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Outside of Here There's Hope: A Heideggerian Analysis of Beckett's "Endgame"

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Upon finishing Samuel Beckett's play *Endgame*, one is struck with an absolute sense of despair: Nell is dead; Nag weeps for Nell; Hamm is seemingly dead (or soon will be) and thinks his counterpart has left him; Clov (depending on the production) secretly stares at his motionless father. The set itself is "bare" with a "grey light" (Beckett 990). The one piece of art, something that might provide transcendent escape from the banal, is turned to face the wall (Beckett 990). The world outside is just as hopeless, and even deadly, according to Hamm—"Outside of here it's death" (Beckett 992). Overall, the play consists of comical, but useless, actions to fill the time until the characters "end" (Beckett 991). However, I will argue against this despairing reading of *Endgame* by drawing upon Martin Heidegger's conceptions of death and time, and of how we relate to each of these concepts. Indeed, when we consider Beckett's play as a study of characters who incorrectly face their own deaths, the play's end becomes a threshold between despair and enduring hope.

Before examining death as a trope, we must consider why Heidegger's philosophy is a good heuristic for studying Beckett. Although Beckett never explicitly referenced Heidegger, some critical literature has attempted to connect the two writers. Steven Barfield, argues that, between these two writers there exists an "uncanny and unsettling relationship…which shows similar preoccupations but does not necessarily mean any influence of one to the other" (156). Another critic, Lance St. John Butler, writes: "Beckett and Heidegger survive in the same world…they are linked by a common ontology" (7). Both Heidegger and Beckett, then, approach our *ontology,* or the study of our particular being, in a similar way. Heidegger's philosophy thus can be used to pull apart the artistic intuitions that haunt *Endgame.*

Heidegger helpfully illuminates how death, time, and the self are all inextricably connected. Other critics have felt this connection, but failed to explicate it fully. K. Jeevan Kumar's essay "The Chess Metaphor in Samuel Beckett's 'Endgame'" is one such attempt. The title of Beckett's play refers to the last stage of a chess match in which the outcome is clear. *Endgame* for Beckett is analogous to the last stages of life, and even "life itself" (Kumar 541). Kumar provides examples of the systematic movements of a chess game that offers little improvisation and their parallels in the play. For example, Clov, after wheeling Hamm around the perimeter of the room, tries to place Hamm in the center of the room. Kumar explains that this mimics a chess player's movements around the four center squares of a chessboard (548). However, constrained by the geometric boundaries, Hamm will be unable to reach this center, forever searching and dependent on Clov. Kumar calls this the unattainable center and Hamm and Clov's search for it "the locus of the ultimate self, [which] will remain unfulfilled" (548).

While Kumar's subsequent examples show a clear connection between the characters' actions and the moves during a chess game, this particular example comes closest to providing a helpful interpretation of the play. Nevertheless, Kumar does not follow through with this insight, leaving his key phrase, "locus of the ultimate self," unexplored and undefined. While the strangeness and repetition in Hamm and Clov's actions are clear through the chess metaphor, they are not connected to the self in Kumar's analysis; more important, these actions are not clearly tied to a search for the self in the face of death. In other words, Kumar has failed to explain how Hamm and Clov tell the viewer or reader something universal about death. How do Hamm and Clov face death, and how should we?

Heidegger examines how actions might be tied to death and self in his essay *The Concept of Time*. In order to understand how time affects the self, we must first understand what time is. He explains that "time is first encountered in changeable entities; change is in time" (202). The passing of time is apparent to us when objects undergo some change. Because things around us change position or simply look different, we believe that time has passed. This idea is exploited in science fiction or fantasy films: a person magically stops time, and all motion and change cease as well. Heidegger believes that we mark this change in time through many means, but most notably, in our use of clocks. He says of the clock's function: "The primary determination produced by the clock at any given time is not the indication of the how-long or the how-much of time in its present flowing, but the fixing of the now at the time" (202). Clocks therefore allow us to divide time into segments of "now" (unlike a stop watch that merely counts the space between two "now" points). For us, then, time becomes a series of points on a line.

The invention of the clock itself exhibits our consciousness of our relation to "the now" and causes one to wonder why this need to mark out the now might exist. Beckett's use of clocks and clock-like objects helps shed light on the connection between clock and clock-maker. Most obvious is the timer that Clov sets to signal Hamm regarding Clov's death or life. The timer as it rings is representative of blind Hamm looking at the clock and marking "the now." If the timer doesn't ring, or rather "fix the now," then Clov will be dead.

The timer's ability to fix a point in time is therefore contingent on Clov's *life.* There is in this example a connection between death and our relation to the present. It is *we* who have divided up time into segments and express our free rational nature in this arbitrary division.

Furthermore, this point only has meaning when we recognize it *as* a moment. Hamm must *hear* the ringing of the timer for the sound to have meaning. In other words, the present—the "now"—is dependent on our existence. We look at a clock and, in this action, mark the present moment. Heidegger goes so far as to wonder (and then assert): "this time now, as I look at my watch, what is this

now?...Am I myself the now and is my Dasein [i.e. my human being] time?" (203). When Heidegger makes this odd claim, he means that this action, this "fixing of the now" is a way to mark our existence as well. We create the present by *recognizing the present.* Consequently, if Clov dies, Hamm might as well be dead. Michael Worton in his essay argues that "Beckett's pairs are bound in friendships that are essentially power-relationships. Above all, each partner needs to know that the other is there: the partners provide proof that they really exist by responding and replying to each other" (71-72).Without other people to recognize Hamm as alive, without his ability to see change in time, and finally, without his ability to *mark* time as having passed with the timer, time literally *stops for Hamm*.

The play then is riddled with clocks to correctly represent the characters' fears of death— and in many cases, defective or ominous clocks. Before we technologically conquered time, we measured it according to the natural world and through change. We used sun dials or the seasons. In *Endgame*, not only have the technological clocks, like the timer, begun to lose meaning, but also these natural clocks become just as unreliable. The sunset, a "clock" that signifies the passing of 12 hours, is not sinking, but instead is "gray" (Beckett 999). Gray, a color somewhere in between day and night, makes recognition of the passing of time impossible. The rising and setting of the sun have, as a kind of clock, a somewhat optimistic setting. They signify hope and rebirth, a steady and dependable cycle. The sun, being replaced by a gray sky, symbolically destroys the possibility of rebirth and hope. Another natural clock in the play is Hamm's "little vein" (Beckett 995). This "dripping in his head" has begun like countdown as his life nears its end. It is not a heart that lies in his chest which pumps his lifeblood, but the "heart in his head," or knowledge of his mortality that drives him forward and haunts him (Beckett 995). Finally, the painkiller represents another futile attempt by Hamm to keep track of time. Throughout the play Hamm repreatedly asks Clov whether or not it is time for his painkiller, only to discover, when it *is* time, that there is no corresponding action (taking the painkiller) that can fix this moment for him—he is out of painkiller (Beckett 1010). Hamm expresses real terror at this loss of a clock. As he nears death, now this moment, too, has been snatched away from him.

Through these examples, one begins to see how Hamm and Clov treat time and the fixing of time as an attempt to evade death. They believe they have some control over the end of time, their *death*, if they can fill it with an action. Worton explains that "time does not pass in this world; rather, the characters have to find ways of passing the time. One solution adopted by Beckett's characters is mechanical repetition, re-enacting situations without perceiving any significance in these repeated actions" (72). Two ideas are being stressed by Worton: first, that the characters pass time with action, something that aligns with what Heidegger

says about time; second, that these characters are creating their lives (literally their time alive) through meaningless actions. Therefore, while each action reminds them that they are not yet dead, their obsession with death is likewise an obsession with their future selves—the selves they would like to be, but that their meaningless actions, *cannot* be.

Their recognition of their failure to create meaningful selves is explicit in their banter.

CLOV: Why this farce, day after day?

HAMM: Routine. One never knows. (Beckett 999)

Furthermore, Clov laments the quick passing of time, as their empty lives draw to a close, by saying, "Grain upon grain, one by one, and one day, suddenly there's a heap, a little heap, the impossible heap" (Beckett 990). Clov here points out how our entire lives are constructed out of moments, but it is impossible to say how many of these moments are necessary to a complete life. At some point, all these moments become a self, but Clov cannot predict when self-hood will arrive. Hamm has the same fear in that he hopes that all these moments will total a "heap," or a self, but he does not know when this may happen:

HAMM: We're not beginning to…to…mean something?

CLOV: Mean something! You and I, mean something!

(Brief laugh)

Ah that's a good one! (Beckett 999).

Their only option is to continue along the path of actions, hoping they will construct a self before their deaths.

It is their present actions that guarantee their present existence; their existence in the future is never guaranteed. Their focus on time is therefore also a focus not only on their existence, but also on their loss of existence—death. *Death,* for the one who experiences it, is the end of time. It is the end of change. Heidegger explains this attitude toward death by saying, "[Death] is *my* being gone. As thus being gone, it uncovers my Dasein as all at once no longer there; all of a sudden I am no longer there in the midst of such and such matter, intimate with such and such people, surrounded by these vanities these tricks, this verbosity" (207). A contradiction in Hamm and Clov's lives emerges: they fill their lives with meaningless "vanities" and "tricks" in order to live longer in hopes of creating a selves, but their knowledge of death constantly wrenches them out of these same activities. They are not lost in their actions; in a moment of post-modern cynicism, they know their actions are empty but continue them regardless.

This cynicism manifests as an aversion to faith—not necessarily spiritual faith (although Hamm openly curses God saying "The bastard! He doesn't exist!"), but a faith in the point of a meaningful and fully formed self without a guaranteed future (Beckett 1006). Our selves form slowly through the addition of

moments, but we will never reach a fully formed self. Once this exists, it is no more. And without God (as Beckett suggests), then life appears only an arbitrary collection of such moments. Why should we care about having a fully formed self if it cannot exist past death, or if we cannot know that it will even exist in the next moment? This belief takes a kind of leap of faith: the faith that one will exist in the next moment, and that living a good life has some purpose in spite of one's death.

Heidegger does not speak of faith, but he does speak of how one should react to foreknowledge of his own death. Every human being, or *Dasein*, "knows of its death and does so even when it wants to know nothing of it" (Heidegger 207). And this knowledge of death, as mentioned before, illuminates not only one's actions, but also the world with which one interacts. We notice the objects of our lives and the routines in which we participate. Butler speaks of this wordly knowledge we have, saying that "man 'is there', he already has some sort of understanding of Being, his own way-of-Being is 'existence' which involves an inevitable appreciation of facticity and a self-directioning towards his own possibilities" (15). By this, Butler means that we have a past of facts, our *facticity*, elements of our world we cannot change. But our future is left open. We can direct our future actions based on facticity, but only in action do these possibilities become facts.

There is a kind of hope in the belief that "Dasein's past is facticity and his future is possibility" (Butler 14). Heidegger suggests a hopeful way of orienting our being towards our death, our past, and our possible future: being *futural*. He explains that "being futural gives time, cultivates the present and allows the past to be repeated in how it is lived" (208). Knowing about our own death gives us a reference point for our total being, i.e. that we are a sum of moments, of free actions and choices. In very simple terms: by looking toward the future we can plan who we want to be. The idea of "allow[ing] the past to be repeated," may appear troubling to some, however, this idea is positive for Heidegger. Havi Carel explains that "for Heidegger repetition is an explicit positive mode of reliving a past…[and] meaningful disclosure. It is a full realisation [sic] of the historical and social heritage passed down to the present" (121). In other words, Heidegger does not necessarily mean just repeating someone else's actions, but by exploring them, and through them, trying to gain insight into a common social structure. The important idea here is that we view our actions as making history and influencing others' actions as well.

The lives of Hamm and Clov are, in fact, a metaphor for this possibility of futurity. Motivated by their fear of death, they struggle against it, frantically filling their time. But it is this same fear of death that limits their possible being: they fear death so much that they do not change the *facts* of their lives. They remain where they are, invent stories, trying to construct a past that might give

them hope for the future. Worton suggests that this story-telling is used to "give the teller a belief that he or she does in fact have a past, but more importantly, to convince a listener that a past, or at least 'their' past, exists.…[Hamm] is striving not to remember his past but to construct it" (73). In reality, it is the characters' viewpoints that prevent them from changing their current circumstances and creating a new facticity out of which they might build a new future.

Evidence of this psychological failing can be seen in the story of the madman Hamm tells. He speaks of a friend he had who when taken to the window to see the "loveliness" of the world, would turn away "appalled," for "all he had seen was ashes" (Beckett 1002). Oddly, Hamm says that the madman "alone had been spared" (Beckett 1002). We might infer from these words, that Hamm himself once saw the loveliness of the world, but now it is all ashes. Hamm believes it is better to have never known beauty than to have known it and lost it. It is not clear however, whether or not Hamm *too* is mad. Because Hamm cannot see anything (and beyond the room neither can the audience) he cannot know whether the world has lost its beauty or not.

Furthemore, the set of *Endgame* has often been noted by critics to resemble "the inside of a skull, the locus of the brain" with its two high windows and monochromatic and bare walls (Kumar 543). This similarity seems to suggest that the characters' fears of the outside world result from a viewpoint constrained by the walls of their dwelling. Hamm is unable to conceive of anything beyond these walls. They are for Hamm his entire world, as evidenced from how "Hamm orders Clov to wheel him round the room/stage of *Endgame* with the phrase 'Right round the world!'…There is a strong feeling that Hamm *is* only because he 'is in' this world of his" (Butler 18).

Hamm's psychology and worldview restrain him, but for Clov there might be hope. Clov readily acknowledges that, whatever Hamm asks of him, he cannot refuse:

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 any more.
HAMM: You won't be able to any more.

But in these lines of dialogue, it seems that Hamm knows that Clov will not have to refuse once Hamm is dead. Once Hamm dies, Clov is free to go. The most hopeful moment the viewer has is the last moment where Clov stands, dressed in traveling clothes, on stage. Beckett's stage directions read: "[Clov] *halts by the door and stands there, impassive and motionless, his eyes are fixed on HAMM, till the end*" (Beckett 1014). Helene Keyssar, writing about directorial choices her college theatre troupe made when performing *Endgame,* speaks of this scene:

> The set did, however, create the problem that if we wanted Clov to exit at the end it would either break the theatrical illusion or

> necessitate using lighting in a way totally inconsistent with the unchanging, relentless gray hue we had chosen as appropriate. Our final sense that Clov should remain on stage thus dawned as a happy coincidence and reaffirmation of the persistent production principle of doing simply what the script demanded. (236)

This choice may seem to some to be disheartening. Clov should leave, go into the world, free from his restraint. But, in actuality, Clov's presence on the stage is a reminder of and emphasis upon the choice that Clov and *the audience* must make at the end of the play. Knowing what they know (and what little they do know) about the outside world, they must choose an ending for themselves. Clov stands on the threshold between two futures: one is an uncertain one, with a different set of facts about the world which would either leave Clov with a realm of new possibilities or simply death. The other is a certain one, the same world he has always known, but similarly resulting in death, though not necessarily immediate death. The brilliance of this final scene lies in the fact that the audience must make that leap of faith for Clov. With no concern for death because death is inevitable, the audience must choose between an existence of certainty or an existence of possibility.

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