

Samuel Beckett's *Endgame*: A Structuralist Reading

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Abstract

This research paper is written with an aim to interpret the play *Endgame* by Samuel Beckett with a structuralist reading which points out the range of possible meaning available for a text and demonstrates the role of reader in making sense of the given work. It neatly discuss about that the close reading of the play differentiates it from traditional dramatic plays. Thus, this research paper concludes with a point that the play *Endgame* exist on a multitude of levels, revealing new meaning which pasteurizes the world of eroding moral values.

Key Words :Structuralist, meaning, reading, traditional, plays, reveal, erode, moral, value

A structuralist reading of a play need not necessarily add to the gamut of interpretations available on the work, but must demonstrate a reading process. A work of art is neither meaningless nor quite clear, it is a *suspended* meaning. "As a declared system of significance, it offers itself, but as a signified object, it eludes one's grasp. This kind of a *disappointment* or *deception* inherent in the meaning explains how a work can go on being reinterpreted indefinitely" (Barthes 650). The study of *Endgame* referred to here is just an active participation in that ever-going, never-ending activity of reading.

There are two main reasons for choosing the theatre of the absurd for this type of study. First, both structuralism and absurd are almost contemporary events laying much emphasis on the language. Structuralism finds its origin in the French Saussure and Paris certainly is the fountain head of the theatre of the absurd. The second perhaps the more important reason is that the very

nature of the absurd play lends itself to a structuralist reading. Martin Esslin makes "the distinction between a traditional and an absurd play" (P 11). A traditional play is a well-made play with a continuity of action, the action moves from A to B. So, the spectator constantly asks himself, "what is going to happen next?" But, in the absurd plays, the writers try to express their vision of the world, a bundle of absurdities. There is a gradual unfolding of events. The pattern of a play becomes clear only at the end of the play. So, the spectator invariably asks the question, "what is it that we are seeing?" When we attempt to relate this basic distinction to our study, one important point becomes obvious whereas the interest of the spectator is projected into the future of every dramatic event in a traditional play, the absurd drama by its episodic nature compels him to concentrate on the *now* and *there* of the particular event, which are the immediate concerns of a structuralist. Thus,

every action is brought into the conspicuity of the spectator and foregrounded.

Moreover, the conventions that allow the communication to take place are not brought into focus in a well-made play because of its illusionistic nature. The spectator is more interested in the story, the meaning. This illusionistic feature is stripped off in an absurd play and the conventions, perhaps by being broken, are made explicit. The interest of the audience is directed towards the means. Hence, in the absurd theatre, every character, stage property, and action assume a sign quality. For example, in Ionesco's *Amedee*, there is a corpse in the bedroom of a middle-aged couple. It has been there for many years. The identity of the corpse is deliberately not revealed; it may be that of the wife's lover whom the husband might have killed or a burglar or simply a stray visitor. The oddest thing about the corpse is that it keeps on growing. In the course of the play, it grows so large and eventually an enormous foot burst from the bedroom into the living-room threatening to drive Amedee and his wife out of the house. It may be a wild fantasy but it becomes a vital symbol on the stage. At large, the theatre of the absurd becomes a metaphor for the absurd world.

Indeed, a better choice would be a *structuralist drama*, a sub-genre made popular by Michael Kirby and others. They try to construct a play according to structuralist principles. They belong to the structuralist workshop, comment on this special kind of drama, Kirby writes:

“For the structuralist workshop, this is found in the effort to make structure

the most important thing. All theatre has structure, but seldom is it the primary aspect” (P 61).

Though it looks interesting, this structural drama is still in its nascent stage. The choice of Beckett's *Endgame* could be justified in two ways. Esslin remarks:

“Of the dramatists of the Absurd, Samuel Beckett is undoubtedly the profoundest, the greater poet, *Waiting for Godot* and *Endgame* are certainly master pieces” (P18)

The reason for the selection of *Endgame* for analysis is that in addition to the sign quality, the play is constructed a binary oppositions. The contrastive features of the play are symbolized even in the stage property; the ladder and the wheelchair, they become the symbols for the contrast between Clov and Hamm. Compared to the well-made play *Endgame* seems to have no plot at all. The stage is totally bare except for the wheelchair and the ladder. We witness two pairs of characters: Hamm and Clov, Nagg and Nell. Literally, nothing happens in the play. Hamm and Clov are mutually dependent, of course in different sense. Clov expresses his plan of leaving Hamm and Hamm tries to hold him by engaging him in a futile, anchorless dialogue. This is all the action that takes place. But obviously, Beckett's play can never be reduced to this simplicity. In Beckett's theatre, each entity assumes various dimensions of meaning. In a way, it is a metaphor for life itself. Hence, the abstract presentation is to be interpreted in a larger context. George Lukacs brings out the importance of this abstract presentation in

modern drama: “only if the problem is presented abstractly dialectically can we succeed in turning the particular event, which is the basic stuff of drama, into an event touching upon and expressive of dramatic man’s inner essence”(P 437). This abstract quality assigns a sign function to every object in *Endgame*.

Hamm is not simply a disabled – lame and blind. It is true that Hamm is lame and blind. But it does not stop there. One is tempted to ask a series of questions:

“Why blind and lame? and not deaf and dumb? Accepting that he is lame and blind, why lame? why blind? why lame and blind together? “There is another setoff possible questions:

“Who is this Hamm?

Is he just a disabled or more than that?

Is he the spatiotemporal entity that we witness on the stage or somebody more than that?”

These haphazard questions lead the spectator into the heart of the matter. Hamm is not only a spatiotemporal entity but a sign on the stage. Beckett has made a definite choice from a repository of numerous images. The structuralist principle of selection is obvious here. There are many kinds of disabilities: crippled, deformed, blind, deaf, dumb, disordered, etc. Hamm is lame and blind. First, as a sign Hamm is ostended. He is not the only individual that spectator witnesses on the stage. He represents a whole class of people who are lame and blind. He is not bound by time and space. He is a sign. A simple definition of ‘sign’ is something that stands for something

to somebody in some respect. So, there are three terms involved: the signifier, the sign-vehicle, the signified. Hamm as an abstract concept is a sign-vehicle, linking a signifier and a signified. The signifier is the character or the actor, a spatiotemporal entity that we have on the stage. Since Hamm as a sign is opaque, the significant in this case could be any number of things. It opens a range of possible meanings. As a literal sign, he may signify just a disabled person. But as a symbolic sign, he may be anything. For instance, he may be a victim of the world war or maybe he is a metaphoric representation of a modern man whose heroism is mostly heroism of anguish, of despair, not one of bold aggressiveness. The next task is to explain how foregrounding works. While commenting on foregrounding in theatre in general, Frantisek Deak writes:

“In structuralist theatre theory, foregrounding played an important part in analysis. Jindrich Honzl in “Dynamic Sign in Theatre” (1940) analysed how foregrounding functions in changing the traditional role of the components in theatre. For example, the scenic, visual information can be conveyed by speech or an actor can be replaced by sound or lighting, or text can be projected as a painter’s image” (P 89)

In *Endgame*, the first possibility is exploited. The scenic, visual information is conveyed by speech. Hamm is blind and Clov has to explain everything around. In making Hamm blind, Beckett makes the audience see better. Usually, a spectator takes things on the stage for granted. But

here, his interest is oriented to every item on the stage. Thus, foregrounding is affected. Further, Hamm is lame because “outside of here it’s death” to him. The *here* and *now* of the action is symbolically pointed out. Based on the linguistic model, the structuralists view literary texts producing meaning in terms of binary oppositions. This strategy holds good for *Endgame* too. The binary oppositions that produce the meaning in *Endgame* can be located almost in all the aspects of the play. It works in the very action of the play (ending/playing). In the relationship between the characters (bourgeoisie/proletariat), in time quality (stasis /dynamic) and in the structure of the play itself (closed/open form, cyclic, linear structure).

The very title of the play itself is a violent yoking of two contraries: “END GAME”. Hamm and Clove are playing a verbal game. As a chess, they move their verbal pawns to assault each other, to gain independence from each other. It is the “dialogue” that fills the void between them. But, right from the beginning Hamm wants to put an end to this playing. Yet, they take efforts to put off the end as long as possible. This inherent contradiction is obvious even in the very first speech by Hamm:

“Enough, it’s time it ended, in the refuge too (Pause). And yet I hesitate, I hesitate to ... to end. Yes, there it is, it’s time, it ended and yet I hesitate to – (he yawns) – to end. (Yawns)” (Endgame 12).

The dramatic action profits from this binary opposition. The relationship between Hamm and Clove is left open. There are indications

in the play as to two possible relationships, that of master/slave and father/son. The master/slave relationship adds another shade of meaning to the play. Sean Golden considers Hamm as representing the bourgeoisie, the capitalist and Clov, the proletariat” (P 444). The action of the play portrays the raging war between these two. It develops till that rage breaks out into an open rebellion. The following dialogue epitomizes this relationship:

Hamm: Get me ready (Clov does not move) Go and get the sheet (Clov does not move) Clove!

Clove: Yes.

Hamm: I’ll give you nothing to eat.

Clov: Then we’ll die.

Hamm: I’ll give you just enough to keep you from dying. You’ll be hungry all the time.

Clov : Then we shan’t die (Pause) I’ll go and get the sheet (He goes towards the door).

Hamm: No! (Clov halts) I’ll give You one biscuit per day ... (pause). One and half (pause)... (PP 13-14).

Clov does not have even his own words. Hamm’s words and style have dictated Clov’s world. While Hamm is desperately trying to cling on to the decaying authority, Clov is constantly attempting to disentangle himself and to create his own world. The dramatic tension is brought out by the binary opposition in their relationship: the exploiter/the exploited.

Endgame presents a static set of circumstances that manifests itself in

repetition, duplication and echoes, in more and more intensified recurrences of the same situations. For the characters, days and moments have become identical. This atemporal quality is expressed when Hamm says: "One of these days. I'll show them to you" (P 13). The following dialogue brings out this a temporality:

Hamm: Yesterday! What does that mean? Yesterday!

Clov : That means that bloody awful day, long ago, before this bloody awful day. (P 32).

Thus, in the play, time dissolves into multiplicity of moments and a sense of stasis prevails. But the motif of temporal progression is introduced to counterbalance the static moments. It implies the beginning of a developmental motion. "Something is taking its course" (P17). "We're getting on" (P 18). In the words of Hasselbech, The freedom of choice and action is classical drama is usually missing in the absurd drama. The existential futility and absurdity of being is appropriately expressed in the aesthetic structure of circularity and stasism *Endgame* (P 29). Nothing literally happens in the play. The stasis of the cyclic structure is realized in the tableau or the beginning and the end of the play.

The study of languages forms a vital part in any structuralist enterprise. The traditional philosophers of language distinguished two types of utterances: *Constative* and *performance* utterances. A *Constantine* utterance simply makes a proposition, whereas a *performance* utterance does something. In the second case, one is not only simply producing a propositional

content but doing such things as asking, promising, commanding etc., Later, John Austin, an oxford philosopher of language abandoned the distinction and asserted that all utterances have an executive or *performance* force. This *performance* force of utterances is obvious in *Endgame*. Beckett comments about *Endgame* as "Rather difficult, 'elliptic, mostly depending on the power of the text to claw, more inhuman than Godot" (Modern Drama, 291).

To conclude, this structuralist reading of *Endgame* points out the range of possible meanings available for a text and demonstrates the role of the reader in *making sense* of the given work. When the critical touch stones of traditional drama are applied to an absurd drama, *Endgame* has no plot to speak of, the dialogue seems to have degenerated into meaningless babbles. This is exactly the reason why the play of Ionesco, Beckett, Genett, and Adamov puzzled and outraged the audience as well as most of the critics. But structuralism explains the process of signification at work in an absurd play and suggests the need for one's faculty of reading not static and rigid but ever alive and dynamic. In a nutshell, *Endgame* portrays a world of eroding moral values. A sense of deadness prevails over the whole action. It is a world disintegrating human relationships and the characters, especially, Hamm, are devoid of any neighborly concerns. *Endgame* exists on a multitude of levels, revealing new meanings of it is more closely studied and analysed. The play can also be considered as a monodrama depicting the dissolution of personality in the hour of death.

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