ashbins, defecating in the place they exist, which makes them nothing but powerless poles in the chess-like game of survival. Despite the utter desire to rule his subjects, the

king has limited powers as well, being an amputee and confined to a wheelchair. Hence, Hamm can move just one pace at a time, which adds to his vulnerability due to the necessity of being protected all the time.

In this respect, the symbolism of the characters' names or "allegorical personifications" (Kennedy, 1989: 53) needs a separate treatment. If Hamm may be associated with a hammer, then Nagg, Nell, and Clov - with a nail (*nägel* in German, *nello* in Italian, *clavus* in Latin). Yet, a hammer is often useless without the presence of nails, necessary for carrying out its purpose and completing its tasks. The same holds true of Hamm, who is completely dependent on his co-residents.

Hamm is constantly dreaming of nature, as opposed to the non-existent outside world, which allows him to collect everything that remains of his natural identity and not to dissolve into nothingness: "What dreams! Those forests!" (Beckett, 1958: 2). The same attitude can be seen further on through the play: "If I could sleep I might make love. I'd go into the woods. My eyes would see... the sky, the earth. I'd run, run, they wouldn't catch me" (Beckett, 1958: 19). Towards the middle of *Endgame* the character is overtaken with the desire to leave the ghastly place, so as to find meaningful existence among meaningful people, devoid of the constant necessity to prove who you are or used to be in the face of the surrounding nothingness: "Let's go from here, the two of us! South! You can make a raft and the currents will carry us away, far away, to other...mammals!" (Beckett, 1958: 19). Correspondingly, when informed by Clov that "something is taking its course" (Beckett, 1958: 18), Hamm cannot but articulate his optimism about the possibility of finding a definite identity: "We're not beginning to... to... mean something?" (Beckett, 1958: 18).

The idealistic hope to find significance is never devoid, whatsoever, of the apprehension of the absurdity of such a thought, which is constantly supported by facts meticulously provided by Clov, claiming that the time is "the same as usual" (Beckett, 1958: 3), and outside is "zero...zero...and zero" (Beckett, 1958: 16). Thus, Hamm finds himself in the information void, as the data he receives from Clov cannot be tested in any way. Hence, "Beckett establishes a concrete physical image of the irredeemable division between the words that identifiers describe and the objects that consciousness attempts to encompass in naming them" (Lyons, 1988: 63). As a consequence, "uncertainty becomes the only certainty" (Lyons, 1988: 59) available for Hamm, and he is forced to accept that "outside of here it's death" (Beckett, 1958: 36) and to employ more materialistic means of asserting his existence. Hence, the character gives his co-habitants as little food as would keep them alive: "I'll give you just enough to keep you from dying. You'll be hungry all the time" (Beckett, 1958: 4). Thus, the characters totally depend upon his mercy, just like vegetables do, waiting to be watered.

Hamm's superiority often epitomizes itself in various forms of suffering he brings to his closest acquaintances. Thus, faced with the fact that Clov does not have any warm feelings towards him, the former accepts: "I've made you suffer too much" (Beckett, 1958: 4). The similar cruelty is seen in Clov's complaint: "When there were still bicycles I wept to have one. I crawled at your feet. You told me to go to hell. Now there are none" (Beckett, 1958: 5). Hamm is malicious in no lesser degree towards his parents, especially his father, when he tells Clov to "bottle him up" (Beckett, 1958: 6). Thus, the former attempts to re-install his identity by, speaking in Lacan's terms, aiming to reach the unattainable phallus, the law of the father, and the unreachable signified through the unending game of signifiers. Despite the fact that Hamm never disentangles from the net of signifiers, his effort is worthwhile, as it alone allows him to maintain his identity.

Hamm enjoys abusing people, which he believes raises him above the grey mass surrounding him. Hence, terrified by the idea that life might spring up again, he insults Nagg: "Accursed progenitor! ... Accursed fornicator!" (Beckett, 1958: 6). Aware of the absurdity of his situation - being blind, handicapped and possibly tortured by tuberculosis, Hamm, nevertheless, does not forget to threaten Clov with the likelihood of the same fate: "One day you'll be blind like me. You'll be sitting here, a speck in the void, in the dark, forever, like me" (Beckett, 1958: 20). What is more, the cripple is full of memories about his triumph over the crawling figure of Clov's

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father: "I can see him, down on his knees, his hands flat on the ground, glaring at me with his mad eyes, in defence of my wishes" (Beckett, 1958: 28). Thus, even if for a little while, this allows him to preserve his identity from the threat of the annihilating checkmate.

Hamm's obsession with being begged goes even further. He becomes fond of objectifying people and creatures around him. Accordingly, Nagg and Nell are no longer human, but mere "guzzling" (Beckett, 1958: 6) beings-in-themselves canned in ashbins, fully dependent on his mercy. The same is true of the invalid's dog, never mind that it is a toy. It does not matter as long as it "begs [him] for a bone" (Beckett, 1958: 22).

The desire 'to be something' is accountable for numerous repetitions and word games abundant in Hamm's speech. The fear of nothingness makes the character fill in the silences with syllables, words and utterances, simply to avoid stillness comparable with death. Thus, he is constantly asking for a "pain-killer" (Beckett, 1958: 37), both, to fill in the time and to underline the fact that if the pain is still there, his identity exists as well. The same is true of the absurd choice of words to substitute the word 'thermometer' in Hamm's narration of the past, including "heliometer" (Beckett, 1958: 27), "anemometer" (Beckett, 1958: 27) and "hygrometer" (Beckett, 1958: 28). The character's use of theatrical elements allows him to delay in an artistic way the moment of being absorbed by the outside greyness: "I'm warming up for my last soliloquy" (Beckett, 1958: 40). At the same time, by suspending the finale of his "chronicle" (Beckett, 1958: 31) on Clov's childhood Hamm presumably postpones the moment of his death. Thus, it becomes obvious that "Beckett is playing with Hamm's inner self, upon unconscious and preconscious thoughts, upon emotions and drives...the unseen, the unknowable ones" (Riva, 1970: 160), making him persist with his 'material' theatrical performance staged in the void of concrete meaning.

The role of the routine plays a significant role in Hamm's affirmation of identity. Every day in the play is marked by a set of identical events. Indeed, Hamm becomes obsessed with the idea of a wheelchair ride in order to be seated in the middle of the room. Just like a monarch, he is possessed with a desire to be firmly placed on a throne of power in the very heart of his realm:

Hamm: Am I right in the centre?

Clov: I'll measure it.

Hamm: More or less! More or less!

Clov (*moving chair slightly*): There!

Hamm: I'm more or less in the centre?

Clov: I'd say so.

Hamm: You' say so! Put me right in the centre! (Beckett, 1958: 15)

As can be seen, the routine is what people in absurd situations adhere to in order to persuade themselves that death is not really imminent, and that they still exist. Indeed, actions of the kind seem to fill in the time, by both staving off death and drawing it ever closer. Thus, routine seems to function, "as a kind of positivity contained in pure negativity" (Adorno and Tiedmann, 2003: 24).

Instances of physicality and the necessity of touch reinforce Hamm in his constant desire to re-assert himself. Thus, he declares: "My anger subsides, I'd need to pee" (Beckett, 1958: 14). The same is true of the character's desire to be kissed at Clov's looming departure: "You won't kiss me goodbye?" (Beckett, 1958: 24). The cripple earns for the touch of light on his face, which stands for his secret hope of survival and re-birth of life: "It isn't the ray of sunshine I feel on my face?" (Beckett, 1958: 33). Nevertheless, it never reaches Hamm as a punishment for withholding light from Mother Pegg, which resulted in her subsequent death:

Hamm: Is Mother Pegg's light on?

Clov: Light! How could anyone's light be on?

Hamm: Extinguished!

Clov: Naturally it's extinguished. If it's not on, it's extinguished. (Beckett, 1958: 22)

Therefore, a double curse is laid on Hamm: that of blindness and constant necessity to assert his identity in the face of nothingness. He cannot exert his authority in complete solitude. Hence, Hamm is in great need of Clov's presence, who is the only one (excluding the objectified Nagg and Nell) to exercise his full authority on.

Hamm is afraid of the potential circularity of existence, defined by Clov as: "grain upon grain, one by one, and one day suddenly, there's a heap, a little heap, the impossible heap" (Beckett, 1958: 2), standing for a life made of a succession of moments, until death rounds them off. Such an end lays foundation for the rebirth of life and consequent repetition of the same misery over and over again. Therefore, the character is anxious to kill the flea haunting Clov's body and the rat roaming the kitchen – both capable of swift multiplication, as well as to "bottle" (Beckett, 1958: 6) his father Nell - the "fornicator" (Beckett, 1958: 6). In addition, he hopes for the rapid death of a boy seen outside of the window, whom he views as "a potential procreator" (Beckett, 1958: 40) and an innocent sufferer "who brings more suffering into the world – as a perpetuator of the endless cycle" (Kennedy, 1989: 60). Thus, the dawn of new life and, as a consequence, new suffering will get postponed for an indefinite period of time.

At the end of *Endgame* Hamm, though aware of the proximity of death ("Then let it end! With a bang! Of darkness!" (Beckett, 1958: 40)), is, nevertheless, absolutely afraid of expiring, thus stressing his impotence of meeting the end, which will terminate all the attempts to establish his identity:

And to end up with? Discard. With my compliments. Clov! No? Good. Since that's the way we're playing it... let's play it that way... and speak no more about it... speak no more. Old stancher! You... remain. (Beckett, 1958: 43)

Thus, the game of asserting one's existence is stopped only to start anew. The endgame reaches a stalemate marked by the fear of a checkmate of death. Hamm, "cover[ing] his face with handkerchief, lower[ing] his arms to armrests, remain[ing] motionless" (Beckett, 1958: 43), just like at the beginning of the play, only re-confirms the fact that next night at the theatre the performance will be repeated. According to Charles R. Lyons, Hamm's impotence to end the game makes one wonder whether "*Endgame* imitates the act of dying or whether it imitates a game in which the players pretend to move towards death" (1988: 55). In addition, it is Hamm's powerlessness to end the game that makes life cyclical and drags all the rest of characters into the limbo-like stalemate of existence.

### Clov

Hamm's servant and possible foster son is also engaged in the identity building game. The fact that Clov's physical condition is degrading day by day, making him stagger as he walks, supports the idea of a chess game, with Clov being a knight in the direct service of a king. Hence, his scope of actions is wider than Hamm's, yet limited by the progressing physical deterioration:

Hamm: How are your eyes?  
Clov: Bad.  
Hamm: How are your legs?  
Clov: Bad.  
Hamm: But you can move.  
Clov: Yes. (Beckett, 1958: 5)

In addition, the character cannot sit down, which serves as a symbolic foreshadowing of Clov's future disability. This fact emphasises the circular nature of existence, as the servant awaits the same destiny as his master.

From the very beginning of the play, Clov outlines the gruesome reality of existence: "Finished, it's finished, it must be nearly finished" (Beckett, 1958: 2), echoing Christ's last words pronounced on Mount Calvary, signifying the end of suffering and consequent salvation of



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mankind, just like Christ's dusk on the Cross was superseded by the dawn of Christian faith. Hence, Hamm's servant sets the tone for the play, emphasising the recurrent stasis of existence.

The character is always haunted by the fear of extinction, as it is death that causes something to be "finished" (Beckett, 1958: 2) by decimating the very essence of infinity. Therefore, all through the play Clov's speech abounds in references to death, which he fervently attempts to postpone: "I see my light dying" (Beckett, 1958: 7). A bit further the character notes: "Well... sooner or later I'd start to stink" (Beckett, 1958: 25). Towards the end of *Endgame* Clov exclaims: "Let's stop playing!" (Beckett, 1958: 40). When making a reference to Hamm's toy dog the servant declares: "But he isn't finished, I tell you! First you finish your dog and then you put on his ribbon!" (Beckett, 1958: 22). The fact that Hamm never agrees to do that, emphasizes their mutual incapability to face death and to accept that "life is in itself nothing more than a protracted dying – a dying which none of us has the courage to hasten, and which must be fully acted out day by day until the final end" (Riva, 1993: 162), as it would ultimately bring to an end all of their attempts to be someone in the world after the nuclear disaster.

Clov's recurrent references to God serve as a symbol of hope that the existence might continue for a while in its rhythmical and cruel flux: "God forbid!" (Beckett, 1958: 19); and later on, reacting to Hamm's description of the old days: "God be with those days" (Beckett, 1958: 24). The same line of reasoning may be applied to Clov's dialogue with Hamm about the importance of praying God:

Hamm: The bastard!! He doesn't exist.

Clov: Not yet. (Beckett, 1958: 29)

Thus, the inability to lose faith and belief in God in all his grandeur stands for the inability to end one's existence in all its misery. In addition, it is God himself who is unable to abandon the living, because "this means that he cannot bear not to be God. Not ending it but with the end come before him, he cannot avoid cruelty, arbitrariness, repentance, disappointment, then back through to cruelty" (Cavell, 1969: 139).

The idea of the circularity of life, with its "zero" (Beckett, 1958: 3) outside and absolute "GRRAY" (Beckett, 1958: 17), when "yesterday" (Beckett, 1958: 23) stands for "that bloody awful day, long ago, before this bloody awful day" (Beckett, 1958: 23), and "a day [is] like any other day" (Beckett, 1958: 24), is opposed to Clov's repetitive allusions to the fact that "something is taking its course" (Beckett, 1958: 8), something is happening despite the omnipresent stasis. Consequently, the unspoken realisation that it is death that is "taking its course" (Beckett, 1958: 18) justifies Clov's desire to accomplish acts of sheer absurdity, as described in stage directions, so as not to surrender his self to the gradually approaching death:

*(He goes out, comes back immediately with a small step-ladder, carries it over and sets it down under window left, gets up on it, draws back curtain. He gets down, takes six steps towards window right, goes back for the ladder, carries it over and sets it down under window right, gets up on it, draws back curtain. He gets down, takes three steps towards window left, goes back for the ladder, carries it over and sets it down under window left, gets up on it, looks out of window).* (Beckett, 1958: 2)

Clov is prone to creating micro-worlds, in which he attempts to find temporal escape from Hamm's binding presence: "I'll go now to my kitchen, ten feet by ten feet, and wait for him to whistle to me" (Beckett, 1958: 2). The same attitude can be traced in the following excerpt from the dialogue with Hamm:

Clov: I'll leave you, I have things to do.

Hamm: In your kitchen?

Clov: Yes. (Beckett, 1958: 6)

Therefore, by isolating himself from Hamm's grip, Clov attempts to construct a stronghold (or an illusion of it) for his disintegrated ego. Indeed, the look of being constantly busy provides Hamm's

attendant with a chance to put himself above his arrogant master: “I can’t be getting you up and putting you to bed every five minutes, I have things to do” (Beckett, 1958: 3). The similar line of reasoning can be applied to the following conversation with Hamm:

Hamm: What are you doing?

Clov: Having an idea. (Beckett, 1958: 25)

The use of the gerund “having” (Beckett, 1958: 25), emphasising the process, rather than the verb ‘to have’, standing for an accomplished act, gives Clov a degree of seeming though temporary significance. It is for this reason that Clov tends to be always engaged in the process of accomplishing some ‘meaningful’ act. In this connection, Clov’s sequence of “it’s finished, nearly finished” (Beckett, 1958: 2) resulting in the “impossible heap of grains” (Beckett, 1958: 2) serves as a reference to a Zeno’s paradox, which stipulates that “while any object of magnitude is subject to division, the act of perceiving it as separated components identifies that object, not as a discrete entity, but, rather, as a collection of individual segments” (Lyons, 1988: 53). In other words, it stands for Clov’s vision of life as a collection of units, “the impossible heap” (Beckett, 1958: 2) just temporarily filling in the void of signification with an amorphous accumulation of fragmented meanings.

A similar standpoint can be developed with regards to numerous verbal repetitions that Clov makes - “all life long the same questions, the same answers” (Beckett, 1958: 4), as well as his incessant emphasis on “leaving [Hamm]” (Beckett, 1958: 4), which he never actually accomplishes:

Hamm: You’re leaving me all the same.

Clov: I’m trying. (Beckett, 1958: 4)

Consequently, the stress is made once more on the durational aspect of the action, rather than its result, thus underlining the need to fill in the time and re-state Clov’s distinctness from the “GRRAY” (Beckett, 1958: 17).

The structure of the play’s discourse may be analysed in terms of a chess game mechanism, when each move of one side is followed by that of another till the time either *stalemate* or *checkmate* takes place: attack – counterattack/ attack – counterattack/attack, etc. Accordingly, Hamm and Clov speak in short sentences, reminiscent of steps on the chess board, which are occasionally followed or preceded by pauses and silences, corresponding to the time each player takes to think over the next move. Though Hamm is mostly on the offensive, while Clov-the-knight is forced to retaliate, the nature of the defence is such that it contains some seeds of an implicit threat, allowing the latter to keep his ego intact:

Hamm: What time is it?

Clov: The same as usual. (Beckett, 1958: 3)

What is more, with the progression of the play, Clov’s threats gain in their explicitness and impact:

Clov: Do this, do that, and I do it. I never refuse. Why?

Hamm: You’re not able to.

Clov: Soon I won’t do it anymore. (Beckett, 1958: 23)

Towards the very end of the play the menace reaches the scale of a full-blown attack:

Hamm: Give me the dog!

*(Clov drops the telescope, clasps his hands to his head. Pause. He gets down precipitately, looks for the dog, sees it, picks it up, hastens towards Hamm and strikes him violently on the head with the dog.)*

Clov: There’s your dog for you.

Hamm: He hit me! (Beckett, 1958: 39)

Thus, Clov does not seem to be against the use of verbal intimidation and physical violence to assert his personality. Yet, it is the dialogue that plays the most important role in plot development, as it is

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directly contrasted to the “zero” (Beckett, 1958: 3) of the outside, and presents a disparity between meaning something through words and absolute nothingness:

Clov: What is there to keep me here?

Hamm: The dialogue (Beckett, 1958: 30)

Hence, it is the presence of communication and the ability to express oneself verbally that allows Clov to retain some bits of his wretched self.

Hamm's evident need of human touch and emotions raises his servant's esteem, as it is only Clov who can satisfy the needs of the former:

Hamm: You won't come and kiss me goodbye?

Clov: Oh I shouldn't think so (Beckett, 1958: 24)

Later on through the play it is Clov himself who demonstrates explicit care for the quickly deteriorating master: “Is your throat sore? Would you like a lozenge? No. Pity” (Beckett, 1958: 37). Though it might seem as a pure role-play on Clov's behalf inspired by Hamm's relentless attempt to perform his own authority, the former still considers himself needed and his self is gratified, as no one else can provide the necessary care to the weakening king.

Nevertheless, as the above examples illustrate, though Clov and Hamm “are bound together in various acts of complicity” (Lyons, 1988: 61), the former generally serves as a complete antithesis of the latter, and “each character manifests a profound sense of alienation and isolation” (Lyons, 1988: 61). As a consequence, the play brings to the forefront the notion of uncertainty permeating “the relationship of the self to the presence of another” (Lyons, 1988: 61), questioning the possibility to ‘mean something’ in the shadow of somebody else's identity.

Though Clov was the one to introduce the idea of the circularity of existence at the beginning of the play, he seems to be unable to face its implications, such as the possible rebirth of life resulting in the likelihood of a similar chaos and misery for the generations to come. It is for this reason that Clov kills the flea roaming his trousers with “insecticide” (Beckett, 1958: 19):

Hamm: Let him have it!

Clov: The bastard!

Hamm: Did you get him?

Clov: Looks like it. (Beckett, 1958: 19)

The situation repeats itself with the appearance of the rat in Clov's kitchen:

Hamm: He can't get away?

Clov: No (Beckett, 1958: 29)

The servant feels threatened by the possibility of the seeds sprouting, despite the fact that it was him who planted them: “If they were going to sprout they would have sprouted. They'll never sprout!” (Beckett, 1958: 8). What is more, Clov is shocked by the vision of a boy outside of the shelter, who, alongside with being a “potential procreator” (Beckett, 1958: 40), could also have the same miserable destiny as Clov. Therefore, the latter's desire to kill the boy with a “gaff” (Beckett, 1958: 40) seems to be logical. Yet, we never know what happened either to the seeds and or to the boy, which once again underlines the central theme of the play – “our inability *not* to mean what we are given to mean” (Cavell, 1969: 117).

The dread of losing traces of meaning established in the shelter makes Clov impotent to leave: “Sometimes, Clov, you must be better than that if you want them to let you go – one day. But I feel too old, and too far, to form new habits. Good, it'll never end, I'll never go” (Beckett, 1958: 40). The servant's weakness is propped up by Hamm who incessantly attempts to drag him back into the absurdity of their existence in a shelter:

Hamm: Gone from me you'd be dead.

Clov: And vice versa. (Beckett, 1958: 36)



Thus, though “the *project of ending*, a performance of the movement towards death, may be Hamm’s fiction, Clov may well function as Hamm’s accomplice within the limits of that project despite his ironic perspective towards Hamm’s role-playing” (Lyons, 1988: 71). As a consequence, just like Hamm, Clov chooses to end the game in a stalemate and forsake the chance of a checkmate of death for the incessant repetition of instances of synthetically manufactured meaning.

### **Nagg and Nell**

Nagg, Hamm’s father and an amputee, has been often compared to the Biblical persona of Noah, who engendered Ham as a progenitor of life on earth after the nuclear flood. Nevertheless, the *Endgame* presents quite a different view of the two, as Noah’s Ark - the symbol of hope and continuation of life - is substituted by a repulsive ashbin containing the crippled body of Nagg submerged into his own excrements. Hamm, on the other hand, is portrayed as a sterile misogynist, content with his absurd existence and eager to crush any signs of the possible rebirth of life.

Deprived of human dignity and constantly tormented by his son (“Accursed progenitor!” (Beckett, 1958: 6)), and physically intimidated by Clov at Hamm’s demand – “Bottle him! Sit on him!” (Beckett, 1958: 6), Nagg cannot think of anything but basic survival. Therefore, food and physical condition happen to be the only remaining means of asserting the old man’s identity: “The old folks at home! No decency left! Guzzle, guzzle, that’s all they think of” (Beckett, 1958: 6). In fact, this instance has a direct reference to Beckett’s maxim that “everything that matters in life depends not upon ‘man’s maximum’ but on ‘man’s minimum’” (Adorno, 1997: 134).

The need for human touch does not allow Nagg to dissolve into oblivion:

Nagg: Kiss me.

Nell: We can’t. (Beckett, 1958: 8)

The same stance is seen further on through the play:

Nagg: Could you give me a scratch before you go?

Nell: No (Beckett, 1958: 11)

In fact, this over-exaggerated tenderness serves as a parody of a parental couple, which, as it has been shown above, is depicted by their constant “attempts at erotic tenderness and by their nostalgia for having once rode on Lake Como, one April afternoon” (Kennedy, 1989: 59). Therefore, it is the fundamental feeling of physical touch that keeps Hamm’s father away from nothingness. Accordingly, Nagg employs every opportunity to express his physical needs, so as to inform his offspring that he still exists and, therefore, possesses a certain identity. Thus, the old man can be observed to be constantly begging for a biscuit, “me pap” (Beckett, 1958: 6), or a “sugar plum” (Beckett, 1958: 26). Feeling claustrophobic in his bin, Hamm’s father enquires his wife Nell whether she “can hear [him]” (Beckett, 1958: 9); and later on Nell poses the same question regarding his sight:

Nell: Can you see me?

Nagg: Hardly. (Beckett, 1958: 9)

Similarly, Nagg informs his wife that he “lost his tooth” (Beckett, 1958: 9), and that he is “freezing” (Beckett, 1958: 10). The further emphasis on the bodily condition, as well as physical needs can be seen in the conversation regarding the “sawdust” (Beckett, 1958: 10). By declaring that it has not been “changed” (Beckett, 1958: 10), the old amputee once again attempts to have his voice heard. Consequently, having adopted the almost animal-like principle - *I am hungry and cold, therefore I am* – Nagg takes a desperate endeavour to re-assert his incessantly dissolving identity even if at a minimalistic level.

The old man’s ability of storytelling, indicative of a still human skill of logical thinking, as well as the presence of a certain audience, enables him to rise above the nuclear chaos. Nagg persistently emphasises the fact that it is “[his] story and nothing else” (Beckett, 1958: 12) that

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“always made [Nell laugh]” (Beckett, 1958: 12). Hence, the old amputee attempts to demonstrate his former aptitude to dominate. At the same time, Nagg’s constant need of storytelling serves a symbolic function in the play, as it underlines the urge of cultures to live according to a story or to “an approved text” (Kiberd, 1996: 545) even in situations when the meaning itself seems to have put a curse on the world. In this respect, the message conveyed by the story of a tailor echoes, to a large extent, the notion of the “GRRAY” (Beckett, 1958: 17) and “zero” (Beckett, 1958: 3) outside advocated by Hamm and Clov. Nagg’s anecdote implicitly criticises God for making an imperfect world, as compared to the perfection of the tailor’s trousers, and entails the fact that God and nature have forsaken the earth, leaving it to the mercy of death. Consequently, Nagg’s striking ability of storytelling and critical reasoning allows the old man to reassemble the traces of his ego.

In addition, Nagg and Nell are full of memories of the past, “when [they] crashed on [their] tandem and lost [their] shanks” (Beckett, 1958: 30). Thus, not only having a certain past and, but also sound memories of the past, provide the couple with a temporary shelter from the absurdity of their situation. In this connection, despite the misery of the old man’s condition, he manages to exert authority upon his son, desperate to have someone to listen to his “chronicle” (Beckett, 1958: 31). Consequently, Nagg extorts two “sugarplum[s]” (Beckett, 1958: 26) from Hamm in return for the uninterrupted attention. As a consequence, the above examples demonstrate that though Beckett wrote *Endgame* as an attempt to flee the meaning of stories present in any culture, he is still “one of the assailants, finally cursing his play with his intent. Beckett wants to be special, to tell stories, to love floods. He aims to keep his face to the wall, but ends up flipping over time and again” (Gontarski, 2010: 303), which can be clearly seen in numerous flashbacks on Nagg’s behalf.

The old amputee is able to retain human emotions in the face of humiliation, shame and degradation:

Hamm: What is he doing?

Clov: He’s crying.

Hamm: Then he’s living. (Beckett, 1958: 32)

The fact emphasizes Nagg’s continuous awareness of his self despite the animal-like existence. In fact, Nagg manages to take revenge upon his offspring, as a punishment for the debasing treatment. Thus, the old man declares that though at present he is nothing but a bucket of excrement, Hamm might need him yet when left alone and dejected:

One must live with times. Whom did you call when you were a tiny boy, and were frightened, in the dark? Your mother? No. Me. We let you cry. Then we moved you out of earshot, so that we might sleep in peace... I hope the day will come when you’ll really need to have me listen to you, and need to hear my voice, and voice. Yes, i hope I’ll live till then, to hear you calling me like when you were a tiny boy, and were frightened, in the dark, and I was your only hope. (Beckett, 1958: 29)

Thus, Nagg conscientiously attempts to postpone his death, so as to witness the misery of his son. To continue with one’s existence means to go on with re-affirming one’s self. Consequently, Nagg finishes his endgame in a stalemate, postponing the checkmate of death till an indefinite moment in the future, which might never come, as the play would be replayed in the theatre on the next day of the performance.

Nell, Hamm’s mother and an amputee, lives, just like her husband Nagg, in a waste basket. Contrary to other characters of the play, the old woman is guided by a sense of sobriety in her deplorable existence. It is her clear understanding of their degraded state that allows the character not to lose her identity. Thus, Nell is unwilling to kiss Nagg, calling it a sham: “Why this farce, day after day?” (Beckett, 1958: 9). Aware of her appalling condition, she welcomes the fact that Nagg can “hardly” (Beckett, 1958: 9) see her: “So much the better, so much the better” (Beckett, 1958: 9). When asked by her husband if she is cold, she replies: “Yes, perished” (Beckett, 1958: 9). Hence, the retort serves a sort of foreshadowing of her imminent death. Furthermore, Nell is the one to

accentuate that even the “sawdust” (Beckett, 1958: 10) is not there anymore, marking a further dilapidation of their condition:

Nagg: Has he changed your sawdust?

Nell: It isn't sawdust. Can you not be a little accurate, Nagg?

Nagg: Your sand then. It's not important.

Nell: It is important. (Beckett, 1958: 10)

Nell's inability to cry stresses the point of no return to normal existence, with only her memories of the past left to re-assert her personality. Consequently, the old woman's sobriety serves as a form of rebellion in the face of nothingness, allowing her to retain the remaining traces of her deteriorating self. Nell is aware of the circular nature of existence, obliterating the borderline between meaning and absurdity. Hence, her reaction to Nagg's statement becomes logical:

Nagg: Yesterday you scratched me there.

Nell: Ah yesterday. (Beckett, 1958: 11)

Nell does not see any distinction between the previous day and the day after – both are blurred into a bleak mass of bizarre existence, demanding an ever-lasting search for artificial means of asserting one's being. In this connection, one might question numerous claims of Beckett's alleged 'nihilism', as “it appears as the opposite of nihilism. Beckett is a ‘true nihilist’ because he opposes the false positivities of a post-Auschwitz, [or a post-nuclear] moment that saw the restoration of older values in which it is impossible to believe” (Rabatè, 1996: 105).

The old woman scatters a number of signs implicitly foreshadowing her death towards the end of the play. Thus, Nell refuses Nagg's biscuit: “Biscuit. I've kept you half. Three quarters. For you. Here. No? Do you not feel well?” (Beckett, 1958: 10). A similar way of reasoning may be traced when her husband is referring to the situation from the past, “when [they] crashed [their] tandem and lost [their] shanks” (Beckett, 1958: 9). Hamm's mother is initially refusing to “remember” (Beckett, 1958: 9) it at all, as if afraid to infect the memories of the meaningful past with the absurdity of the present. What is more, Nell is sceptical regarding Nagg's decision to tell a funny story: “It's like a funny story we have heard too often, we still find it funny, but we don't laugh any more” (Beckett, 1958: 11). Such a retort creates a feeling of a possible parallel in the old woman's mind between the laughable absurdity of the characters' condition and the utter impossibility to laugh. The same line of reasoning may be applied to Nell's attitude regarding the genuine reason she laughed at the first narration of the “story of the tailor” (Beckett, 1958: 12): “It was because I felt happy” (Beckett, 1958: 12), which she is obviously not any more. Consequently, though still defying death, Nell's sobriety implicitly foretells its imminence in the near future. The old woman's foreshadowing of her decision to go is enclosed in the following excerpt from her conversation with Nagg:

Nagg: Do you want your biscuit? I'll keep it for you. I thought you were going to leave me.

Nell: I am going to leave you. (Beckett, 1958: 11)

Nell accomplishes her promise towards the end of the play:

Hamm: Go and see is she dead.

*(Clow goes to bins, raises the lid of Nell's, stoops, looks into it. Pause.)*

Clow: Looks like it. (Beckett, 1958: 32)

Thus, Nell's possible death presents a strong divergence in a play where death seems to be unfeasible. However, since Nell is the one who soberly recognizes the absurdity of synthesizing artificial meaning, perhaps she might be rewarded by dying. Yet, interesting enough, the absence of the ‘official proclamation’ of death does not make a significant event out of it. Therefore, it is marked by the lack of astonishment on behalf of the remaining characters, which turns it into a routine act in the meaningless circularity of existence. There is little doubt that Hamm's mother will be revived for the next performance. So, just like the rest of the characters, Nell finishes her

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endgame in a stalemate, only to reinforce the major maxim of the play that absence of meaning as such is meaningful in itself because it assembles aesthetic content and creates form.

### Conclusion

To conclude, the characters of *Endgame* are substituting the 'checkmate of death' by the 'stalemate of existence' in the course of the play, which corresponds to the final stage of the game of chess. Hamm, Clov, Nagg and Nell arrive at the realization of the circular nature of existence with its never-ending succession of meaningless and artificially constructed movements, which are to be eventually eradicated by death. The four are unable to face the checkmate of death because of their mutual fear of nothingness, and, therefore, incline towards the stalemate of artificially constructed meanings and stasis with neither beginning nor end.

The characters use various techniques to achieve this goal, including numerous verbal repetitions, adherence to the rule of the routine, threats, physical intimidation and necessity to keep order. What is more, the four employ language games, memories, references to the past, explicit demands to satisfy their basic needs, various meaningless acts to fill in the time, as well as instances of sensibility, physicality and childishness to realise their ultimate purpose. As Bertolt Brecht put it, though the characters' "eyes are open, they stare rather than see, just as they listen rather than hear...Seeing and hearing are activities, and can be pleasant ones, but these people seem relieved of activity and like men to whom something is being done" (1964: 187). In other words, when the world is gone and only images of it are left, the four seem to use them extensively in a series of collages to create artificial meanings out of surrounding meaninglessness. Thus, "fascinated by the fetish/image, [they] can hardly be expected to see anything very far (Brater, 1990: 286), rather they hang on there, engendering acts of cruelty and evil. "The motive, however, is not death, but life, or anyway human existence at last" (Cavell, 1969: 161). Despite the illusion of safety created in Hamm's royal shelter, no one is spared from the omniscient presence of death. Consequently, it is the threatening prospect of the checkmate that makes the *king*, the *knight* and two *poles* prefer the stasis of the stalemate in order to preserve the wretched crumbles of their identities.

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