

22-23 Samuel Beckett's Life and Writing in the Twentieth Century
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Beckett, S. (2006) *Endgame* in *Samuel Beckett, The Complete Dramatic Works*, Faber and Faber, p. 107. From “CLOV: Why this farce, day after day [...]” to “CLOV (*anguished, scratching himself*): I have a flea!”

If *Waiting for Godot* is a continuous sequence of moments of frustrated anticipation, then *Endgame* resolves this waiting by realizing a destination prior to the moment before extinction. The play primarily shows us the turn-by-turn dialogue between Hamm and Clov as they negotiate the complex moves of a chess game that ultimately leads to an existential moment of checkmate. As they progress, they deploy both tactical and strategic moves:

CLOV:
Why this farce, day after day?
HAMM:
Routine. One never knows.

Here, Clov, the ever-mobile chess Knight (since he can't sit down), has discarded his examination of the world outside the stage and conversationally jumped into a new subject, the reason for existence. But Hamm, the high status, but relatively immobile King, uses that status to shut down Clov's interrogative thrust, declaring the answer unknowable. The phrase “One never knows” is characteristic of the apparent opaqueness or ambiguity of much of the play, both from the actor's and the audience's perspective. When Hamm says, “There was a big sore”. Clov cynically replies “Pah! You saw your heart” thus implying that Hamm's heart is damaged or diseased (and indeed implying Hamm himself is diseased, as the heart can symbolically be seen as the representation of the person). Hamm takes Clov's disparaging remark and doubles its impact, by saying “No, it was living” and though this on the surface is contradicting Clov by suggesting the heart is fine, one might expect the actor playing Hamm to show that the emotional state of his heart is not actually fine by the tone of voice.

Hamm and Clov now return to the bigger picture of the previous question that opened this section: why they are there? Hamm, giving up his position of confident control of the conversation asks: “What's happening?”. Clov guides the conversation (though he has no direct answer) as he responds: “Something is taking its course”. But then, Hamm starts to regain control, by suggesting a new proposition: “We're not beginning to... to... mean something?”. This is definitely a surprising, even shocking idea, given the grey, largely featureless space they inhabit, but it is Clov this time that plays the countermove, trying to shut the idea down with a sarcastic declamation:

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

Hamm regains control of the exchange and won't be put off. So much so, that he considers how an external alien, looking into their room, would view their activities. For a moment, Hamm even leaves the room in his imagination:

HAMM:
....
(*Voice of rational being.*)
Ah, good, now I see what it is, yes, now I understand what they're at!

Hamm is desperate that there is meaning to be found in his existence:

HAMM:
(*Vehemently.*)
To think perhaps it won't all have been for nothing!

However, the use of *perhaps* suggests that Hamm is not even convincing himself, let alone the audience, that the alien would recognise Hamm and Clov's existence as being meaningful and worthwhile. Here the sentences and speeches are longer, emphasising the moment of philosophical reflection, compared to the earlier cut and thrust between Hamm and Clov.

[525 words]

Had the word count been higher, I would have gone on to say the material below, as my original intention was to analyse the passage up to the climax of the appearance of the flea. But as usual, my

first draft went over the word count, as this is primarily an unmarked practice piece, I left it as is. For an exam piece, I would have spent some time working out what to cut to bring the whole thing back under the word count. The opening two sentences, which are rather general overview-type statements would be good candidates to cut.

The dramatic impact of the realisation that their lives have all been for nothing is further heightened by the next section in which Clov discovers a flea and Hamm instructs him to destroy it. The only actions the two characters can control in this world now seem to be actions of death and termination. Hamm can only look forward to the simple and temporary pleasure of a pee, before the inevitable and almost imminent end.