

**From Martin Esslin's *The Theatre of the Absurd*. Penguin Books, 2004 [first published in 1961, Eyre and Spottiswoode, Garden City, N.Y] (pp. 62-74)**

If *Waiting for Godot* shows its two heroes whiling away the time in a succession of desultory, and never-ending, games, Beckett's second play deals with an 'endgame', the final game in the hour of death.

*Waiting for Godot* takes place on a terrifying empty open road, *Endgame* in a claustrophobic interior. *Waiting for Godot* consists of two symmetrical movements that balance each other; *Endgame* has only one act that shows the running down of a mechanism until it comes to a stop. Yet *Endgame*, like *Waiting for Godot*, groups its characters in symmetrical pairs.

In a bare room with two small windows, a blind old man, Hamm, sits in a wheelchair. Hamm is paralysed, and can no longer stand. His servant, Clov, is unable to sit down. In two ash-cans that stand by the wall are Hamm's legless parents, Nagg and Nell. The world outside is dead. Some great catastrophe, of which the four characters in the play are, or believe themselves to be, the sole survivors, has killed all living beings.

Hamm and Clov (ham actor and clown? Hammer and Nail - French 'clou'?) in some ways resemble Pozzo and Lucky. Hamm is the master, Clov the servant. Hamm is selfish, sensuous, domineering. Clov hates Hamm and wants to leave him, but he must obey his orders. 'Do this, do that, and I do it. I never refuse. Why?' Will Clov have the force to leave Hamm? That is the source of the dramatic tension of the play. If he leaves, Hamm must die, as Clov is the only one left who can feed him. But Clov also must die, as there is no one else left in the world, and Hamm's store is the last remaining source of food. If Clov can muster the will power to leave, he will not only kill Hamm but commit suicide. He will thus succeed where Estragon and Vladimir have failed so often.

Hamm fancies himself as a writer - or, rather, as the spinner of a tale of which he composes a brief passage every day. It is a story about a catastrophe that caused the death of large numbers of people. On this particular day, the tale has reached an episode in which the father of a starving child asks Hamm for bread for his child. Finally the father begs Hamm to take in his child, should it still be alive when he gets back to his home. It appears that Clov might well be that very child. He was brought to Hamm when he was too small to remember. Hamm was a father to him, or, as he himself puts it, 'But for me ... no father. But for Hamm ... no home.' The situation in *Endgame* is the reverse of that in Joyce's *Ulysses*, where a father finds a substitute for a lost son. Here a foster son is trying to leave his foster father.

Clov has been trying to leave Hamm ever since he was born, or as he says, 'Ever since I was whelped.' Hamm is burdened with a great load of guilt. He might have saved large numbers of people who begged him for help. 'The place was crawling with them!' One of the neighbours, old Mother Pegg, who was 'bonny once, like a flower of the field' and perhaps Hamm's lover, was killed through his cruelty: 'When old Mother Pegg asked you for oil for her lamp and you

told her to get out to hell ... you know what she died of, Mother Pegg? Of darkness.' Now the supplies in Hamm's own household are running out: the sweets, the flour for the parents' pap, even Hamm's painkiller. The world is running down. 'Something is taking its course.'

Hamm is childish; he plays with a three-legged toy dog, and he is full of self-pity. Clov serves him as his eyes. At regular intervals he is asked to survey the outside world from the two tiny windows high up in the wall. The right-hand window looks out on land, the left-hand on to the sea. But even the tides have stopped.

Hamm is untidy. Clov is a fanatic of order. Hamm's parents, in their dustbins, are grotesquely sentimental imbeciles. They lost their legs in an accident while cycling through the Ardennes on their tandem, on the road to Sedan. They remember the day they went rowing on Lake Como - the day after they became engaged - one April afternoon (cf. the love scene in a boat on a lake in *Krapp's Last Tape*), and Nagg, in the tones of an Edwardian raconteur, retells the funny story that made his bride laugh then and that he has since repeated ad nauseam.

Hamm hates his parents. Nell secretly urges Clov to desert Hamm. Nagg, having been awakened to listen to Hamm's tale, scolds him: 'Whom did you call when you were a tiny boy, and were frightened in the dark? Your mother? No. Me/ But he immediately reveals how selfishly he ignored these calls. 'We let you cry. Then we moved out of earshot, so that we might sleep in peace. ... I hope the day will come when you'll really need to have me listen to you. ... Yes, I hope f 11 live till then, to hear you calling me like when you were a tiny little boy, and were frightened, in the dark, and I was your only hope.'

As the end approaches, Hamm imagines what will happen when Clov leaves him. He confirms Nagg's forecast: 'There I'll be in the old shelter, alone against the silence and ... the stillness. ... I'll have called my father and I'll have called my ... son,'<sup>1</sup> which indicates that he does indeed regard Clov as his son.

For a last time, Clov looks out of the windows with his telescope. He sees something unusual. 'A small ... boy!' But it is not entirely clear whether he has really seen this strange sign of continuing life, 'a potential procreator'. In some way, this is the turning point. Hamm says, 'It's the end, Clov, we've come to the end. I don't need you any more.' Perhaps he does not believe that Clov will really be able to leave him. But Clov has finally decided that he will go: 'I open the door of the cell and go. I am so bowed I only see my feet, if I open my eyes, and between my legs a little trail of black dust. I say to myself that the earth is extinguished, though I never saw it lit. ... It's easy going. ... When I fall I'll weep for happiness.'<sup>4</sup> And as blind Hamm indulges in a last monologue of reminiscence and self-pity, Clov appears, dressed for departure in a Panama hat, tweed coat, raincoat over his arm, and listens to Hamm's speech, motionless. When the curtain falls, he is still there. It remains open whether he will really leave.

The final tableau of *Endgame* bears a curious resemblance to the ending of a little-known but highly significant play by the brilliant Russian dramatist and man of the theatre Nikolai Evreinov, which appeared in an English translation as early as 1915 - *The Theatre of the Soul*.

This one-act play is a mono-drama that takes place inside a human being and shows the constituent parts of his ego, his emotional self and his rational self, in conflict with each other.

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The enclosed space with the two tiny windows through which Clov observes the outside world; the dustbins that hold the suppressed and despised parents, and whose lids Clov is ordered to press down when they become obnoxious; Hamm, blind and emotional; Clov, performing the function of the senses for him - all these might well represent different aspects of a single personality, repressed memories in the subconscious mind, the emotional and the intellectual selves, Is Clov then the intellect, bound to serve the emotions, instincts, and appetites, and trying to free himself from such disorderly and tyrannical masters, yet doomed to die when its connection with the animal side of the personality is severed? Is the death of the outside world the gradual receding of the links to reality that takes place in the process of ageing and dying? Is Endgame a monodrama depicting the dissolution of a personality in the hour of death?

It would be wrong to assume that these questions can be definitely answered. Endgame certainly was not planned as a sustained allegory of this type. But there are indications that there is an element of monodrama in the play. Hamm describes a memory that is strangely reminiscent of the situation in Endgame: 'I once knew a madman who thought the end of the world had come. He was a painter - an engraver. ... I used to go and see him in the asylum. I'd take him by the hand and drag him to the window. Look ! There ! All that rising corn ! And there ! Look ! The sails of the herring fleet ! All that loveliness ! ... He'd snatch away his hand and go back into his corner. Appalled. All he had seen was ashes. ... He alone had been spared. Forgotten. hellip; It appears the case is ... was not so ... so unusual.'<sup>1</sup> Hamm's own world resembles the delusions of the mad painter. Moreover, what is the significance of the picture mentioned in the stage directions? 'Hanging near door, its face to wall, a picture'. Is that picture a memory? Is the story a lucid moment in the consciousness of that very painter whose dying hours we witness from behind the scenes of his mind?

Beckett's plays can be interpreted on many levels. Endgame may well be a monodrama on one level and a morality play about the death of a rich man on another. But the peculiar psychological reality of Beckett's characters has often been noticed. Pozzo and Lucky have been interpreted as body and mind; Vladimir and Estragon have been seen as so complementary that they might be the two halves of a single personality, the conscious and the subconscious mind. Each of these three pairs - Pozzo-Lucky; Vladimir-Estragon; Hamm-Clov - is linked by a relationship of mutual interdependence, wanting to leave each other, at war with each other, and yet dependent on each other. 'Nee tecum, nee sine te'. This is a frequent situation among people - married couples, for example - but it is also an image of the interrelatedness of the elements within a single personality, particularly if the personality is in conflict with itself.

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*Endgame* then becomes an allegory of the relationship between the domineering, nearly blind Joyce and his adoring disciple, who felt himself crushed by his master's overpowering literary influence. Superficially the parallels are striking: Hamm is presented as being at work on an interminable story, Lucky is being made to perform a set piece of thinking, which, Mr Abel argues, is in fact a parody of Joyce's style. Yet on closer reflection this theory surely becomes untenable; not because there may not be a certain amount of truth in it (every writer is bound to use elements of his own experience of life in his work) but because, far from illuminating the full content of a play like *Endgame*, such an interpretation reduces it to a trivial level. If *Endgame* really were nothing but a thinly disguised account of the literary, or even the human, relationship between two particular individuals, it could not possibly produce the impact it has had on audiences utterly ignorant of these particular, very private circumstances. Yet *Endgame* undoubtedly has a very deep and direct impact, which can spring only from its touching a chord in the minds of a very large number of human beings. The problems of the relationship between a literary master and his pupil would be very unlikely to elicit such a response; very few people in the audience would feel directly involved. Admittedly, a play that presented the conflict between Joyce and Beckett openly, or thinly disguised, might arouse the curiosity of audiences who are always eager for autobiographical revelations. But this is just what *Endgame* does not do. If it nevertheless arouses profound emotion in its audience, this can be due only to the fact that it is felt to deal with a conflict of a far more universal nature. Once that is seen, it becomes clear that while it is fascinating to argue about the aptness of such autobiographical elements, such a discussion leaves the central problem of understanding the play and exploring its many-layered meanings still to be tackled.

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In *Endgame* we are also certainly confronted with a very powerful expression of the sense of deadness, of leaden heaviness and hopelessness, that is experienced in states of deep depression: the world outside goes dead for the victim of such states, but inside his mind there is ceaseless argument between parts of his personality that have become autonomous entities.

This is not to say that Beckett gives a clinical description of psychopathological states. His creative intuition explores the elements of experience and shows to what extent all human beings carry the seeds of such depression and disintegration within the deeper layers of their personality. If the prisoners of San Quentin responded to *Waiting for Godot*, it was because they were confronted with their own experience of time, waiting, hope, and despair; because they recognized the truth about *their own human relationships* in the sadomasochistic interdependence of Pozzo and Lucky and in the bickering hate-love between Vladimir and Estragon. This is also the key to the wide success of Beckett's plays: to be confronted with concrete projections of the deepest fears and anxieties, which have been only vaguely experienced at a half-conscious level, constitutes a process of catharsis and liberation analogous to the therapeutic effect in psychoanalysis of confronting the subconscious contents of the mind.

This is the moment of release from deadening habit, through facing up to the suffering of existence, that Vladimir almost attains in *Waiting for Godot*. This also, probably, is the release that could occur if Clov had the courage to break his bondage to Hamm and venture out into the world, which may not, after all, be so dead as it appeared from within the claustrophobic confines of Hamm's realm. This, in fact, seems to be hinted at by the strange episode of the little boy whom Clov observes in the last stage of *Endgame*. Is this boy a symbol of life outside the closed circuit of withdrawal from reality?

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Does Hamm, who has shut himself off from the world and killed the rest of mankind by holding on to his material possessions - Hamm, blind, sensual, egocentric - then die when Clov, the rational part of the self, perceives the true reality of the illusoriness of the material world, the redemption and resurrection, the liberation from the wheels of time that lies in union with the 'accidentless One-and-Only, conveniently called Nothing'? Or is the discovery of the little boy merely a symbol of the coming of death - union with nothingness in a different, more concrete sense? Or does the reappearance of life in the outside world indicate that the period of loss of contact with the world has come to an end, that the crisis has passed and that a disintegrating personality is about to find the way back to integration, 'the solemn change towards merciless reality in Hamm and ruthless acceptance of freedom in Clov', as the Jungian analyst Dr. Metman puts it?

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*Waiting for Godot* and *Endgame*, the plays Beckett wrote in French, are dramatic statements of the human situation itself. They lack both characters and plot in the conventional sense because they tackle their subject-matter at a level where neither characters nor plot exist. Characters presuppose that human nature, the diversity of personality and individuality, is real and matters; plot can exist only on the assumption that events in time are significant. These are precisely the assumptions that the two plays put in question. Hamm and Clov, Pozzo and Lucky, Vladimir and Estragon, Nagg and Nell are not characters but the embodiments of basic human attitudes, rather like the personified virtues and vices in medieval mystery plays or Spanish autos sacramentelles. And what passes in these plays are not events with a definite beginning and a definite end, but types of situation that will forever repeat themselves. That is why the pattern of act I of *Waiting for Godot* is repeated with variations in act II; that is why we do not see Clov actually leave Hamm at the close of *Endgame* but leave the two frozen in a position of stalemate. Both plays repeat the pattern of the old German students' song Vladimir sings at the beginning of act II of *Waiting for Godot*, about the dog that came into a kitchen and stole some bread and was killed by the cook and buried by its fellow-dogs, who put a tombstone on its grave which told the story of the dog that came into the kitchen and stole some bread - and so on ad infinitum. In *Endgame* and *Waiting for Godot*, Beckett is concerned with probing down to a depth in which individuality and definite events no longer appear, and only basic patterns emerge.

From *Palgrave Advances In Samuel Beckett Studies* edited by Lois Oppenheim, Palgrave Macmillan, 2004 (pp. 89-171)

✚ *Irish/Postcolonial Beckett* by Anna McMullan (pp. 89-109)

In *Godot* and *Endgame*, Beckett presents both the material subjection of Lucky, Clov, Nagg, and Nell, through corporeal discipline, and the ambivalence of the authority of the master/oppressor, in ways which recall Bhabha's insistence on the insecurity of colonial rule. While Said's Orientalism was crucial in identifying the West's strategies of 'Othering,' critics pointed out that he posits for diverse European imperial projects an apparently secure and unified identity – 'the West,' and tends to present the Orient as the passive victim of the West's identificatory power. Bhabha's controversial intervention, was to insist that, at the level of discourse and rhetoric, the supposedly stable and superior identity of the colonizer is anxious and ambivalent and needs to be continually reasserted. Pozzo and Hamm are dependent on those they subject to produce and perform their identity, while they anxiously maintain positions of linguistic and corporeal dominance.

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In fact, in Beckett's world, authority is almost always a masquerade. Pozzo comes across as a rather pathetic and parodic substitution for the absent Godot. He is also the mimic man of his 'slave,' Lucky, who taught him his rhetoric. Vladimir and Estragon mimic the roles of Pozzo and Lucky at the beginning of Act Two. Lucky, in turn, has internalized his subjection and mimics his master when he places the whip back in the hands of Pozzo in Act Two. Clov in *Endgame* recalls Caliban in Shakespeare's *The Tempest* (a text that has often been read in a colonial/postcolonial context) as Hamm rules him and has imposed his language and customs on him:

CLOV: I use the words you taught me. If they don't mean anything anymore, teach me others. Or let me be silent.

(Beckett, *Endgame* 113)

Yet Hamm is the ultimate player-king, whose authority must be continually mimed through well-rehearsed and self-consciously theatrical routines. In recognizable colonial/postcolonial terms, Hamm's authority is shored by his narration of origins – his story. But as Paul Lawley has argued, *Endgame* is full of inauthentic origins, adoptions, betrayals, and substitutions (Lawley 1997, 22). Therefore, while Beckett stages authority as invested in the power to name and know who, what, and where, and in the corporeal subjection of others, that authority is framed as

masquerade and mimicry. Most of the authoritarian figures in Beckett's drama, while appropriating the labor of others, are themselves required to perform. As Lloyd argued of *First Love*, Beckett presents identity not as pedagogical, but as performative and interactive: '[O]ne labours to produce oneself for others' (Lloyd 1993, 50).

### ✚ Beckett and Religion By Mary Bryden (pp. 154-171)

Since the earliest days of Beckett criticism, commentators have recurrently sought to identify religious, spiritual, and mystical underpinnings within Beckett's writing. This is from one point of view surprising. Beckett's work can hardly be said to dramatize a journey to faith, an experience of the divine. At the extempore prayer meeting held by Hamm, Clov, and Nagg in *Endgame*, the participants fail to apprehend the presence of God, and quickly abandon their attitudes of prayer. Hamm's disgusted observation about the *deus absconditus* is: 'The bastard! He doesn't exist!' (Beckett 1964, 38). Indeed, a few years before *Endgame*'s first appearance, Harold Pinter was already communicating in a letter his admiration of what might be termed Beckett's resourcelessness: 'The more he grinds my nose in the shit the more I am grateful to him. [...] He's not flogging me a remedy or a path or a revelation or a basinful of breadcrumbs' (Graver and Federman 1979, 12).

In *Endgame*, as Ruby Cohn has convincingly shown, the web of scriptural allusions serve as a grim reminder that 'Endgame is unmistakably a play about an end of a world' (Cohn 1969, 44). These allusions do not wrench the text into predetermined patterns. As Kristin Morrison remarks with reference to *Endgame*: 'The allusion itself does not change or add anything to the sense of misery and hopelessness that the play has previously established; it simply intensifies what is already there' (Morrison 1983, 95). As his work progresses, Beckett often uses Biblical texts in half-hidden guises, so that recognition of the prompt-text is merely optional. As Morrison concludes, Biblical allusions are 'present often only as subtle verbal echoes, whispered reinforcements of moods, themes, ironies already established' (Morrison 1983, 97).

### ***The Cambridge Introduction to Samuel Beckett* Edited by Ronan McDonald, Cambridge University Press, 2006 (pp. 43-**

*Endgame* is set in a world even more unfamiliar than that of *Waiting for Godot*. All outside, if we are to believe the testimony of Clov and his telescope, is grey, deserted and lifeless. The characters have memories of a world similar to our own, but the one they live in is depleted and belated. Their memories are more attuned than the characters in *Waiting for Godot*, so their awareness of current dereliction is all the more of a torment. Physical debility is clearly a motif in the earlier play but in this world of the amputated, the paralytic and the blind, the sense

of decrepitude and entrapment is far more oppressive. Outside, all is 'corpsed'. This desolate landscape resembles a post-apocalyptic scene, prompting some commentators to speculate on whether some of the anxieties of the Cold War, with the threat of nuclear extinction, can be felt in this play. The reason for why the world is at this point of expiration, why all outside is grey and flat and lifeless, is not given. Nor is the behaviour of the characters explained. Why does Clov do Hamm's bidding when he resents it so much? Why are Hamm's parents, the legless Nagg and Nell, confined to ashbins? What is the relationship of Hamm's chronicle to the play? Does it, as many have suggested, relate to the arrival of Clov in the house? At a production in the Riverside Studio in Hammersmith in 1980, directed by Beckett, Rick Cluchey, playing Hamm at the time, asked Beckett directly if the little boy in the story is actually the young Clov. 'Don't know if it's the story of the young Clov or not,' was Beckett's characteristic response. 'Simply don't know.' (S. E. Gontarski (ed. and notes), *The Theatrical Notebooks of Samuel Beckett, vol. II: Endgame* (London: Faber and Faber, 1992, p. 61.)

Spectators on the look-out for a meaning in the play will encounter the following metatheatrical snub:

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

CLOV: Mean something! You and I, mean something! (Brief laugh.) Ah that's a good one!' (*Endgame* 27).

If everything is coming to an end, if all is run down and exhausted, this does not just apply to painkillers and bicycles but to the less tangible qualities of meaning and clarity. The stage directions tell us that there is a picture facing the wall in the room where the action takes place, a metaphor perhaps for the withheld information throughout the play. Unlike the conventional or well-made play, we are not given the 'full picture' – not even at the end. Rather, we have to make do with the vague refrain: 'Something is taking its course.' What is this 'something', apart, obviously, from the already written play which is unfolding before our eyes? How do those aspects of *Endgame* which we might consider 'bewildering' or 'bizarre' actually function aesthetically or dramatically? How might we begin to 'read' or interpret them?

*Endgame* resists critical decoding or philosophical explanation to an even greater degree than *Waiting for Godot*. This resistance is part of its aesthetic and theatrical effect. *Waiting for Godot* also withholds certainty, as we saw, but there are reflections on time, habit, desire and so onto which a critic can gain a precarious grip. *Endgame* poses the sheerer challenge. It is as if, frustrated by the philosophical interpretations of *Waiting for Godot*, a 'play struggling at all times to avoid definition', Beckett has produced a new play immune to explanation in 'allegorical or symbolic terms'. However, if *Endgame* bypasses neat, rational explanation, this is not to say that it does not communicate in a powerful and affecting way. The German philosopher and critic T. W. Adorno, in possibly the most famous essay on this play, can praise it for putting 'drama in opposition to ontology', for dramatising an incoherent situation, untranslatable into the language of rationality and conceptuality: 'Understanding *Endgame* can



only be understanding why it cannot be understood, concretely reconstructing the coherent meaning of its incoherence.’ Rather than simply asserting a lack of ‘meaning’, the play actually demonstrates it. This is why Adorno held that the play was so much more powerful than the existentialist philosophy with which Beckett was sometimes associated. In abstract philosophy, what we understand only occurs at the level of complexity and ideas. *Endgame* claws at deeper and darker levels of experience and intuition.

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For all the antagonism between Hamm and Clov, for all the difference in their role and character, they have one thing in common. They both suffer. Amongst the earliest lines of both, they reflect on their torment:

CLOV: I can't be punished any more';

HAMM: Can there be misery – (he yawns) – loftier than mine?' (*Endgame* 12).

The yawn here, implying the bored or the jaded, contradicts the aspirations to grandeur of the word 'loftier'. It is the first sign of a careful blending of the inflated and the deflated, the turgid and the trivial. Similarly the action of the play is at once geared towards some quasi-climactic, long-awaited ending while at the same time dwelling on the dreary routines of day-to-day life. The anticipation in this play, which counters the boredom and inanity of the stage action, is not towards the Utopian, endlessly deferred arrival of a saviour but, more bleakly, towards the relief of a finish or conclusion. Like in *Waiting for Godot*, there is ambivalence or conflict here between 'time' as the source of decay and depletion and 'time' as a source of repetition and entrapment. That is time as bringing change and loss and time as simply cyclical, the routine that the characters in the play go through, which also makes a metatheatrical gesture towards the repetition of the play night after night until the end of the run. There is atrophy and loss here combined with stasis and inertia. For all the promises of ending, and for all the evident physical decay, Hamm ends up with the handkerchief over his face the same way he started (the last word in the play is 'remain') and Clov seems unable to leave the stage.

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On this level, all the talk about 'finishing' or 'ending' also refers to the roles they are playing. The fact that they want to end so much reinforces a familiar Beckettian theme where speech and play-acting become a sort of torture. On the one hand it keeps characters distracted and hence momentarily protected (think how Hamm loves to tell his story); on the other, the whole sorry business – the pretence, the 'entrapment' (in the sense of having to go through pre-ordained roles) and the repetition intrinsic to the play-acting – is conflated with existential tedium and angst more generally: 'Why this farce, day after day?' as both Nell and Clov remark. Again, as with *Waiting for Godot*, the subtle metatheatrical elements in *Endgame* do not only highlight theatre as theatre. At the same time they demonstrate the performative, repetitive and theatrical aspects of everyday life.

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Human agency is ebbing into deterministic pattern. That the characters' actions are pre-ordained alludes most obviously to the theatrical fact that this is a play and hence based on a pre-written script. But it also perhaps derives from a more thematic and even philosophical approach to determinism. Beckett admitted that he finds deterministic accounts of life more convincing than the non-deterministic. His recognition that there are structures controlling human behaviour, limiting our freedom, places him in a different camp to the existentialists. He agreed enthusiastically with his biographer James Knowlson's objections to the existentialist emphasis on untrammelled human freedom, saying that he found 'the actual limitations on man's freedom of action (his genes, his upbringing, his social circumstances) far more compelling than the theoretical freedom on which Sartre had laid so much stress'. Whether we are the product of nature (genes, biological determinism) or nurture (social conditioning, upbringing, ideology), Beckett is more drawn to the idea that human action is caught in delimiting systems and structures than that we have significant control over our behaviour. Such a view is evinced in the mechanical, coldly deterministic qualities of *Endgame*.

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