

**“THE BEGINNING IS THE END AND YET YOU GO ON”: A POSTSTRUCTURALIST
CRITIQUE OF LANGUAGE IN SAMUEL BECKETT’S PLAYS**

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**I, THE UNDERSIGNED MEMBER OF THE COMMITTEE,
HAVE APPROVED THIS THESIS**

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ABSTRACT

“THE BEGINNING IS THE END AND YET YOU GO ON”: A POSTSTRUCTURALIST CRITIQUE OF LANGUAGE IN SAMUEL BECKETT’S PLAYS

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This thesis will examine the ways in which language is represented in the plays *Waiting for Godot* and *Endgame* by Samuel Beckett. It will analyze the works through the critical theory of poststructuralism, which posits that the very structures that critics rely on to understand and interpret works must be called into question. This theory calls into question the validity of using language as a means of discussing language generally and works of literature specifically. In this thesis I will show how Beckett uses language to illustrate its ineffectiveness in communicating ideas. For the characters of both plays, this breakdown of language—in the mid-twentieth century—coincides with the breakdown of human perception and stability when faced with the inability to articulate the meaninglessness and hopelessness of their lives. I will examine the language used and the general disconnect between thoughts, meaning, and speech. I will assess the content and form of the texts, including the repetitive nature of both plays and the fluctuation between lyrical and rhythmic speech to terse and discordant speech. Through this analysis I determine that language, as represented by Beckett, is not a reliable mode of communicating ideas and yet is necessary for humanity to endure the misery of life.

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CHAPTER 1

LITERATURE REVIEW

Two of Samuel Beckett's most important plays, *Waiting for Godot* (1953) and *Endgame* (1957), have been reviewed and examined from countless perspectives. While this essay will offer a poststructuralist reading, it is important to recognize the variety of other possible critical approaches, such as the Christian, humanist, Marxist, formalist, and deconstructive-feminist.

When *Waiting for Godot* debuted, it was received with confusion and discomfiture by many. Various critics found it difficult to incorporate Beckett's plays into the existing theories of the time and dismissed his works. In the almost 70 years since then, however, interpretations have evolved, expanded, and morphed to encompass the controversial plays. In their attempt to find a place in the critical sphere for *Waiting for Godot*, critics were forced to re-examine their methods of analysis. To begin, they had to rethink their language. Vivian Mercier wrote in 1956: "[Beckett] has achieved a theoretical impossibility – a play in which nothing happens, that yet keeps audiences glued to their seats. What's more, since the second act is a subtly different reprise of the first, he has written a play in which nothing happens, twice." Beckett's style of writing changed the rules for criticizing literary works. Critics trained to expect certain elements to be intrinsic to a work – rising action, a climax, and a resolution, as well as a meaning or truth to be learned – would be disappointed.

To find a place for Beckett's pieces, Martin Esslin outlined a new genre of drama in the 1960s, Theatre of the Absurd, in an attempt to expand the liberal humanist discourse surrounding the plays. Liberal humanism asserts the idea that literature, regardless of when written, contains universal truths to be understood by any (though presumably educated) individual of any period. However, this mode of critique comes imbedded with a prevailing cultural framework – a set of

values that came to be understood in this theory as intrinsic to all humanity – that others argue was exactly what Beckett was trying to escape from. In “Theatre of the Absurd,” Esslin states,

[T]he defiant rejection of language as the main vehicle of the dramatic action, the onslaught on conventional logic and unilinear conceptual thinking in the Theatre of the Absurd is by no means equivalent to a total rejection of all meaning. On the contrary, it constitutes an earnest endeavor to penetrate to deeper layers of meaning and to give a truer, because more complex, picture of reality in avoiding the simplification which results from leaving out all the undertones, overtones, and inherent absurdities and contradictions of any human situation. (12-13)

He reasons that *Waiting for Godot* is the stripped-down truth of the human condition. While Esslin attempts to incorporate Beckett into this theory, the liberal humanist belief in universal values that exist outside of cultural or social construction seems to be in direct contrast with the emphasis on meaninglessness present within the plays. Peter Boxall explains that “Esslin’s argument abruptly brings a radical nihilism, which questions the validity of all truth and meaning, up against a stout defense of the validity of a stock of values that he deems to be unquestionable,” highlighting the tensions within his analysis (37).

Discussing Esslin’s writing, Theodor W. Adorno found that the liberal humanist theory fell short in accurately depicting Beckett’s works, and integrated socialist realism to create a more comprehensive argument. This Marxist criticism focuses on art as influenced by political and social systems and ideology. Adorno states that “*Endgame* takes place in a zone of indifference between inner and outer, neutral between – on the one hand – the ‘materials’ without which subjectivity could not manifest itself or even exist, and – on the other – an

animating impulse which blurs the materials, as if that impulse had breathed on the glass through which they are viewed” (127-8).

Poststructuralist theory, instigated by theorists and philosophers such as Jacques Derrida, was developing as Beckett was writing and was in many ways shaped by literary works like Beckett’s. This theory argues that the very structures that critics rely on to understand and interpret works must be called into question. It challenges the validity of using language as a means of discussing language generally and works of literature specifically. In *Samuel Beckett: Repetition, Theory and Text*, Steven Connor writes that “[w]hen Vladimir and Estragon meet, they have to painfully reconstruct the events of the previous day. . . . To reconstitute the day in memory and representation is to open up that gap between the original and its repetition which can never entirely be closed, either for the characters or for their audience; we can never be sure again of the simple factuality of the day and its events” (133). Poststructuralist criticism contends that “[t]he goal of Beckett’s writing is often taken to be silence. Beckett uses words to whittle away words until words, exhausted, plead to stop” (Boxall 96).

Reader-response theory, which focuses on how literature affects its audience and how the interaction between the two creates meaning, joined the forces in trying to decipher Beckett with a German writer, Wolfgang Iser. He states that “[w]e are constantly fabricating fictions in order to create reliable guidelines or even realities for ourselves, though in the end they turn out to be no such thing. These texts show clearly that in spite of the knowledge revealed to us concerning our needs, we still cannot do without our fictions, so that these needs become the basis of our own entanglement with ourselves” (261).

While each theory brings different insights to the two texts, no theory has quite encompassed Beckett’s work like poststructuralism. Because the theory was partially forged as a

response to his work, it is able to analyze the pieces in an arguably unique way. The plays toy with language in a meta-linguistic construction that perfectly complements the meta-analysis that is one of the main tenets of poststructuralism. Because of its suitability for examining Beckett, this thesis will focus on a poststructuralist viewpoint for analyzing both *Waiting for Godot* and *Endgame*, incorporating the arguments of theorists such as Steven Connor and Charles Campbell, who argues that “in *Waiting for Godot* language becomes a game because it is denied the reliability of independent verification” (60). This thesis will examine the increasing estrangement between language and meaning, between thought and speech, and between form and content within Beckett’s plays.

CHAPTER 2

METHODOLOGY STATEMENT

In this thesis, I will examine the ways in which language is represented in the plays *Waiting for Godot* and *Endgame* by Samuel Beckett, through the critical theory of poststructuralism. Language is presented as a game to be played in the plays, which perfectly complements the meta-analysis of language integral to this theory. Poststructuralism argues that the very structures that critics rely on to understand and interpret works must be called into question. More specifically, the legitimacy of using language as a means of discussing language, principally in works of literature, is criticized.

I will create a meta-analysis that will compile previous research on the topic and add my own interpretations to create a comprehensive exploration of the two plays. Because of my focus on poststructuralism, I have limited my research to focus mainly on those authors who analyze the works through a poststructuralist lens, with only some commentary from non-poststructuralist authors. While I examined alternative theories in my literature review, the majority of research presented in this thesis will be poststructuralist in theory. I have used library databases to find articles, journals, books, and theses that examine either one or both of the plays. I have relied on peer-reviewed research to engage with a well-informed content. This thesis will provide both a primary analysis and an incorporation of other criticism on the topic.

CHAPTER 3

WAITING FOR GODOT

For a play in which “nothing happens, twice” (Mercier 6) there is certainly a plethora of critical analyses surrounding *Waiting for Godot*. Samuel Beckett was one of the first playwrights to create a play lacking any apparent action, climax, or resolution. The play was so shocking that during its first showing, many people stormed out of the theatre. In spite of initial negative reactions, the play, which debuted in 1953, has been produced, discussed, and translated over and over again to this day. This seemingly sparse play, in which two characters, Vladimir and Estragon, spend most of their time on stage waiting for a mysterious person named Godot to arrive (though he never does), is rife with complex themes and symbolism. The play “draws the audience’s attention to its process of artificiality by abandoning the pre-established expectations of allegories and meanings. This is to spotlight the very nature of narratives to create artificial ‘real’ and imaginary worlds in the guise of truth” (Beyad 323). In this artificial world, the two tramps spend their time contemplating suicide, playing games with language, and interacting with two visitors: a master, Pozzo, and his slave, Lucky. It is the minimalism of the play that allows for so many questions and hypotheses.

The most prominent aspect of the work is its language: Beckett’s attention to word choice, his use of repetition, both linguistically and structurally, and his inclination for juxtaposing the shape of conversation against its content. He “excel[s] in laying bare both the nature of life without real hope of improvement or change, and the subterfuges we adopt to conceal from ourselves the worst facts about our condition, in dialogue that modulates with striking rapidity from the sublime to the ridiculous, speech without consequence reflecting action without conclusion” (Fletcher 13).

Though Beckett's play is brimming with intricate themes, his use of disjointed and repetitive language emphasizes most notably the harrowing existence of being human. The writing reinforces the pointlessness of humans spending their lives waiting for something that never comes, believing in something that doesn't exist, and hoping for verification of their own existence. This can most clearly be seen in the intentionally overbearing repetition in the play which mimics the overbearing repetition of day-to-day life, all the while waiting for something to "happen." The following interaction between Vladimir and Estragon is repeated, exactly, no less than six times, and the general idea is repeated even more frequently throughout the play:

Estragon: Let's go.

Vladimir: We can't.

Estragon: Why not?

Vladimir: We're waiting for Godot.

Estragon: (*despairingly*). Ah! (10)

These five lines hold the characters' reasoning for inaction throughout the play. The repetition of these lines enhances their absurdity as their situation does not change. The two are not sure why they need to speak with Godot, where they are supposed to meet him, or if he is even coming. Despite these ambiguities, they remain steadfast in their dedication to wait for him. In this way, Gogo and Didi represent all of humanity—lacking any hard evidence but still willing to put all of their faith into something, anything for a sense of assurance or purpose. The act of waiting is justified by the idea that the indefinite "Godot" that they, and all humans, are waiting for is imminent and comes bearing concrete answers to elusive questions.

Along with linguistic repetition, the play makes use of structural repetition, as explained in Martin Esslin's essay "The Search for the Self." He writes, "Each time the two tramps

encounter another pair of characters, Pozzo and Lucky, master and slave, under differing circumstances; in each act Vladimir and Estragon attempt suicide and fail, for differing reasons; but these variations merely serve to emphasize the sameness of the situation” (28). The slight variations in dialogue or action embedded in a prevailing overall consistency within the play mirror the tedium of life. The pattern of life is one of monotony with small, irrelevant changes to give the appearance of something different, when in fact nothing significant has changed at all. Gogo and Didi constantly try to convince themselves that things are changing or that they will change soon. In the following conversation, Didi tries to cheer Gogo up with the hope that Godot will meet them tomorrow:

Vladimir: Ah Gogo, don't go on like that. To-morrow everything will be better.

Estragon: How do you make that out?

Vladimir: Did you not hear what the child said?

Estragon: No.

Vladimir: He said that Godot was sure to come to-morrow. (*Pause.*) What do you say to that? (35)

By now used to the continuing repetition of the play, one may correctly assume that this type of false reassurance has been uttered many a time before. The two men themselves seem to know it is unlikely that tomorrow will be any better, as immediately after this dialogue, Estragon laments their inability to kill themselves that day and asks Vladimir to remind him to bring rope for their inevitable suicide attempt the following day. Sick of the repetition, they long for a reprieve, but the only one they can imagine, aside from meeting Godot, is suicide. In living, their only option is to continue on in the same way they have been for half a century. This repetition “create[s] an illusion to mask certain ‘truths’ and in so doing avoid[s] certain unhappy realizations (like

Estragon's 'billions'), but it also masks the illusion that there is a truth at all. The fact that there are so many possible truths (they are waiting for Godot or for night to fall) rather than a singularity that can ever be attained is almost as frightening as the prospect of their interminable wait" (Yates 445). In one of their many arguments Estragon aptly summarizes their predicament:

Vladimir: This is becoming really insignificant.

Estragon: Not enough. (44)

Being aware of the insignificance of their lives is not enough to change it. Their unwillingness to kill themselves means they will spend their days waiting until their natural deaths. In the same way, humans can end their lives in an attempt to free themselves of the never-ending repetition of life, or they can hope, however improbably, that they will be "saved," though very few (including Vladimir and Estragon) are able to articulate what that might actually entail. The fear of what awaits after suicide (perhaps nothingness) is usually enough for individuals to choose to wait and hope for reprieve. As Richard Durán explains, "Despite the urge to flee the absurd, the more powerful fear of death shackles him to a life without meaning" (986).

The idea of waiting recurs on nearly every page in the play and in nearly every moment during a stage performance. Estragon remarks, "Nothing happens, nobody comes, nobody goes, it's awful!" (27). The prevailing focus of the play "is not Godot but waiting, the act of waiting as an essential and characteristic aspect of the human condition" (Esslin 30-31). This act of waiting reprises the way in which humans wait for salvation or explanation or solutions to unsolvable problems. Waiting "stands for habit, which prevents us from reaching the painful but fruitful awareness of the full reality of being" (Esslin 37). Since the act of suicide appears impossible for Didi and Gogo, and they insistently shy away from acknowledging the reality of their situation, they are left to wait. They long for anything to disrupt the unbearable nothingness of waiting,

like visitors or for night to fall. This yearning for nightfall “expresses the desire that the ennui, the need to pass time, and the waiting may come to an end. With the night comes sleep, a state much like death, and with sleep or death there is oblivion” (Cormier 46). By the end of the play, Estragon knows how the refrain goes, as he states, “Let’s go. We can’t. Ah!” (58). The repetitive nature of the work tells us that Vladimir and Estragon will never meet Godot, they will never take their own lives, and they will never stop waiting. This is the existence they are doomed to, as is most of humanity (excluding those either who attempt to escape through suicide or who attempt to rationalize through philosophy or religion). Estragon and Vladimir strive

to establish for one’s self a “raison d’être” and to rationalize one’s often painful and difficult existence; yet, cruelly, those who exist in an era that has gone beyond God [or Godot] have no recourse to a metaphysical foundation upon which they can build a meaningful understanding of life. The person therefore finds himself in an absurd world, which seems to be an endless and purposeless repetition of the same, recalling the image of Sisyphus eternally pushing the boulder up the hill only to watch it fall time and time again. (Kubiak 396)

The characters’ boulder is not the act of waiting, but the act of continually keeping the reality and direness of their situation (both within the play and in relation to the play) from setting in.

It is not just the language itself that Beckett experiments with but the shape of it. He once said, “I take no sides. I am interested in the shape of ideas even if I do not believe in them” (qtd. in Beyad 320). This “shape” can be seen in the fluid dialogue between Didi and Gogo.

Estragon: In the meantime let us try and converse calmly, since we are incapable
of keeping silent.

Vladimir: You’re right, we’re inexhaustible.

Estragon: It's so we won't think.

Vladimir: We have that excuse.

Estragon: It's so we won't hear.

Vladimir: We have our reasons.

Estragon: All the dead voices.

Vladimir: They make a noise like wings.

Estragon: Like leaves.

Vladimir: Like sand.

Estragon: Like leaves.

Silence.

Vladimir: They all speak at once.

Estragon: Each one to itself.

Silence.

Vladimir: Rather they whisper.

Estragon: They rustle.

Vladimir: They murmur.

Estragon: They rustle.

Silence.

Vladimir: What do they say?

Estragon: They talk about their lives.

Vladimir: To have lived is not enough for them.

Estragon: They have to talk about it.

Vladimir: To be dead is not enough for them.

Estragon: It is not sufficient.

Silence.

Vladimir: They make a noise like feathers.

Estragon: Like leaves.

Vladimir: Like ashes.

Estragon: Like leaves.

Long silence. (40)

This haunting dialogue is the perfect example of the combination of form and content expressing one coherent idea. Hugh Kenner explains, “In a beautiful economy of phrasing, like cello music, the voices ask and answer, evoking those strange dead voices that speak, it may be, only in the waiting mind, and the spaced and measured silences are as much a part of the dialogue as the words” (63). Didi and Gogo wait for nothing and fill their empty days with striking and symmetrical discourse to pass the time. The form of their conversation provides entertainment as they wait for something to be *enough* for them while the content of it expresses their deepest fear: that nothing ever will be *enough*.

Vladimir and Estragon, while waiting in limbo, desperately need to be assured of their existence. When Estragon asks why Vladimir will never let him sleep, he replies, “I felt lonely” (11). Without the other person, there is nothing tying the individual to reality as nothing they experience is consistent or tangible. Without someone to talk to we are, Barbara Herrnstein Smith says, “manifoldly deprived; for, lacking listeners, we not only lack the opportunity to affect others instrumentally, to secure their services in ministering to our physical needs and desires, but we also lack their services in providing . . . cognitive feedback, that is the occasion they offer us to verbalize and thus to integrate, discriminate, appreciate, and indeed experience

our own otherwise elusive perceptions" (qtd. in Yates 440). They rely on each other to confirm that what they are experiencing is real. It is evident that "Didi and Gogo need each other to remember as much as to be remembered by. Without each other they would be looking at a mirror with no reflection and the reflection verifies their own existence" (Yates 439). As Estragon remarks, "We always find something, eh Didi, to give us the impression we exist?" (44). They use repetition as a means of confirming they are being heard by the other. It is through the act of mimicking the other that they can be sure they are being seen and heard, which is tantamount to being in existence (insofar as their lives can be called an existence).

Though not a self-proclaimed poststructuralist, Samuel Beckett seems to have the same misgivings about language. He wrote in a letter in 1937,

More and more my own language appears to me like a veil that must be torn apart in order to get at the things (or the Nothingness) behind it ... Is there any reason why that terrible materiality of the word surface should not be capable of being dissolved [...] so that through whole passages we can perceive nothing but a path of sounds suspended in giddy heights, linking unfathomable abysses of silence? (qtd. in Cant 138)

In fact, this central theme pervades the entire play, as it throws into question the efficacy of language as a means of communication.

Didi and Gogo's repetitive language, along with the repetitive structure of the play, represent the repetition of human lives in order to give some sense of stability in a world of absurdity. The characters spend their time trying and failing to communicate with each other, as shown in the following conversation:

Vladimir: What was I saying, we could go on from there.

Estragon: What were you saying when?

Vladimir: At the very beginning.

Estragon: The very beginning of WHAT?

Vladimir: This evening . . . I was saying . . . I was saying . . . (42)

The constant failings of communication between the two lead characters illustrate that language itself is ineffectual, despite it being our primary way of communicating. Beckett's use of language outside of the norms serves to deconstruct it and its conventional meanings, thereby showing the incompetency of not just language, but everything subsequently defined by it, such as time and space.

Beckett was very aware of the schism between language and thought, which can be evidenced in his choice to write *Waiting for Godot* in French and then later translate it into his native language, English. Sarah Cant explains that "Beckett's choice to be both writer and translator appears . . . as an attempt to reinvent language by using the process of writing in a second language as a means of removing the limitations of style" (141). By stepping away from his native language, Beckett was able to avoid any mechanical reflexes he might have adopted in his writing style and ensure that every word written was a deliberate and conscious choice. Furthermore, he highlights the difficulties in communicating through language in that no one language can be directly translated into another without some change in meaning.

Misconstructions in meaning extend not just across languages but within them. Beckett "was aware of the fact that language has the tendency to slip, break down, or deconstruct itself" (Atkins 75) and he illustrates this concern in the dialogue between Vladimir and Estragon. In the opening lines of the play Vladimir remarks, "So there you are again" to which Estragon replies, "Am I?", immediately showing a fissure between language and meaning. If what is being said is not true, how can we determine what is? In the same conversation Vladimir remarks, "We should

have thought of it a million years ago, in the nineties.” Humans use language to describe time, but this description is incongruent, thereby bringing into question the idea of time itself.

Throughout the play we are confronted with inconsistent descriptions of time, which hints at the problem of defining time within an inarticulate language system. The role of language “in *Waiting for Godot* then is a (relatively) diminished one to the extent that it lacks the stability of the verifying relations that would establish its significance” (Campbell 60). If one cannot accurately describe or depict time, how can anyone know for certain what it is, or more aptly, when it is. Vladimir and Estragon “are hoping to be saved from the evanescence and instability of the illusion of time, and to find peace and permanence outside it” (Esslin 33).

Even concrete physical objects are brought into question. Didi and Gogo typically assert their beliefs confidently, only to slowly unravel their thoughts until they are not certain of anything, not even a tree standing directly in front of them. Examining the tree (one of the few physical objects on stage), they quickly devolve from questioning the type of tree, to wondering if it is perhaps not even a tree at all.

Estragon: What is it?

Vladimir: I don't know. A willow.

Estragon: Where are the leaves?

.....

Estragon: Looks to me more like a bush.

Vladimir: A shrub.

Estragon: A bush. (10)

This disintegration of basic communication suggests at a much greater deficiency of language. As Emily Atkins explains, “Beckett ‘unwrites’ his images in the continual focusing and

refocusing on a single object . . . [which] is cast into doubt . . . both by the derision of others and by the fact that it emerges . . . only as an image of an image” (76)—as is demonstrated by uncertainty of the reality of the tree. This form of deconstructing even the most basic of facts or perceptions shows how much we rely on basic assumptions to be true. If what we see around us spatially, or what we experience temporally can be tampered with by our own minds and our ability to communicate effectively, then how can we determine the exactness or reality of anything?

Didi and Gogo have trouble communicating not just about the physical environment around them but communicating their thoughts as well. Estragon has tremendous difficulty explaining why Vladimir should hang himself first, and his ability to communicate his logical theory slowly crumbles until he is babbling like a baby.

Vladimir: I don’t understand.

Estragon: Use your intelligence, can’t you?

Vladimir uses his intelligence.

Vladimir: (*Finally*). I remain in the dark.

Estragon: This is how it is. (*He reflects.*) the bough . . . the bough . . . (*Angrily.*)

Use your head, can’t you?

Vladimir: You’re my only hope.

Estragon: (*with effort*). Gogo light–bough not break–Gogo dead. Didi heavy–

bough break–Didi alone. Whereas– (13)

This aggressive disintegration of language “is a sign of the general inadequacy of speech to cope with a variety of situations and of the incoordination between speech and memory or thought” (Cormier 57). The idea, in this case, is perfectly sound, but Estragon is unable to explain it

clearly, perhaps because the emotions he might feel at the thought of leaving his friend alone in the emptiness of their world impair his ability to communicate clearly. Thoughts, one might argue, are one of the few things that separate humans from animals, distinguishing us as “superior” or “special.” If humans are incapable of communicating their thoughts, they are suddenly no better than the apes they evolved from, “for the act of speaking is that which gives man dignity and demonstrates his ability to think logically and coherently” (Cormier 55). Moreover, being able to communicate our thoughts and desires is what unites us with other humans and drowns out the loneliness of the universe. These instances in which language collapses, “point out what is in reality a crucial aspect of man’s finitude: in this case, his inability to communicate to others his ideas about himself and the world” (Cormier 59).

In spite of Gogo and Didi’s “inability to communicate to any satisfying degree, they are dependent upon one another to distract themselves from the haunting absence of Godot (or of purpose and meaning)” (Kubiak 399). The disconnect between language and meaning is insignificant to them compared to the more pressing fear of absolute and endless silence. I refer again to the passage of text cited earlier in which Vladimir and Estragon discuss the “dead voices.” They claim that they converse so they won’t think, to which Estragon adds, “It’s so we won’t hear” (40). They speak to smother the voices that claim living and dying is not enough for them. These voices, which are more than likely the tramps’ own thoughts and fears, morbidly echo the cries of humanity, who wait all their lives for something, and are (generally) met with nothing. They speak to smother the silence that allows these thoughts to creep in. This silence, which the duo tries so hard to avoid, is as Beckett says, “when for a moment the *boredom of living* is replaced by the *suffering of being*” (qtd. in Esslin 38). While the endless waiting is painful for the Didi and Gogo, being aware that their waiting is ultimately futile is agony.

In Beckett's undoing of language "[w]e see . . . a horror of the arbitrary nature of human life, which implies the absence of a stable ground upon which to build a moral or rational understanding of existence, or even an objectively determined system of language – that is, one in which the relation between signifier, signified, and referent is universally understood" (Kubiak 396). The constant repetition as a means for ensuring one's own existence paints a grave representation of the human race. The ideology that "emerges from the play is that our knowledge of the past (our sense of history) is based upon unreliable memory; our experience of the present is filled with boredom and the need to cope with this boredom; and our anticipation of the future rests upon a poorly grounded hope of salvation" (Cormier 39).

CHAPTER 4

ENDGAME

Four years after the premiere of *Waiting for Godot*, *Endgame*, in similar fashion, was debuted in French and later translated to English by Beckett himself. *Endgame* is eerily familiar to *Waiting for Godot*, though with some notable differences. Both plays feature four characters, one setting, little but specific action, and extensive dialogue. Some critics have argued that *Endgame* is a continuation of *Waiting for Godot*, with both plays depicting a world full of waiting and despair. The language is also reminiscent of *Waiting for Godot* in that it ebbs and flows with attention to shape as much as content; it halts and jerks and often transcends concrete meaning. The repetition in language is constant, echoing past moments so that one is never sure what is present. As time loses its meaning so does the characters' existence. The only surety is that even inadequate language is better than the anguish of silence.

In *Endgame*, the character Hamm remains ever-present on stage in a wheelchair, as well as the two characters, Nagg and Nell, who reside in their individual garbage cans. Clov is the only character that enters and exits the stage. Through sometimes incomprehensible language, it is eventually established that Nagg and Nell are the parents to Hamm, and Clov is Hamm's servant. Hamm, blind and immobile, constantly gives Clov orders to look out the window or to open or close the trash bins. Clov frequently threatens to leave Hamm, though it is uncertain if he ever does. The play ends with all four characters on stage, though Clov makes no sound in order to make Hamm believe he has left him. It is unclear whether or not Hamm is aware of his presence.

Just as in *Waiting for Godot*, language often does not correlate to meaning in *Endgame*. Definitions, thoughts, memories, and time are all skewed in the language of the play, and an

agreed upon understanding of time is necessary to understand humanity's relationship to it. That is to say, much of how people orient themselves is in relation to time. Questions of identity are based on perceptions of past, present, and future. Without distinctions, it becomes much more difficult to define oneself. At the start of the play, Hamm asks Clov, "What time is it?" to which he responds, "The same as usual" (10), indicating from the onset that time does not hold the normal significance. Önder Çakırtaş states that Beckett categorizes time into three fragments: "yesterday, today, and tomorrow in which human beings are physiologically evoked in the aim [to gain] recognition for [their] physical presence" (118). If time is one way humans realize themselves, the characters' lack of logical association with time helps dismantle their existence. If a person's "existence is certified through the physical and concrete presence of space and time; there are hours and days, there is yesterday and tomorrow, there is now and then within the limited lifespan of human beings" (Çakırtaş 118), then the characters of *Endgame* are unable to certify their existence because of the fact that they have no linear relation to space and time. This can be seen in the idea of yesterday, a common refrain in the play. In the following dialogue, yesterday is remembered sorrowfully, as if it were an entity that had died a very long time ago:

Nagg: I've lost me tooth.

Nell: When?

Nagg: I had it yesterday.

Nell: [*elegiac*] Ah yesterday! (22)

Later in the play, the concept of yesterday becomes even vaguer, as seen in this exchange between Hamm and Clov:

Clov: I oiled them yesterday.

Hamm: Yesterday! What does that mean? Yesterday.

Clov: [*violently*] That means that bloody awful day, long ago, before this bloody awful day. I use the words you taught me. If they don't mean anything anymore, teach me others. Or let me be silent. (51)

In this case, yesterday does not mean at maximum twenty-four hours from the present moment, but an undefined point in the past. Time, and words defining time, do not have the same definition in the play as in reality. In both exchanges, the agreed-upon meaning of a word is altered, no longer indicating a fixed point in time, but a general idea of the past. This creates a schism in communication, both between the characters on the stage and between the characters and audience. That yesterday does not mean what it is agreed upon to mean in reality throws all notions of understanding the concept of time through language into question.

Steven Connor elaborates on the idea of time within the two plays in order to show that time is a perplexity that even reality cannot grasp, and the language of the play simply highlights that fact. He writes that the characters “seem to encounter the paradox of all time; that is, that the only tense we feel has real verifiable existence, the present, the here-and-now, is in fact never here-and-now” (qtd. in Boxall 122). That is to say that in the time it takes to acknowledge a moment as present, the moment is already in the past. Hamm emphasizes the lack of time or understanding of it when he states, “Moments for nothing, now as always, time was never and time is over, reckoning closed and story ending” (Beckett 92). Connor explains that the repetition of language “opens up the dual anxiety of living in time, an anxiety expressing itself in the two questions ‘am I the same as I was yesterday’ and ‘will I be the same as I am today’” (qtd. in Boxall 122). Because *Endgame* offers no one definition of yesterday, the question becomes, “Am I the same as I’ve always been?” and “Will I always be the same?” Taken a step further, if there is no time or spatial relation within the plays, the question can be reduced to, “Am I?”

Without time as reference, it becomes difficult to differentiate one moment from another. As repetitions run rampant throughout the play, there is no way to determine whether it is a distinct moment, occurring after a primary moment, or if it is an echo of the previous moment. An important question to be asked is this: if the scenes (or general groupings of dialogue) of the play were rearranged, would it change the meaning or understanding of the play, or would the overall outcome be the same? Because there seems to be no linear time within the play, it stands to reason that much of the play would still be understood in the same way if the scenes were rearranged. Connor writes, “To reconstitute the day in memory and representation is to open up that gap between the original and its repetition which can never entirely be closed, either for the characters or for their audience; we can never be sure again of the simple factuality of the days and its events” (qtd. in Boxall 121). There is a cyclical repetition to the play, as past and future are blurred and mixed, as well as a linear repetition in which what Connor calls entropic decline can be seen – each repetition differs just enough to show a steady decline in the characters and story.

This can be seen in certain repeated exchanges throughout the play. The very first words of the play, spoken by Clov, are, “Finished, it’s finished, nearly finished, it must be nearly finished” (8). This refrain is then echoed by Hamm when he says later on, “Have you not finished? Will you never finish? [*With sudden fury.*] Will this never finish?” (30-31). While the phrases are not identical, the one calls to mind the other. The word “finish” being said multiple times in a row occurs again, this time spoken by Hamm, when he says, “It’s finished, we’re finished. [*Pause*] Nearly finished” (58). This is obviously not the same moment, which shows some sort of variation and, possibly, a progression of time, and yet it repeats an idea already voiced twice before. Interestingly, these lines can also be interpreted as the author addressing the

audience through his characters, informing them that the play will soon be finished. The repetition of this sentiment without it being proved true, however, shows that neither the characters nor the play are near the end. It can then be assumed that the characters continue on in a similar manner long after the play itself has come to a close.

In *Waiting for Godot*, Vladimir and Estragon often look for solace in each other, in order to validate their existence through the assurance of the other. Their exchanges hold an underlying tenderness; they both care for the other in admittedly unconventional ways. In *Endgame*, however, there does not seem to be anything keeping the characters tethered together beyond the disabilities they seem to suffer from. There is very little tenderness in the exchanges, particularly between Hamm and Clov. It begs the question then, “Why do they stay with each other?” Clov threatens no less than eleven times to leave his cruel master Hamm, and yet he never does because Hamm offers him assurance that he is in existence and vice versa. In the following dialogue, Hamm questions whether Clov has left or died:

Hamm: What? Neither gone nor dead?

Clov: In spirit only.

Hamm: Which?

Clov: Both.

Hamm: Gone from me you’d be dead.

Clov: And vice versa. (79)

According to Clov, his spirit is already gone and dead, leaving only his physical presence and his mind. Most importantly, his mind is left to wade through this liminal space in which nothing grows, nothing changes, and there is no order, logic, or sense to be found. The only way to find some sense of stability is through communication with the other, however flawed and short-

reaching it is. Toward the end of the play, Clov asks, “What is there to keep me here?” to which Hamm responds, “The dialogue” (66). The thing that tethers them to their version of reality is the continued communication with one another. They create a reality through each other – Clov sees and moves for Hamm, while Hamm keeps Clov busy by constantly giving him orders which in turn gives Clov a sense of order. These actions are spoken aloud to one another in order to confirm they are happening. Clov describes what he sees outside (though it is often nonsensical) and states when he completes a task given to him by Hamm. Clov literally creates Hamm’s world for him through language. Though the language frequently falls short of communicating effectively, it serves its main purpose of allowing the other to hear and respond and be heard in return. The following exchange explains why they cannot leave each other:

Hamm: Why do you stay with me?

Clov: Why do you keep me?

Hamm: There’s no one else.

Clov: There’s nowhere else. (13)

There is no one else, and without anyone else, they will cease to be. If they are unable to communicate to someone and hear them communicate in response, there will be nothing tethering them to existence and every aspect of their being will be gone and dead. As Hamm states, “Outside of here it’s death” (16). While their inability to communicate any meaningfully new thoughts or ideas creates a sort of hell, it is the lesser of two evils when compared to the hell of isolation, the hell of being unsure of one’s existence. Again, I quote Hamm: “Beyond is the . . . other hell” (78).

In *Waiting for Godot*, there are sections of text that are lilting and beautiful, resounding music or rhythmic chanting contrasted with sections of harsh, abrupt dialogue that stilts and jerks

with dissonant beats. The content of these passages generally correlates with the form, meaning the content and form work together to create a unified meaning. Beckett plays with form and content in *Endgame* as well, but with a notable difference. The content seems to be secondary when compared to the form of the text. Courtney Massie explains that the “semantic elements of the play’s language, while still present, serve a purpose only insofar as they support and enhance language’s non-semantic elements – namely, the sound and structure of the dialogue” (45). This serves to highlight the inadequacies of language. She writes, “Ultimately, by de-emphasizing semantic content (i.e., what words mean), *Endgame* magnifies the tension between the failure of language and its ultimate inescapability” (48). The repetition of words and phrases in the play, then, is not to emphasize their meanings, but to allow the audience to hear more than just the words, but the sounds and rhythms they create. As I mentioned earlier, the characters repeat some version of the phrase, “Finished, it’s finished, nearly finished, it must be nearly finished” (8) throughout the work. By repeating the word in close succession, it creates a lyrical sound, and repeating the phrase throughout the play creates a cohesive repetitive form of music. The words are repeated to “emphasize the sequence of sounds they make. The concentration of several repetitions within a short amount of playing time induces an effect akin to semantic satiation: that is, a word’s loss of meaning when spoken multiple times in succession” (Massie 50).

Other key exchanges reverberate throughout the play, such as when Hamm asks on two separate occasions, “What’s happening, what’s happening?” to which Clov responds, “Something is taking its course” (20), or when he frequently asks Clov for forgiveness, saying, “Forgive me. [*Pause*] I said, forgive me,” to which Clov replies, “I heard you” (19). These and other exchanges weave throughout the dialogue frequently enough to become familiar to the

audience and to begin to create a musical refrain that is not wholly music, but not wholly language either. This simultaneously shows what language is capable of creating, while emphasizing its inability to be anything other than a representation of something it is not. When the audience hears the dialogue's "particular combinations of repetition, rhythm, and tone, they hear its words not necessarily as representative of concepts but as resonances that create a system of auditory footholds throughout the play. And yet the characters still speak words. The audience thus registers *Endgame*'s dialogue as both language and music and as neither language nor music" (Massie 49). The dialogue can never truly become music, but neither can it truly enact a moment, thought, or idea – it is always patently a replica.

Throughout the play, language is portrayed as inadequate and unable to facilitate meaningful communication, and yet the play is comprised almost completely of dialogue, with very little action or silence. Though language consistently fails the characters, it is better than the alternative of silence. Hamm remarks, "It's finished, we're finished. [*Pause.*] Nearly finished. [*Pause.*] There'll be no more speech" (58), implying that the moment of being completely "finished" will be the moment there is no more speech. The most common stage direction in both plays is to pause. A pause is a *temporary* rest in speech, indicating that the speech will resume shortly. Despite language's shortcomings, it creates sounds and noises that stave off silence. Silence is feared because in it there is no escape from painful, inescapable truths. To be repetitive, silence is when, "for a moment the *boredom of living* is replaced by the *suffering of being*" (qtd. in Esslin 38), because within silence, there is no distraction from the bleakness of life and the inevitability of death. When Clov asks, "What is there to keep me here?" and Hamm responds, "The dialogue" (66), it is the dialogue that keeps the silence at bay and keeps Clov's mind "here," instead of facing the suffering of silence.

Toward the end of the play, Hamm says, “There I’ll be, in the old shelter, alone against the silence and . . . [*he hesitates*] . . . the stillness” (78). He doesn’t say that he will be alone with the silence but *against* it. It is a battle to keep communicating and failing, but it is a battle that must be fought in order to defend against silence. When Hamm says, “Outside of here it’s death” (16), it is literally death for the characters outside the stage as they only exist on stage, but it is also death to the dialogue, meaning silence and all that comes with it. In both plays, language is a representation of truth, but as it can never completely replicate reality, it consistently fails the speakers, while silence is only its all-encompassing self. Between the two, the characters continually choose language, and continually attempt to stretch it beyond its abilities because even though they constantly fail in those attempts, it is still less agonizing than accepting the defeat of silence.

CHAPTER 5

CONCLUSION

Waiting for Godot and *Endgame* paint a grave picture of human struggle. Beckett illustrates the incompetency of language in describing basic objects, relative terms such as time, and more complex ideas and emotions. He illustrates the futility of language but also the inescapability of it. Language is what people use to determine, explain, understand, convey, and signify to other people, and yet it depends upon a set of completely arbitrary rules, words, and sounds that are only meaningful because they are agreed upon. The difficulty then lies in being certain that words mean the same to one person as the next, with the problem being that the only way to discuss the issue is through the medium of language. In the two plays, the pairs of characters (particularly Didi and Gogo and Hamm and Clov) are odds with the other, both attempting to articulate their feelings, desires, thoughts, and ideas, with little success. We watch their difficulty in articulating even simple concepts, such as deciphering objects around them or determining the day or time. This emphasizes that even outwardly obvious notions of language are unreliable. The characters' continuous struggles with communication are what cause their loneliness and despair. They wait for answers to unanswerable questions, hoping to find meaning in the seemingly endless days.

Though Beckett's work is extensive in its symbolism mirroring the bleakness of humankind, it fails to offer an answer of what to do with this knowledge. *Waiting for Godot* seems a resigned and hopeless account of the fatality of humanity, but perhaps this is what makes it so attractive to audience members. The raw honesty of life is contained in the play so that people may view it, feel it, digest it, and then continue on with their lives. It calls to mind the intent of Greek tragedies – that the audience members will experience catharsis, the purging of

pent-up emotions to alleviate the symptoms of those feelings. Beckett's plays can be said to evoke a cathartic experience for viewers, allowing them a safe or contained space to experience intense and overwhelming emotions. Whatever the plays may induce in audience members, it is clear there is something undeniably powerful and morbidly attractive about them, as is evidenced in how widely produced and discussed they are to this day.

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