

# NARRATIVE FRAGMENTS AND STORY-TELLING IN SAMUEL BECKETT'S *ENDGAME*<sup>1</sup>

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## *Abstract*

*Narrative and story-telling are important human concepts encapsulating such issues as cognition, meaning, tradition and identity. Characters in Samuel Beckett's Endgame, which is assumed to be antagonistic to story-telling, problematise the act of story-telling by attempting to create or retell stories, despite their obvious failures and difficulties and objections they come across. Being trapped within the uneventful present, they tell stories, anecdotes, jokes, and fill in the void with dialogues. This paper examines story-telling in the play within the context of time, power, and identity.*

**Keywords:** *Story-Telling, Narrative, Time, Identity, Meaning, Power, Intertextuality, Digressive Narration*

## **Öz**

### ***Samuel Beckett'in Oyunun Sonu Adlı Yapıtında Anlatı Parçaları ve Öykü Anlatma***

*Anlatı ve öykü anlatma bilgi, anlam, gelenek ve kimlik gibi unsurları içeren insana özgü önemli kavramlardır. Samuel Beckett'in genellikle öykülemeye ve anlatıya yabancı ve uzak olduğu düşünülen Endgame (Oyunun Sonu) adlı oyunundaki karakterler bütün başarısızlıklarına karşın öyküler yaratmaya ve anlatmaya girişerek öykü anlatma edimini sorunsallaştırırlar. Durağan bir şimdiki zamana hapsedilen bu oyun kişileri gene de öyküler, anılar, fıkralar anlatmaktan ve yaşadıkları boşluğu doldurmak için diyaloga girmekten geri durmazlar. Bu makalenin amacı Beckett'in oyununu zaman, iktidar ve kimlik bağlamında incelemektir.*

**Anahtar Sözcükler:** *Öykü Anlatma, Anlatı, Zaman, İktidar, Kimlik, Anlam, Metinlerarasılık, Anlatıda Sapma*

## **1. Introduction: Story-Telling and its Significance as a Human Activity**

Story-telling and composing narratives are known to be vital human activities that help individuals make sense of the world around them, pass over experiences and information to other generations, and thus build a tradition for their community. The term narrative is a widely discussed subject with a plethora of diverse definitions. Scholes and Kellogg foreground “a teller and a tale” as the prerequisite of narrative (1996: 4). Martin, however, stresses temporality in his definition of narrative: “Just as fiction can be opposed to fact and truth, narrative is opposed to atemporal laws that depict what is, whether past or future” (1991: 188). Since any narrative has to depend on the question what will happen next and the author has to keep the reader in suspense, traditional narrative is linear and syntagmatic by nature. Its temporality emphasizes historicity, progress and change.

Story-telling not only provides people with an enjoyable pastime; it is, as McQuillan states, also bound up with identity, power, property and domination (2000: xi). For Prince, narrative, which is

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“related to the Latin *gnārus* - ‘knowing,’ ‘expert,’ ‘acquainted with’” (1990: 129), is a mode of knowledge as well as reporting. J. Hillis Miller, who also makes use of the root word *gnarus* in his discussion, asserts that narration harbours the ideas of knowing, judging and interpretation: “A (g)narration is a diagnosis, a retelling by one who knows. It is also a diagnosis, an act of identifying or interpreting by a discriminating reading of signs” (1998: 47). No matter how fractured and out of context it may seem, any narrative gives clues about the circumstances in which it is related, and the people who produce and enjoy it.

One of the dominant themes in Samuel Beckett’s plays is their resistance to narratives and full-fledged stories. This is indeed the case with many of his dramatic characters who cannot produce, tell or finalize coherent narratives. As Diamond observes, Beckett’s characters (Hamm in *Endgame*, Winnie in *Happy Days*, and the Mouth in *Not I*) are “creative individuals” concocting fictions out of their bleak existence to render the present endurable. “Their impulse to fictionalize is the impulse to create the self or ‘I,’ which, because time-bound, exists in a state of mental torment and physical degeneration. [Their] fictions are heroic attempts, but they are, finally, failures. Story-telling relieves but does not cure the pains of existence” (1975: 111). In a similar vein, Herrero-Martín states that “Beckett’s characters on stage resort to a great variety of narratives in order to give coherent shape to their private memories, fragmented identities and insidious frustrations” (2007: 194). The characters’ wish to endow their life with meaning and, thus, create the self is not fulfilled since the narratives they relate fall short of producing the desirable effect. The characters’ failure arises from their lack of certain narrative skills such as remembering, recounting, ordering, dramatizing, ending, and obtaining feedback from the audience. They are, in short, the kind of narrators who give the impression that they are “disoriented, devious, or insane” (Richardson, 2001: 3). Still, this shortcoming does not hinder their instinct to tell something.

Hugh Kenner mentions “two narrative intervals in *Endgame*,” Nagg’s story about trousers and Hamm’s chronicle (1975: 4). However, the play harbours other pieces with a narrative strain in them. In fact, the whole play teems with narratives, exercises of telling such as jokes, anecdotes, stories, Biblical allusions, and an implied family drama. This paper aims at unravelling the intermittent yet crucial use (and abuse) of such narrative acts in Beckett’s work, which will shed light on and enrich our understanding of the play’s seeming antagonism to story-telling. Despite their unstable existence within the play, the narrative bits in the play point towards issues of identity, survival, and meaning, which the characters find almost impossible to secure.

As a playwright Beckett has been almost obsessed with the notion of time, which he refers to as “that double-headed monster of damnation and salvation” (1970, 1) in his monograph on Proust. Beckett’s preoccupation with “the aesthetic and epistemological implications of time consciousness” (Postlewait, 1978: 474) finds its expression in and seems to derive from the writings of St Augustine, the Christian theologian and philosopher. For St Augustine, the present is the only solid standing point for comprehending and making sense of time and our experiences. In other words, the past, the present

and the future can only be conceived within the context of the present. The present itself is synonymous with flux which is a *sine qua non* for time (1992: 230-231), with which the characters in *Endgame* intensely occupy themselves. St Augustine defines the present as an interval with no duration, an ungraspable, elusive notion that defies to be pinned down; as such it is almost nonexistent (1992: 232). Paradoxically, the present is the only means available for coming to terms with the notion of time: "Perhaps it would be exact to say: there are three times, a present of things past, a present of things present, a present of things to come. In the soul there are these three aspects of time, and I do not see them anywhere else" (St Augustine, 1992: 235). Characters in *Endgame* find themselves entrapped within the uneventful present and have recourse to past experiences and events to fill this void.

## 2. Oedipal Family Drama

Imprisoned into the almost speechless ennui of the present, the characters in the play resort to their past which harbours a number of minor events. One of these narrative bits or story lines that occupy them revolves around the oedipal relationship between Clov and Hamm. Clov criticises Hamm, his guardian or (step) father, for not getting him a bike in the past. Though the mother is not mentioned in this family history, the bitter feelings between the father and the son are apparent. This dialogue unmistakably harbours a narrative which would translate into the following story: Hamm, whose name is reminiscent of Shakespeare's Hamlet, appears to be a nobleman or a king who asks his son to inspect his poor subjects. His son Clov performs the duty of visiting the paupers either on horse or on foot since despite his pleas his father the king refused to get him a bicycle. Hamm accuses Clov of not caring for him as much as he did in the past and Clov admits his coldness toward him. This narrative insinuates an oedipal struggle between Hamm and Clov, who are still not on friendly terms because Hamm does not let Clov have access to the ladder. This discontent is further complicated with the introduction of Hamm's decrepit parents Nell and Nagg, whom he calls "Accursed progenitor" (15) and "Accursed fornicator" (16). Nell still acts as a sheltering mother for Hamm (Laughlin, 1988: 161). Since his parents are old and weak, they do not constitute a threat to Hamm's position. This family feud acts as the fuel for much of the interaction between characters, providing them with material to talk about, stories to tell, make comments on, and interfere with the narrative bits. The oedipal details of the past erupt into the dull present and fill the void in which the characters find themselves. Talking about their family feuds, however, does not help any of the characters build their own identity; it only exacerbates feelings of bitterness toward each other.

Another narrative chunk pertains to memories of Nell and Nagg. Recounting the past, however, is not an easy task since the characters suffer from their deteriorating memories. Rendered immobile in their bins, Nell and Nagg talk about their failing senses and try to reconstruct their past: during a tandem ride they fall off their bike and break their shanks in the Ardennes, which leads them to laugh heartily. The accident they had in the Ardennes is not the kind of event that should arouse laughter.

Apparently they did not have serious injuries in the accident and they recall that moment or the events leading to that moment as a source of laughter. But what is it that makes them laugh? As opposed to the tailor joke Nagg tells, the memory of the tandem accident seems to be more successful in creating a cheerful mood on Nell. Nagg, however, cannot bring this reminiscence to the surface of the present time on his own. His narrative is intermittently updated, corrected, and in a way, bridled on and off by Nell's intrusions. Telling thus becomes synonymous with and a by-product of dialogue. Like the other characters, Nagg too has to depend on the driving force of the dialogue and the incentives of an audience, which turns the act of telling into a process in which the teller has to improvise.

### 3. The Joke

The tailor joke, the only totally fictive and complete narrative piece, is another narrative instance in the play.

NAGG: Let me tell it again. (*Raconteur's voice.*) An Englishman, needing a pair of striped trousers in a hurry for the New Year festivities, goes to his tailor who takes his measurements. (*Tailor's voice.*) "That's the lot, come back in four days, I'll have it ready." Good. Four days later. (*Tailor's voice.*) "So sorry, come back in a week, I've made a mess of the seat." Good, that's all right, a neat seat can be very ticklish. A week later. (*Tailor's voice.*) "Frightfully sorry, come back in ten days, I've made a hash of the crutch." Good, can't be helped, a snug crutch is always a teaser. Ten days later. (*Tailor's voice.*) "Dreadfully sorry, come back in a fortnight, I have made a balls of the fly." Good, at a pinch, a smart fly is a stiff proposition. (*Pause. Normal voice.*) I never told it worse. (*Pause. Gloomy.*) I tell this story worse and worse. (*Pause. Raconteur's voice.*) Well, to make it short, the bluebells are blowing and he ballockses the buttonholes. (*Customer's voice.*) "God damn you to hell, Sir, no, it's indecent, there are limits! 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!" (*Tailor's voice, scandalized.*) "But my dear Sir, my dear Sir, look - (*disdainful gesture, disgustedly*) - at the world (*pause*) - and look (*loving gesture, proudly*) - at my TROUSERS!" (21-22)

The joke contains sexual innuendos, empowered by such words with double meanings as seat, crutch, ticklish, teaser, balls, fly, stiff, proposition and ballock. However, it can neither produce laughter nor teach a lesson thanks to Nagg's poor performance. The main reason why Nell finds Nagg's joke boring is that it is full of sexist insinuations. Though Beckett does not have overtly gendered characters and motives in his work, the male-oriented nature of the joke is obvious. "Since jokes, like dreams, and like parataxis or slips of tongue, express repressed or unconscious wishes (Neve, 1988: 37)" Nagg's joke might be interpreted as his gesture towards making love, or kissing which he mentions at the beginning of the play. Therefore, Nagg's attempt to tell the joke gives clues about his futile attempt to establish his identity through voicing his sexual fantasies.

Despite the failure of his narrative faculties half way through the joke, Nagg goes on telling his piece with commitment. This is a Beckettian trait - failure followed by other attempts for new and more spectacular failures. No matter how unsuccessful an act, it is tried over and over again, and carried to the limits. Nagg cannot realize as much as others that in their world, speech is a futile human activity that has turned into circumlocution and gibberish. No narrative can help create

tradition, identity, solidarity, and, above all, relief, hope and meaning. He is not aware of the fact that a joke loses its pleasing quality, and turns into a heap of pointless verbiage. For Nell the joke was funny (though perfunctorily) only when she first heard it on Lake Como. She is aware of the transience of jokes and their effects - once you have a laugh at something, you cannot obtain the same amount of enjoyment next time you hear it. Nagg is far from being a comedian or a skilful narrator, which exacerbates the staling effect of his joke. This is a crucial point in what Freud calls the joke-work. "If I repeat a joke that I have heard myself, I must, if I am not to spoil its effect, behave in telling it exactly like the person who made it" (1976: 197). In other words, a teller of jokes should be a successful mimic too.

After the joke, Hamm orders silence, revealing his intolerance for fictions other than his own, and his desire to stamp his godlike power on the stage. This is further confirmed by his repartee "My kingdom for a nightman!" (22), an allusion to the lines in Shakespeare's *Richard III*: "A horse! my kingdom for a horse!"(V: iv.7). This allusion demonstrates the fact that Hamm is a character struggling to establish his identity through indirect means. Like the narratives he produces, his identity, name and status are unstable, and depend on fictions. His narrative attempts seem to focus on stabilizing this uncertainty, and the ride Clov has given him is an expression of his wish to secure his place in the room. In addition, he pictures himself travelling "Right around the world!"(23) He enquires "I was right in the centre wasn't I?" (23), which is the token of his desire to confirm himself as the centre of things. He is also like a strict stage manager/director bullying other actors and silencing the stories they intend to tell.

Hamm also introduces a narrative of escape in which he dreams of going south, and mentions the means of his departure. But suddenly he asks for his painkiller immediately after the detail of sharks (28). This abrupt move from the heroic and adventurous to the domestic marks his deficiency not only as a narrator but also as a king he claims to be. What can be defined as a narrative of dangerous escape ends up in worries related to his health - his failing eyes, his weakening limbs. Just like the joke which fails to make people laugh, his narrative fails to produce the effect it intends to create. Hale, referring to Hamm's passion for narrating and acting, builds an analogy between him and Shakespeare's Hamlet: "His name recalls both the main character of *Hamlet*, Shakespeare's greatest 'play-within-the-play', and his role as a 'ham actor' in the drama of human existence" (1992: 77). In other words, Hamm is a sham Hamlet; as opposed to Shakespeare's hero, he cannot construct a stage on the stage. He is a ham, a second-rate actor, a Hamlet manqué.

#### **4. Hamm's Story**

Having something to tell does not satisfy Hamm; he also has to turn his narrative into a performative act by relating it to someone, for only then does he find solace. He seems to be aware of his shortcoming as a performer and yearns to recount his own story. He asks a second time whether it is time for his painkiller. Upon Clov's reply in the negative, he says it is time for his story (34). This

reveals that story-telling assumes the function of a painkiller, a vital substance that enables one to go on. In order for his narrative, a quasi-therapeutic act, to take effect, however, he needs an audience. Clov being reluctant, Hamm asks him to find out whether his father would like to hear it. But the father is asleep and he does not want to hear it unless he is given a sugar plum. What Hamm is trying to do here is find a listener to his narrative; as opposed to Nagg, he seems to be aware of the fact that a narrator without an audience is nothing. He even bribes Nagg in order to persuade him to listen to him. Having a story to tell and an audience to hear it is essential for Hamm, though he can neither accomplish this nor impress his audience with his story. Thus, such various desires as telling something, and recruiting an audience, and acts of resistance against being told a story occupy a considerable part of the play's narrative content.

Hamm seems to be suffering from what Schechtman defines as reality constraint which along with articulation constraint operates against the construction of the self. "The reality constraint requires that one's narrative cohere with reality. It cannot be premised upon factual errors of a major kind (for example, being totally wrong about the date, place and current events), because such errors disable the semantic web that links 'who' to 'where' and 'when' etc" (qtd. in Atkins, 2004: 353). Hamm finds it hard to start telling his story. First, he asks "Where was I?" (35) as if he is going to pick up the story where he left off. He then prophecies about the end of life and speech and speculates about the noise he hears in his head. He can only start telling his story after these ad lib sentences and phrases.

Hamm's next story automatically employs the deictic mode: "The man came crawling towards me, on his belly" (35). It is not clear who this man or what his motive is, nor is Hamm's position as a homodiegetic character in the story. As a narrator he falters on and off; he sets out to describe the man but leaves the description incomplete believing that he has already covered that detail before. He seems to be making up or designing his narrative spontaneously and making corrections along the way. The act of storytelling is reduced to a tedious process of dialogue and commentary, a work in progress. This in fact is a way of producing a narrative without boundaries - a never-ending story constantly evolving into different shapes and digressing into unpredictable paths. It is probably no coincidence that Nagg should sneer at Hamm, because his narrative deviates into awkward details due to intermittent digressions. Later, Hamm embarks on talking about the weather, and instead of providing the details concisely, he mentions specific words like thermometer, heliometer, anemometer and hygrometer (35-37). Scientific discourse oozes through, or so to speak, contaminates his narrative. This might explain the fact that he is trying to stamp the existence and superiority which he claims from his nonchalant audience or subjects. In his hands, narrative turns into a hobby horse, a toy to mark his politics of hegemony.

The same narrative incompetence and lack of mastery appears in the way Hamm strives to end his story. "I'll soon have finished with this story. (*Pause.*) Unless I bring in other characters. (*Pause.*) But where would I find them? (*Pause.*)"(37). There is a sort of confession of helplessness about creating

characters, telling a story, or developing the nucleic narrative into a meaningful story. The use of such meta-narrative devices produces a disconcerting effect. Still, it grants the speaker the opportunity to remain on the platform. He is, in a way, like Sherarazade of the *Arabian Nights* in terms of the use of narrative. Nevertheless, while Sherarazade aims and manages to defer the end of her story so that she can survive, Hamm cannot find the means to bring things to an end, nor can he manage to maintain a sense of suspense, which is the prerequisite for the interest of an audience. Ironically, though, that which helps him maintain his position as the focus of attention is his very failure to end his narrative.

## 5. Chronicle vs. Story

Clov too attempts to adopt roles that are beyond his capacity to realize. Upon Hamm's question as to what he is doing, Clov, who has been collecting Hamm's scattered objects, answers "Putting things in order" (39), which recalls Hamlet's "The time is out of joint: O cursed spite!/That I should be the one to set it right" (*Hamlet*, I:v. 188-189).

CLOV: (*straightening up*) I love order. It's my dream. A world where all would be silent and still and each thing in its last place, under the last dust.

HAMM: (*exasperated*) What in God's name do you think you are doing?

CLOV: (*straightening up*) I am doing my best to create a little order. (39)

This might lead us to think that, like Hamm, Clov too plays the role of Hamlet who is trying to put things aright. Indeed, he has a Hamlet-like quality in that he acts as Hamm's audience and, just like the way Nell helps Nagg tell his story, he endeavours to concoct consistent and meaningful stories out of Hamm's narrative pieces.

CLOV: What's there to keep me here?

HAMM: The dialogue. (*Pause.*) I've got on with my story. (*Pause*) I've got on with it well. (*Pause. Irritably.*) Ask me where I've got to.

CLOV: Oh, by the way, your story?

HAMM: (*surprised*). What story?

CLOV: The one you've been telling yourself all your . . . days.

HAMM: Ah you mean my chronicle?

CLOV: That's the one. (39-40)

Hamm is confused since he associates his story with dialogue, probably assuming that his story leads to an exchange of words between himself and Clov. This is partly because of the difficulty of creating a story out of an uneventful life. The story of a life implies "the internal between birth and death" (Ricoeur, 1991: 425). It is also because of the difficulty of turning one's own life or experiences into a narrative. In the words of Atkins, "Unlike fictional narratives, actions in 'real life' do not have the clear limits of a beginning, middle or an end" (2004: 349). Conceiving one's life as a pure narrative, a story with a beginning and an end is further complicated by the fact that "we have not had the

experience of our own births nor, in the midst of our lives, the experience of our own deaths” (Kemp, 1989: 73). Therefore, Hamm’s narrative attests to the fact that he is caught in invisible flow of the present.

The reason why Hamm finds it difficult to tell his “chronicle” (40) stems from his poor memory and confused mind. Though he is supposed to have a good command of his chronicle, he needs to be reminded where he left off. To complicate the matter, there seems to be a problem with naming what he has been telling. Is it a story or a chronicle? He does not know; any designation seems to do. Hamm once again proves incompetent with storytelling since he can only get on with his story/chronicle only through Clov’s incentives. Obviously, he improvises all the time because he confesses that “There are days like that, one isn’t inspired” (40). By saying that he needs inspiration Hamm contradicts himself. Since it is his chronicle, it should have nothing whatsoever with inspiration; because a chronicle suggests the register of events either witnessed or experienced first-hand, Hamm should have no difficulty in relating what happened. Since he cannot differentiate between fiction and fact, he fails to create neither a satisfactory chronicle nor an interesting story. However, unlike Nagg, who fails to produce laughter with his joke and who is far from being a raconteur, Hamm is quite resourceful in the delivery part of his narrative since he adopts different voices in his chronicle. Morrison notes that he employs three distinct voices: “his special narrating voice to tell the story, the father’s voice as quoted by the narrating voice, and his own voice to comment on the other two” (1983: 35). Thus he proves to be successful in the production of his narrative as performance despite his failure in the production of his narrative as text. According to Socrates the unexamined life is not worth living (Ricoeur, 1991: 425), likewise, a life which has not been turned into a story is not worth living since it does not yield to any form of evaluation. Therefore, Hamm failing to narrate his life story, fails to establish his power and identity.

## 6. Conclusion

Characters in *Endgame* suffer from the lack of subjectivity and communication, which are turned into things in the making. They also suffer from intertextuality which surrounds them, depriving them of their chance of autonomy and authenticity. As the allusions to Shakespeare’s plays and Hamm’s name (which is reminiscent of Hamlet) indicate, Beckett’s play is intertextual. Consequently, every attempt at telling a story turns into an intertext, “the text within which other texts reside or echo their presence” (Hawthorn, 2000: 182). Accentuating the interdependence and intertextuality of discourses, Worton observes

Every Beckett text is built on the premise that whenever we speak or write, we are using someone else’s thoughts and language. We are condemned or ‘damned’ to construct ourselves through the discourse of others, whether we like it or not. And each time we write, we are rewriting and therefore transforming (and deforming!) what we and others previously wrote (1990: 81).



“I use the words you taught me,” says Clov. “If they don’t mean anything any more, teach me others” (32). Thus, he confesses the insufficiency of words to mean anything and build one’s identity. Bair points out the fact that in *Fin de partie*, the original version of *Endgame*, Hamm has been identified as James Joyce, and Clov, as Beckett the disciple (1978:467-468). Accordingly, Clov’s words might be interpreted as the words of a fledging poet to his master whose presence and success is overwhelming. However, it also highlights the failure of language to communicate something authentic. Since words and ideas are borrowings from others it is difficult to claim one’s selfhood through speech. Clov’s confession of his lack of authenticity and his acceptance of the frailty of self-expression call attention to the difficulty of constructing the self and identity.

*Endgame* is like an elegy on the impossibility of organizing disparate things into a coherent, temporal and linear unity, and reaching an end whereby one can construct a meaningful whole and thus an identity. These issues may help one to label *Endgame* a play on narrative *cul-de-sacs* since more dialogue is fuelled by the gaps and failures in the narrative bits than full-fledged narratives. The whole play, thus, seems to question the idea of storytelling, rendering one’s own life and experiences meaningful. The characters cannot connect anything, and they have no reliability as narrators; still, they do not refrain from concocting stories, recalling anecdotes, telling jokes with the hope of avoiding the weight of the present from which they cannot escape.

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