

BECKETT NOTES

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BRIEF LIFE OF SAMUEL BECKETT

Samuel Beckett was born in Dublin, Ireland, in 1906, the second son of comfortable middle-class parents who were a part of the Protestant minority in a predominantly Catholic society. He was provided with an excellent education, graduating from Trinity College, Dublin, with a major emphasis in French and Italian. His first job was as a teacher of English in the *Ecole Normale Supérieure* in Paris. In 1931, he returned to Ireland as a lecturer in French literature, and he received his masters degree in French from Dublin and subsequently returned to Paris as a teacher in 1932. He made Paris his home, except for visits abroad and a retreat to the Unoccupied Zone in Vichy, France, during 1942-44.

Beckett found teaching uncongenial to his creative activities and soon turned all of his attention to writing. During the 1930s and 1940s, his writing consisted of critical studies (Proust and others), poems, and two novels (*Murphy* and *Watt*), all written in English. In the late 1940s, he changed from writing in English to writing in French. Part of the reason for this was his basic rejection of Ireland as his homeland. When asked why he found Ireland uncongenial, he offered the same explanation that has been given by other famous Irish expatriates, such as Sean O'Casey and James Joyce. He could not tolerate the strict censorship of so many aspects of life, especially the arbitrary censoring of many works of literature by the Catholic clergy. In addition, the political situation created an oppressive anti-intellectualism. Even after he became famous, he refused to allow some of his plays to be presented in Ireland. In 1958, during the International Theater Festival in Dublin, a play of his compatriot O'Casey was banned, and Beckett, in protest, withdrew his plays, which have not been seen in Ireland since then.

Since the major portion of his dramas were composed in French and first presented in Paris, many critics find difficulty in classifying Beckett's works: should he be considered a French or an Irish writer? The nature of his characters, even when named Vladimir and Estragon, seems to be more characteristically Irish than any other nationality. Essentially, it should be a moot question because Beckett, when composing in French, was his own translator into English and vice versa. Thus his works do not suffer from another translator's tampering with them, and his great plays now belong to the realm of world literature.

SAMUEL BECKETT AND THE THEATER OF THE ABSURD

With the appearance of *En Attendant Godot* (*Waiting for Godot*) at the Theatre de Babylone in Paris in 1953, the literary world was shocked by the appearance of a drama so different and yet so intriguing that it virtually created the term "Theater of the Absurd," and the entire group of dramas which developed out of this type of theater is always associated with the name of Samuel Beckett. His contribution to this particular genre allows us to refer to him as the grand master, or father, of the genre. While other dramatists have also contributed significantly to this genre, Beckett remains its single, most towering figure.

This movement known as the Theater of the Absurd was not a consciously conceived movement, and it has never had any clear-cut philosophical doctrines, no organized attempt to win converts, and no meetings. Each of the main playwrights of the movement seems to have developed independently of each other. The playwrights most often associated with the

movement are Samuel Beckett, Eugene Ionesco, Jean Genet, and Arthur Adamov. The early plays of Edward Albee and Harold Pinter fit into this classification, but these dramatists have also written plays that move far away from the Theater of the Absurd's basic elements.

In viewing the plays that comprise this movement,

- * we must forsake the theater of coherently developed situations,
- * we must forsake characterizations that are rooted in the logic of motivation and reaction,
- * we must sometimes forget settings that bear an intrinsic, realistic, or obvious relationship to the drama as a whole,
- * we must forget the use of language as a tool of logical communication, and
- * we must forget cause-and-effect relationships found in traditional dramas.

By their use of a number of puzzling devices, these playwrights have gradually accustomed audiences to a new kind of relationship between theme and presentation. In these seemingly queer and fantastic plays, the external world is often depicted as menacing, devouring, and unknown; the settings and situations often make us vaguely uncomfortable; the world itself seems incoherent and frightening and strange, but at the same time, it seems hauntingly poetic and familiar.

These are some of the reasons which prompt the critic to classify them under the heading "Theater of the Absurd"—a title which comes not from a dictionary definition of the word "absurd," but rather from Martin Esslin's book *The Theatre of the Absurd*, in which he maintains that these dramatists write from a "sense of metaphysical anguish at the absurdity of the human condition." But other writers such as Kafka, Camus, and Sartre have also argued from the same philosophical position. The essential difference is that critics like Camus have presented their arguments in a highly formal discourse with logical and precise views which prove their theses within the framework of traditional forms. On the contrary, the Theater of the Absurd seeks to wed form and content into an indissoluble whole in order to gain a further unity of meaning and impact. This theater, as Esslin has pointed out, "has renounced arguing about the absurdity of the human condition; it merely presents it in being—that is, in terms of concrete stage images of the absurdity of existence."

Too often, however, the viewer notes only these basic similarities and fails to note the distinctive differences in each dramatist. Since these writers do not belong to any deliberate or conscious movement, they should be evaluated for their individual concerns, as well as for their contributions to the total concept of the Theater of the Absurd. In fact, most of these playwrights consider themselves to be lonely rebels and outsiders, isolated in their own private worlds. As noted above, there have been no manifestoes, no theses, no conferences, and no collaborations. Each has developed along his own unique lines; each in his own way is individually and distinctly different. Therefore, it is important to see how Beckett both belongs to the Theater of the Absurd and, equally important, how he differs from the other writers associated with this movement. First, let us note a few of the basic differences.

Differences

One of Samuel Beckett's main concerns is the polarity of existence. In *Waiting for Godot*, *Endgame*, and *Krapp's Last Tape*, we have such characteristic polarities as sight versus

blindness, life-death, time present-time past, body-intellect, waiting-not waiting, going-not going, and dozens more. One of Beckett's main concerns, then, seems to be characterizing man's existence in terms of these polarities. To do this, Beckett groups his characters in pairs; for example, we have Vladimir and Estragon, or Didi and Gogo, Hamm and Clov, Pozzo and Lucky, Nagg and Nell, and Krapp's present voice and past voice. Essentially, however, Beckett's characters remain a puzzle which each individual viewer must solve.

In contrast to Beckett, Eugene Ionesco's characters are seen in terms of singularity. Whereas Beckett's characters stand in pairs *outside* of society, but converse with each other, Ionesco's characters are placed in the midst of society—but they stand alone in an alien world with no personal identity and no one with whom they can communicate. For example, the characters in *The Bald Soprano* are *in* society, but they scream meaningless phrases at each other, and there is no communication. And whereas Beckett's plays take place on strange and alien landscapes (some of the settings of his plays remind one of a world transformed by some holocaust or created by some surrealist), Ionesco's plays are set against the most traditional elements in our society—the standard English drawing room in *The Bald Soprano*, a typical street scene in *Rhinoceros*, and an average academic study in *The Lesson*, etc.

The language of the two playwrights also differs greatly. Beckett's dialogue recalls the disjointed phantasmagoria of a dream world; Ionesco's language is rooted in the banalities, clichés, and platitudes of everyday speech; Beckett uses language to show man isolated in the world and unable to communicate because language is a barrier to communication. Ionesco, on the other hand, uses language to show the failure of communication because there is nothing to say; in *The Bald Soprano*, and other plays, the dialogue is filled with clichés and platitudes.

In contrast to the basic sympathy we feel for both Beckett's and Ionesco's characters, Jean Genet's characters almost revile the audience from the moment that they appear on the stage. His theme is stated more openly. He is concerned with the hatred which exists in the world. In *The Maids*, for example, each maid hates not just her employer and not just her own sister, but also her own self. Therefore, she plays the other roles so as to exhaust her own hatred of herself against herself. Basically, then, there is a great sense of repugnance in Genet's characters. This revulsion derives partially from the fact that Genet's dramatic interest, so different from Beckett's and Ionesco's, is in the psychological exploration of man's predilection to being trapped in his own egocentric world, rather than facing the realities of existence. Man, for Genet, is trapped by his own fantastic illusions; man's absurdity results partially from the fact that he prefers his own disjointed images to those of reality. In Genet's directions for the production of *The Blacks*, he writes that the play should never be played before a totally black audience. If there are no white people present, then one of the blacks in the audience must wear a white mask; if the black refuses, then a white mannequin must be used, and the actors must play the drama for this mannequin. There must at least be a symbol of a white audience, someone for the black actors to revile.

In contrast to Beckett, Arthur Adamov, in his themes, is more closely aligned to the Kafkaesque, existentialistic school, but his technique is that of the Theater of the Absurd. His interest is in establishing some proof that the individual does exist, and he shows how man becomes more alienated from his fellow man as he attempts to establish his own personal identity. For example, in *Professor Taranne*, the central character, hoping to prove his innocence of a certain accusation, actually convicts himself through his own defense. For Adamov, man attempting to prove his own existence actually proves, ironically, that he does not exist. Therefore language, for Adamov, serves as an inadequate system of communication and,

actually, in some cases serves to the detriment of man, since by language and man's use of language, man often finds himself trapped in the very circumstances he previously hoped to avoid. Ultimately, Adamov's characters fail to communicate because each is interested only in his own egocentric self. Each character propounds his own troubles and his own achievements, but the words reverberate, as against a stone wall. They are heard only by the audience.

Adamov's plays are often grounded in a dream-world atmosphere, and while they are presenting a series of outwardly confusing scenes of almost hallucinative quality, they, at the same time, attack or denounce the confusion present in modern man. Characteristic of all these writers is a notable absence of any excess concern with sex. Edward Albee, an American, differs significantly in his emphasis and concern with the sexual substructure of society. The overtones of homosexuality in *The Zoo Story* are carried further until the young man in *The American Dream* becomes the physical incarnation of a muscular and ideally handsome, young sexual specimen who, since he has no inner feelings, passively allows anyone "to take pleasure from my groin." In *The Sandbox*, the angel of death is again seen as the muscle-bound young sexual specimen who spends his time scantily dressed and performing calisthenics on a beach while preparing for a career in Hollywood.

Similarities

Since all of the writers have varying concerns, they also have much in common because their works reflect a moral and philosophical climate in which most of our civilization finds itself today. Again, as noted above, even though there are no manifestoes, nor any organized movements, there are still certain concerns that are basic to all of the writers, and Beckett's works are concerned with these basic ideas.

Beyond the technical and strange illusionary techniques which prompt the critic to group these plays into a category, there are larger and, ultimately, more significant concerns by which each dramatist, in spite of his artistic differences, is akin to the others. Aside from such similarities as violation of traditional beginning, middle, and end structure (exposition, complication, and denouement) or the refusal to tell a straightforward, connected story with a proper plot, or the disappearance of traditional dramatic forms and techniques, these dramatists are all concerned with the failure of communication in modern society which leaves man alienated; moreover, they are all concerned with the lack of individuality and the overemphasis on conformity in our society, and they use the dramatic elements of time and place to imply important ideas; finally, they reject traditional logic for a type of non-logic which ultimately implies something about the nature of the universe. Implicit in many of these concerns is an attack on a society or a world which possesses no set standards of values or behavior.

Foremost, all of these dramatists of the absurd are concerned with the lack of communication. In Edward Albee's plays, each character is existing within the bounds of his own private ego. Each makes a futile attempt to get another character to understand him, but as the attempt is heightened, there is more alienation. Thus, finally, because of a lack of communication, Peter, the conformist in *The Zoo Story*, is provoked into killing Jerry, the individualist; and in *The Sandbox*, a continuation of *The American Dream*, Mommy and Daddy bury Grandma because she talks incessantly but says nothing significant. The irony is that Grandma is the only character who does say anything significant, but Mommy and Daddy, the people who discard her, are incapable of understanding her.

In Ionesco's plays, this failure of communication often leads to even more drastic results. Akin to the violence in Albee's *Zoo Story*, the professor in *The Lesson* must kill his student partly because she doesn't understand his communication. Berenger, in *The Killers*, has uttered so many clichés that by the end of the play, he has convinced even himself that the killers should kill him. In *The Chairs*, the old people, needing to express their thoughts, address themselves to a mass of empty chairs which, as the play progresses, crowd all else off the stage. In *Maid to Marry*, communication is so bad that the maid, when she appears on the stage, turns out to be a rather homely man. And ultimately in *Rhinoceros*, the inability to communicate causes an entire race of so-called rational human beings to be metamorphosed into a herd of rhinoceroses, thereby abandoning all hopes of language as a means of communication.

In Adamov's *Professor Taranne*, the professor, in spite of all his desperate attempts, is unable to get people to acknowledge his identity because there is no communication. Likewise, Pinter's plays show individuals grouped on the stage, but each person fails to achieve any degree of effective communication. This concern with communication is finally carried to its illogical extreme in two works: in Genet's *The Blacks*, one character says, "We shall even have the decency—a decency learned from you—to make communication impossible." And in another, Beckett's *Act Without Words I*, we have our first play in this movement that uses absolutely no dialogue. And even without dialogue, all the action on the stage suggests the inability of man to communicate.

Beckett's characters are tied together by a fear of being left entirely alone, and they therefore cling to one last hope of establishing some kind of communication. His plays give the impression that man is totally lost in a disintegrating society, or, as in *Endgame*, that man is left alone after society has disintegrated. In *Waiting for Godot*, two derelicts are seen conversing in a repetitive, strangely fragmented dialogue that possesses an illusory, haunting effect, while they are waiting for Godot, a vague, never-defined being who will bring them some communication about—what? Salvation? Death? An impetus for living? A reason for dying? No one knows, and the safest thing to say is that the two are probably waiting for someone or something which will give them an impetus to continue living or, at least, something which will give meaning and direction to their lives. As Beckett clearly demonstrates, those who rush hither and yon in search of meaning find it no quicker than those who sit and wait. The "meaning" about life that these tramps hope for is never stated precisely. But Beckett never meant his play to be a "message play," in which one character would deliver a "message." The message here is conveyed through the interaction of the characters and primarily through the interaction of the two tramps. Everyone leaves the theater with the knowledge that these tramps are strangely tied to one another; even though they bicker and fight, and even though they have exhausted all conversation—notice that the second act is repetitive and almost identical—the loneliness and weakness in each calls out to the other, and they are held by a mystical bond of interdependence.

Each dramatist, therefore, presents a critique of modern society by showing the total collapse of communication. The technique used is that of evolving a theme about communication by presenting a series of seemingly disjointed speeches. The accumulative effect of these speeches is a devastating commentary on the failure of communication in modern society. In conjunction with the general attack on communication, the second aspect common to these dramatists is the lack of individuality encountered in modern civilization. Generally, the point seems to be that man does not know himself. He has lost all sense of individualism and either functions isolated and alienated, or else finds himself lost amid repetition and conformity.

Jean Genet's play *The Maids* opens with the maid Claire playing the role of her employer while her sister Solange plays the role of Claire. Therefore, we have Claire referring to Solange as Claire. By the time the audience realizes that the two sisters are imitating someone else, each character has lost her individualism; therefore, when Claire later portrays Solange, who portrays the employer, and vice versa, we gradually realize that part of Genet's intent is to illustrate the total lack of individuality and, furthermore, to show that each character becomes vibrantly alive only when functioning in the image of another personality.

Other dramatists present their attack on society's destruction of individualism by different means, but the attack still has the same thematic intent. In Albee's *The American Dream*, Mommy and Daddy are obviously generic names for any mommy and daddy. Albee is not concerned with individualizing his characters. They remain types and, as types, are seen at times in terms of extreme burlesque. So, unlike Beckett's tramps, and more like Ionesco's characters, Albee's people are seen as Babbitt-like caricatures and satires on the "American Dream" type; the characters remain mannequins with no delineations. Likewise in Ionesco's *The Bald Soprano*, the Martins assume the roles of the Smiths and begin the play over because there is no distinction between the two sets of characters.

Ultimately, the absurdity of man's condition is partially a result of his being compelled to exist without his individualism in a society which does not possess any degree of effective communication. Essentially, therefore, the Theater of the Absurd is not a positive drama. It does not try to prove that man can exist in a meaningless world, as did Camus and Sartre, nor does it offer any solution; instead, it demonstrates the absurdity and illogicality of the world we live in. Nothing is ever settled; there are no positive statements; no conclusions are ever reached, and what few actions there are have no meaning, particularly in relation to the action. That is, one action carries no more significance than does its opposite action. No conclusions or resolutions can ever be offered, therefore, because these plays are essentially circular and repetitive in nature.

Early critics referred to the Theater of the Absurd as a theater in transition, meaning that it was to lead to something different. So far this has not happened, but the Theater of the Absurd is rapidly becoming accepted as a distinct genre in its own right. The themes utilized by the dramatists of this movement are not new; thus, the success of the plays must often depend upon the effectiveness of the techniques and the new ways by which the dramatists illustrate their themes. The techniques are still so new, however, that many people are confused by a production of one of these plays. Yet if the technique serves to emphasize the absurdity of man's position in the universe, then to present this concept by a series of ridiculous situations is only to render man's position even more absurd; and in actuality, the techniques then reinforce that very condition which the dramatists bewail. In other words, to present the failure of communication by a series of disjointed and seemingly incoherent utterances lends itself to the accusation that functionalism is carried to a ridiculous extreme. But this is exactly what the absurdist wants to do. He is tired of logical discourses pointing out step-by-step the absurdity of the universe: he begins with the philosophical premise that the universe is absurd, and then creates plays which illustrate conclusively that the universe is indeed absurd and that perhaps this play is another additional absurdity.

In conclusion, if the public can accept these unusual uses of technique to support thematic concerns, then we have plays which dramatically present powerful and vivid views on the absurdity of the human condition—an absurdity which is the result of the destruction of individualism and the failure of communication, of man's being forced to conform to a world of

mediocrity where no action is meaningful. As the tragic outcasts of these plays are presented in terms of burlesque, man is reminded that his position and that of human existence in general is essentially absurd. Every play in the Theater of the Absurd movement mirrors the chaos and basic disorientation of modern man. Each play laughs in anguish at the confusion that exists in contemporary society; hence, all share a basic point of view, while varying widely in scope and structure.

Endgame

Part of the difficulty of this play lies in the condensation of the language. Act Without Words I has no language in it, but in Endgame, Beckett reduces language to its smallest denominator. It is even difficult for many to glean even the barest essentials of the drama. First, we cannot even be certain as to the nature of the setting itself. On the stage, we see a rather sparse, dim room with two small, high windows, one that looks out on land and the other on sea. There are two “ashbins” (ash cans) and a large object covered with a sheet. At first, the ash cans are also covered with a sheet, and thus the opening setting resembles a furniture storage house without any sign of life. The setting alone suggests various approaches to the play. The characters are confined to this bare room, which could suggest such diverse things as the inside of the human skull with the windows being the eyes to look out onto the world, or as one critic has suggested, we are within the womb. Outside the room, there is only devastation, with no sign of life (except maybe a small boy, if he exists, who (perhaps) appears towards the end of the play). The setting, therefore, is typical of Beckett; it is bizarre and unfamiliar, one that can evoke multiple associations and interpretations.

Against this decaying setting, the action (or non-action) of the drama is enacted, and it begins as it ends, with the words “it is finished,” and the rest of the play deals with the end of the game. Unlike traditional drama, Endgame has no beginning and no middle; it opens at the end of a chess game, or at the end of life, or at the end of the world, and there is only “the impossible heap” that is left outside. In addition to the biblical echoes of Christ’s last words, there are also various allusions throughout the play to the Christian story and to other biblical parallels. There are also Shakespearean allusions, along with multilingual puns and various, strategic chess moves. (For example, at the end of a chess game, only a few pieces remain on the board. Clov, with his cloven feet, hops about the stage as does the chess knight (or horse), and he is seen moving the “king” (Hamm) about the board one square at a time, but essentially he allows the king to remain stationary (whenever possible). Consequently, among the difficulties of the play are the non-action and the language, which has been reduced to a virtual non-language, but which is nevertheless filled with allusions to a great body of diverse literature.

At the opening, Hamm, who is blind, and Clov, who cannot sit, speak disjointedly about their life together; they are bored with one another and have lived together too long, but Clov can’t leave because there is “nowhere else,” and he can’t kill Hamm because “I don’t know the combination of the cupboard.” Hamm controls what food or sustenance there is—thereby forcing the others to be subservient to his wishes. After Hamm inquires about his pain-killer and asks some seemingly irrelevant questions about some nonexistent bicycle wheels, Clov departs; the lid on one of the ash cans lifts, and Nagg, Hamm’s father, looks out and asks for food. We hear that Nagg has no legs, only stumps, and is always kept in one of the ash cans. Clov returns, gives Nagg a biscuit, and as Nagg begins to nag about the biscuit, Clov forces him back into the ash

can and closes the lid. After a brief discussion about Clov's seeds, which "haven't sprouted" (an allusion to Eliot's *Wasteland*), Clov departs.

Nagg reappears in his ash can and knocks on the adjacent ash can. Nell, Nagg's wife and Hamm's mother, appears and they reminisce about how they lost their legs in an accident on a tandem bicycle in northern France. Then they remember another incident which happened long ago, when they were engaged and were rowing on Lake Como. Then, Nagg told a story about a tailor who took longer to make a pair of striped trousers than it took God to make the world. But, according to the tailor, the trousers were better made than is the world. Hamm then whistles for Clov, who returns, and Nagg and Nell are forced back into their ash cans and the lids are replaced.

After Clov takes Hamm for a spin about the room and returns him to the exact center of the room, Hamm wants Clov to look out a window and report to him. Clov must get the stepladder (he has either shrunk or else the windows have risen) and the telescope. He looks out and reports that there is "Zero ... (*He looks*) . . . zero . . . (*He looks*) . . . and zero."

After a discussion about the state of the earth (they wonder what would happen if a rational being came back to the earth), Clov discovers a flea on himself, which occupies his complete attention. Afterwards, Hamm wants to get on a raft and go somewhere, and he reminds Clov that someday Clov will be "like me. You'll be sitting there, a speck in the void, in the dark, forever." (The blind Pozzo in *Waiting for Godot* also says approximately the same thing: "One day I went blind, one day we'll go deaf . . . one day we shall die . . . is that not enough . . .")

Hamm then promises to give Clov the combination to the cupboard if Clov will promise "to finish me." When Clov refuses, Hamm reminds Clov of the time long ago when Clov first came here and Hamm was "a father" to him. This thought causes Hamm to ask for his toy dog to play with.

Suddenly, Hamm asks about Mother Pegg and if her light is on and whether or not she is buried, but Clov replies that he has had nothing to do with her or her burial. Then Hamm wants his "gaff," or stick, to move the chair; also, he wants the wheels (casters) oiled, but they were oiled yesterday, and yesterday was like all other days—"All life long the same inanities." Hamm wants to tell his story, but when Clov refuses to listen to it, Hamm insists that he awaken Nagg to listen to the story.

Hamm's story involves a man who comes crawling towards him on his belly. The man wants "bread for his brat." Hamm has no bread, but maybe there is a pot of porridge. The man asks Hamm to take in his child—if the child is still alive. Hamm can still see the man, "his hands flat on the ground, glaring . . . with his mad eyes." The story will soon be finished unless Hamm decides to "bring in other characters."

Hamm whistles for Clov, who excitedly exclaims that he's found a rat in the kitchen. Despite the fact that Clov has only exterminated "half the rat," Hamm says that can wait; for the present, they must all "pray to God." After several futile attempts to pray, Hamm concludes: "The bastard! He doesn't exist."

When Hamm's father begins wailing for a sugar plum, he reminds his son of how he used to cry in the night. Nagg and Nell let him cry, even moved him "out of earshot" so they could sleep in peace. Someday, Nagg warns, Hamm will cry out again for his father. He then sinks back into his ash can and closes the lid behind him.

Clov begins to straighten up the room ("I love order"), and he wonders how Hamm is progressing with his story (his chronicle). Hamm says that he has made some progress with the

story—up to the point where the man wants to bring a small child with him to tend Hamm’s garden, but the creative effort has exhausted him.

Hamm then inquires about his parents. Clov looks into the ash cans and reports that it looks as though Nell is dead, but Nagg is not; Nagg is crying. Hamm’s only reaction is to ask to be moved by the window where he wants to hear the sea, but Clov tells him that this is impossible. After he checks on Nagg once again, refusing to kiss Hamm or even to give a hand to hold, Clov exits to check on the trapped rat in the kitchen.

Alone, Hamm ruminates almost incoherently about life and possible death and then blows his whistle for Clov; he inquires whether or not the rat got away and about his pain-killer. It is finally time for it, he says, but now “there is no more pain-killer.” Hamm then wants Clov to look through the windows and give him a report. Clov looks out “at this muckheap,” but it is not clear enough to see anything. Hamm wonders “what happened.” For Clov, whatever happened doesn’t matter, and he reminds Hamm that when Hamm refused to give old Mother Pegg some oil for her lamps, he knew that she would die “of boredom.”

Clov, when ordered to get something, wonders why he always obeys Hamm, and Hamm suggests that perhaps it’s because of compassion. As Clov is about to look out through the telescope, Hamm demands his toy dog. When Clov throws it to him, Hamm tells Clov to hit him with an axe or with his stick, but not with the dog. He would like to be placed in his coffin, but “there are no more coffins.” Clov looks out the window toward “the filth” and says that it will be the last time; this is to be the end of the game. Suddenly, he sees something that “looks like a small boy.” Clov wants to go see, but Hamm is against it. Hamm then announces that “it’s the end, Clov; we’ve come to the end.” Hamm says he doesn’t need Clov anymore, and Clov prepares to leave. He makes a final speech to Hamm: “You must learn to suffer better . . . if you want them to weary of punishing you.” Clov then exits while Hamm asks one last favor, but Clov doesn’t hear it. In a few moments, Clov reenters, dressed for traveling. He stands impassively while Hamm continues his chronicle about the man coming to him, wanting to bring a child. At the end, Hamm calls out to Nagg and then to Clov. With no answer, he then covers his face with his handkerchief as the curtain falls.

One could easily conclude from the above that nothing happens, and this is part of Beckett’s purpose. The world ends, according to T. S. Eliot, not with a bang but with a whimper. In this play, most of the things that Western civilization has stood for seem no longer to matter—God, family ties, respect for parents, love, prayer, loyalty, and religion—everything is meaningless here as the end of the game is being played; everything outside is zero. The only people remaining are sterile and despairing (one rotting); they “have had enough of this thing.” In *Endgame*, as in so many of his other plays, Beckett utilizes several sets of polarities which characterize most of his plays (*Act Without Words I* is something of an exception to the rule). Among the most obvious polarities here are (1) Hamm versus Clov: Hamm, when he is uncovered, is seen immediately to be a mass of decaying flesh in contrast to Clov, whose name is the same of a preservative spice—thus (2) decay versus preservative; (3) standing versus sitting: Clov must constantly move about the stage to preserve the status quo of the situation, giving us the polarity of (4) movement (Clov) versus non-movement (Hamm); (5) sight versus blindness: not only is Hamm decaying, but he is also blind and must rely upon Clov to see all things for him. The (6) master versus slave polarity is similar to the Pozzo-Lucky polarity; Pozzo and Hamm as masters are blind and must be led (or attended to) by the slaves, Lucky and Clov; (7) inside versus outside polarities are emphasized by the (8) left and right windows, through which

Clov is able to report what is going on outside; (9) Nagg and Nell, the parents of Hamm, seem to suggest the muckheap which Beckett sees mankind as being. Ultimately, the concept (10) of life versus death informs most of the play. Whereas twice in *Waiting for Godot*, Vladimir and Estragon consider suicide by hanging, the idea of death pervades this entire play, from its title (the *End of the Game*) to the presumed death of Nell during the play and includes death images throughout—all indicating the possible death and fall of civilization as we know it. These, at least, are part of the complex polarities and images which Beckett uses in investigating man's absurd existence in an absurd world.