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An Absurd Endgame

It should not be surprising that Beckett's *Endgame* resists interpretation. If we fall in the trap of interpreting the text, the result can easily be contradicted, deconstructed. Yet it fascinates the spectator because he or she will be able to argue about it without betraying Beckett's intent. For that reason it is important that the stage directions be followed closely or it could start to mean something, a fear that even the play warns you about:

HAMM:

We're not beginning to... to... mean something?

CLOV:

Mean something! You and I, mean something!

(Brief laugh.)

Beckett himself prohibited variations in the setting of *Endgame*, more particularly in a New York production placing it in a subway station after a nuclear war. Such an interpretation would obviously restrict what each member of the

“Ever since I first saw the play in the mid-50s, it has always seemed blazingly clear to me. The characters are the last survivors of a nuclear war. The play's terrible prophecy will come true if all nations do not abandon nuclear weapons forever.” (Guardian)

audience brings back from seeing the play. In the stage directions, the windows are high enough that only Clov can see what is outside the room, and he is the only one who can tell us what is in his kitchen and what happens there. We have no other means to know,

“Like much absurdist drama, Beckett’s plays break and disrupt the conventions of realism to deny the audience the comfortable security of stability and to draw attention to their own fictionality” (Abrams)

but why should we trust Clov when he tells Hamm about it?

When he says that he looks at the wall while in his kitchen, which is taken literally by Hamm, he could mean he does not do much in the kitchen while waiting for the next whistle blow. He tells us he has seen a rat in the kitchen

and that he has tried to kill it. Then he speaks nonsense (“If I don’t kill that rat he’ll die”)

which puts his sense of reality into question. So when he answers Hamm’s questions about what he sees outside the windows, we hear answers that are not necessarily describing what he sees. Hamm’s reality is based on what Clov tells him, and what he tells him is in response to questions based on Hamm’s understanding of reality. For example, Hamm may have perceived that there is a window on the sea and a window on the earth, but that would have been based on Clov’s answers to previous questions such as “Is that window on the sea?” and the answer would have been “no,” making the other window the one with a view on the sea. When Hamm asks him to open the window to hear the sea, he does not hear it either because the sea is very calm (his question) or because there is no sea and indeed “it is very calm,” Clov’s literal answer that there is no noise right now. For what we know, they could even be in a theatre and the windows would not be looking outside. When he tours the room, Hamm notices that the bricks are hollow, and that may just be what they are, fake bricks. When he says that “outside of here it’s death,” he may just mean that characters only have a life on the stage.

The lesson we learn from this is that we cannot assume what Hamm assumes, and we should not construct an *Endgame* universe outside of what we see on the stage. If Hamm does not see, we must imagine how his perception of reality can be different from

ours. For example, Clov tells him that the three-legged dog is standing, but we see that the dog has fallen on its side. What we witness in *Endgame* is how Hamm's universe can be constructed on what he is told in response to his questions: we cannot infer much from the dialogue. After all, why would we see Hamm and the trash bins covered at the beginning of the play as if they were furniture or birdcages if in fact Hamm usually sleeps in a bed as he says he would like to do at the beginning of the play? How consistent with any of the doomsday interpretations would that be? After all, Hamm tells us an anecdote in which he visits a madman in an asylum, shows him corn fields and the herring fleet outside, but the madman refuses to see anything else than ashes. If Hamm "used to go and see him, in the asylum," couldn't that mean he was already inside the asylum? And

"My work is a matter of fundamental sounds (no joke intended) made as fully as possible and I accept responsibility for nothing else. If people want to have headaches among the overtones, let them. And provide their own aspirin. Hamm as stated, and Clov as stated, together stated *nec tecum nec sine te* [neither with you nor without you], in such a place, and in such a world, that's all I can manage, more than I could." – Samuel Beckett in a letter to director Alan Schneider (Raponi).

by extension, couldn't that mean he is currently in an asylum, with another who tells him what he "sees" through the window? The text does not tell us. Perhaps the most accurate account of what Clov sees is "a multitude... in transports... of joy" when he looks at the audience through his glass, leaving it up to the audience to decide whether that is what they look like (and do they always look like that?).

If we watch a realist play such as Ibsen's *A Doll's House*, we know that the play takes place at Christmas and we get a good approximation of what time of day the action takes place in. In *Endgame*, there is a deliberate effort not to tell us what time it is.

When Hamm asks “What time is it?” Clov answers “The same as usual.” With that answer, Clov crushes our desire for a point of reference. Is it morning, afternoon, or evening? And why would it make any difference? One could argue that it is daytime because of the gray light that Clov says he sees outside, but as we have already seen Clov’s statements may not reflect reality, and what if they were far north during summer when there is gray light in the middle of the night?

HAMM:

It's the end of the day like any other day, isn't it, Clov?

CLOV:

Looks like it.

We could hold on to the statements about the pain-killer. As the play progresses (if that can be said), the answer to Hamm’s question “Is it not time for my pain-killer?” is consistently “no” until it becomes “yes” (but followed by “There's no more pain-killer”). We could also hold on to the apparent progress in Clov’s desire to leave. The context of the repeated line “I’ll leave you” progresses from just going to the kitchen (“I have things to do”) to the determination of how Hamm will know that he has left (an absurd scheme of an alarm clock ringing) and to the final tableau in which Clov is dressed up to go. We want Clov to go, but we have no idea where he will end up. For what we know it is now a matter of rewinding to the beginning of the play and to play it again.

There is a past, as distant as it may appear. The characters in the trash bins, Nagg and Nell talk about yesterday and of the time they had an accident riding the tandem. Clov tells Hamm of when he wanted a bicycle, and how he would visit Hamm’s paupers on a horse, hints that Hamm and Clov have a long history together. We are given a fragile background to give a sense to their relationships and how they came together in

this room at the present time. Once again, this background may only be in the mind of the individual characters and we assume that the dialogue confirms it while in fact it may not. What if this were really an asylum? What if this were really the stage of a theatre? All that we are left with is that it was a well-written play that will continue to resist our interpretation while giving us extraordinary amounts of amusement and thinking material.

Works Cited

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