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A Metatheatrical Study of Plot in Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* and *Endgame*

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Introduction: Plot in Beckett may well seem diminished from the traditional plot of drama but still worth observing theatrically while reading or watching his metatheatres. Beckett's plays are in contradiction to all types of traditional dramas and at times we witness his echoing or parodying certain dramatic norms. Bentley (1964) describes *Waiting for Godot* as:

A play with a very slight Action, with only the slightest movement from beginning to middle to end, and yet there is an Action, and it enables us to see the totality, not as undramatic, but as a parody of the dramatic. (qut. in Cohn, 1992, 24)

Beckett questions the reliability and validity of literary tradition through the destruction of the fundamental elements of theatre. He revolutionized theatre in the twentieth century and opened it to the possibilities that playwrights and their audiences had never imagined. Unlike the conventional notion of plot, Beckett's plot has no clear beginning, middle or ending. At the end of each one of his plays things are where they were in the beginning. In fact, he performs plays in the course of which nothing happens, yet they are interesting enough to keep the audience glued to their seats.

Beckett uses the notion of plot as grasping together the characters, actions, theme and frames in the spectacle of metatheatre. *Waiting for Godot* and *Endgame* have been termed as metatheatre because they reduce the dramatic features of theatre through the power of imagination. The flow of incidents with its rising and falling action is destroyed to make a new pattern of theatre that puzzles the audience of his plays in making decision on the action of the plays. According to David Pattie:

We watch events, and listen to words, whose precise spatial and temporal arrangement cannot be finally determined; because of this, we encounter characters whose subjectivity can never be fully incarnated, since their place in the action and the words of the play can never be grasped, even from moment to moment. (402)

As such, characters play out their roles in the world of the play that seems to have been taken apart: "characters whose subjectivity is disturbingly evanescent, performed as if it is in fragments spatial of action that have no clear temporal or spatial connection with each other" (Pattie 402-403). Matthew Davies quotes Kenneth Tynan that "whatever their literary merits, Beckett's "dramatic vacuums" are difficult for the audience to digest" (76). *Waiting for Godot* was once said by Beckett to be "a play that is striving to avoid definition" (qtd. in Kennedy 32). The reason is that his plays are 'theatre about theatre'.

Materials: Lack of plot and the logical theatre movement as well as the fragmented sequence of exposition, which is the introductory material to climax, reinforce the departure of these plays from the standards of the theatre's framework. Beckett removes a final resolution and uses "non-resolutions, the gaps and impasses within the pattern of the action" as his unique dramaturgy (Kennedy 23). He throws away the chronology of events and the relationship between them in order to create a fragmentary world. The world of *Waiting for Godot* is one without any meaningful pattern, symbolizing chaos as the dominant force in the play. There is no order in the sequence of events. A tree which is barren now is covered with leaves the next day:

Vladimir: Look at it. (*They look at the tree.*)

Estragon: I see nothing.

Vladimir: But yesterday evening it was all black and bare. And now it's covered with leaves.

Estragon: Leaves?

Vladimir: In a single night. (*Godot 70*)

The two tramps return to the same place every day to wait for Godot who never comes. Regarding such events within the course of the play, Beckett reveals his theatrical strategies in constructing the plot of his plays. Kennedy believes that Beckett portrays the chaotic situation underlying the real world through his structure: "Any 'imitation' of the world's chaos by the structure of the work gives ways in Beckett's plays to an economy of form that corresponds to an urgency of vision -- the chaos of the world meditated by clarity" (22).

Although Beckett has deconstructed the traditional qualities of coherence and meaning, what gives importance to such a plot-less design is its balanced and inter-linked scenes. The extraordinary pattern of *Waiting for Godot* or *Endgame* mocks the expectation of the audience as if Beckett makes the common frame of drama upside down by counterpointing them. The two acts of *Waiting for Godot* with their repetition alongside their overall symmetry make a peculiar pattern. The play is constructed upon a two-act structure with the repetition of the two cycles to challenge the dramatic features by moving the play back to where it starts. This is demonstrated in the progression of the action in each of the two acts of the play. Two helpless tramps on a country road do a tragicomedy routine. This routine must be done again to create the second act. Thus, the audience witnesses the same chain of events. Barbara Reich Gluck (1979) believes that the play's form and movement are "circular, like a worn-out wheel of fortunes at a deserted fairgrounds mysteriously turning". Indeed, "the idea of refrain or repetition is seen in several entire structures, for the dramaturgy of the play is cyclical" (146). It is said that Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* is a play in which nothing happens twice. In this regard, the second act can be considered as a reply to the first act. The action of 'waiting' in act one is transported to the beginning of act two and vice versa to make its circular shape. According to Collin Duckworth:

Sameness of the end of each act stresses the circularity of the whole structure; the return to symmetry leaves us with an overall impression of the monotony and futility of the eternally repeated ritual enacted on that deserted road. (qtd. in *Beckett and Joyce* 147)

The cyclical structure makes the characters start the same action the following day.

Vladimir: We'll come back to-morrow.
Estragon: And then the day after to-morrow.
Vladimir: Possibly.
Estragon: And so on. (*Godot* 10)

The same happens in *Endgame* in which the play is ended while the tension still remains to be continued in an infinite chain. Again, repetition as a characteristic of a circular system is used in *Endgame* as Beckett's metatheatrical technique in order to make his audience listen to his words rather than interpreting them. Beckett's use of repetitive chronological development succeeds in supporting the theme of meaninglessness and absurdism in life. Thus, the idea of repetition is the circular point of the entire structure of *Endgame*. Indeed, nothing is finished in the course of the plot and everything begins again. At the end of the play, Beckettian characters are condemned to continue the same action forever while the curtain of the stage leaves them alone. They remain to give an end to the common series begun by their birth, while they are incapable as there is no future in the loop of life. Thus, Beckett destroys the movement of events toward a final solution and makes the tension of the play remain forever in order to stress the uncertain atmosphere of the play. Kennedy, points to such tensions and uncertainties as the "genius combination of expectations and of downs, of uncertainty and of gradual run-down without end" (25).

To achieve this aim, Beckett incorporates the idea of comparison of the real world and the world of theatre into his plots. Through an analysis of *Waiting for Godot* and *Endgame*, it becomes clear how Beckett's metatheatrical illustrate the ways in which reality and illusion penetrate into life and drama through blending life/reality and theatre/illusion while blurring the boundaries between them. He acknowledges and defines the relationship between the illusionary plays and the reality upon which the plays are built. Beckett does not mean to undermine reality but to make it transparent. In fact, he wants to open a window to a world that is based upon the actuality of performance itself because the plot's original sense in a metatheatrical is theatre itself. In fact, his plays are performance pieces that are manifested in the context of metatheatrical. Thus, transparency is the quality of representation in metadramatic plots which challenges the spectator's perception that what is manifested is not so much what is being represented but the action of representation itself. By drawing the audience's attention to this quality and making obvious the theatrical elements in the plays, Beckett was able to force the audience to affirm the artificiality of life. That is why he breaks the fourth wall of the conventional theatre which separates the actions from the audience. He persuades the audience to question the entire nature of reality in the world. In order to see how much Beckett resorted to metatheatrical, we base our observation on Lionel Abel's theory of metatheatrical. Here, theatricality is considered as an aesthetic element that allows the theatre to stand for the real world of the plot as fictional. Therefore, metatheatricality becomes the aesthetic perception of Beckett's plays that leads the theatrical construction to reveal itself as such.

Abel's definition of metatheatrical is based on Calderon's *Life Is a Dream* which is the main feature of Beckett's plot in order to show the absurdity of man's life and the torture he is condemned to by entering this world. A 'zero' world is the underlying philosophy of Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* and *Endgame*, a world which is a good proof to provide this metatheatrical notion. Kennedy believes that,

Endgame stages 'all the world' -- as did certain kinds of allegorical drama, like Calderon's *The Grate Theatre of the World* (1645), but here all is diminished, the characters in number and scope, the action to a slow cycle of ending, the world itself approaching zero point. (61)

Calderon's *Life Is a Dream* is a play within a play in which the prince of Poland, Sigismund, has been imprisoned by his father since his birth due to the anticipation of an astrologer that the prince would kill both his mother and father. On his twenty-first birthday, still chained in a cave, Sigismund cries out: "what crime did I commit except that I was born?" The same torture is felt by Beckettian characters:

Hamm announces: Can there be misery-- (*He yawns*) -- loftier than mine? No doubt. Formerly. But now? (*Pause*) My father? (*Pause*) My mother? (*Pause*) My . . . dog? (*Pause*) Oh I am willing to believe they suffer as much as such creatures can suffer. But does that mean their sufferings equal mine? No doubt. (*Endgame 2*)

Pozzo, also complains that: "They give birth astride of a grave, the light gleams an instant, then it's night once more" (*Godot* 102). According to the concept of the original sin, to be born is to be a sinner, and thus man is condemned to be a sinner and therefore a sufferer. For Beckettian characters the only way to escape the suffering is to repent or to die. In *Waiting for Godot* Vladimir points to the thieves crucified with Christ as man's repentance:

Vladimir: One of the thieves was saved. It's a reasonable percentage.
 (*Pause.*) Gogo.
 Estragon: What?
 Vladimir: Suppose we repented.
 Estragon: Repented what?
 Vladimir: Oh . . . (*He reflects.*) We wouldn't have to go into details.
 Estragon: Our being born? (*Godot 4*)

Failing to repent, the characters wish their death. Matthew Davies believes that "Darkness or death, is what all Beckett's purgatorial creatures await, or have already experienced, with a craving plagued by contingency" (83):

Clov: Gray, Gray! GRRRAY!
 Hamm: (*Starting*) Gray! Did I hear you say gray?
 Clov: Light back. From pole to pole. (*Endgame 33*).

Death-wish is also clear in Hamm's addressing Clov: "Why don't you finish us? (*Pause.*) I'll tell you the combination of the cupboard if you promise to finish me" (*Endgame 39*). Alan Astro in *Understanding of Beckett* says that "in conformance with the Catholic doctrine of original sin, reflected in the passage from Calderon's *Life Is a Dream* that Beckett cries in Proust-- "For man's greatest crime is to have been born"" (49).

What Beckett performs on the stage is the crisis of human being "with the king and the fool at the center". In this sense, Kennedy regards *Endgame* as "the final scene of the human tragedy that should come to the end". He attributes "a majestic

sadness" to the "constant burden" of the play (61). What Hamm says of 'ending' suggests this:

Hamm: It's the end, Clov, we've come to the end. I don't need you any more. (*Endgame* 81)

The idea that 'life is a dream' confirms the empty nature of life which is justified by appealing to the stage description in a new way. Stage in metadramas of Beckett betrays its ancient tradition by the fact that they tend to separate themselves from the structure of the play in which they appear. In this way, metadramas illustrate the fact that life imitates theatre. Therefore, the stage of Beckett is alien to the classical and modern stage. Essif (2001) points to Beckett's growing respect for the naked stage and his anti-psychological understanding of character as parts of a general process of self-purging which was an attempt on the part of theatre to return to its origins (25). The setting of place in these plays no longer fulfills a decorative function which is reminiscence of the theme of 'nothingness'. The minimalist use of setting, which stresses the emptiness of life and therefore its pointlessness, supports labeling the play as an absurdist one. The setting of *Endgame* is a closed room which is symbolically standing for the imprisonment of life. Hamm and Clov are trapped within the bounds of the house and to each other. Haney describes the world of *Endgame*: "For the characters and the audiences, the pull toward nothingness is represented by the vision of emptiness all around the shelter, the corpsed, gray world of zero, and by the constant shifting of characters' socially reduced identity" (49). There is almost nothing on the stage except actors and a few objects. Such barren setting makes the audience have no idea where the characters are either in place or time. It seems as if the bare setting of the play is used as a technique to impose the sense of uncertainty on the play which promotes the metatheatrical notion of 'life as a dream'. The stage of *Waiting for Godot* includes a tree, a rock and a road. Estragon and Vladimir are on this road, but it is not clear where this road leads to because the two men do not make progress along this road. The pair cannot agree on whether or not they are in the right place or that this is the arranged day for their meeting with Godot. The presence of the tree and the rock is apparently important. The tramps are uncertain about the identity of the tree, the kind of the tree or even if it is a tree at all. Kennedy suggests that the tree can be "anything from the tree of life to all that is left of 'Nature' in a deserted and a desolate landscape" (24). He also mentions that "the only tree with only four or five leaves in that bare stage imply that not only human beings, but also nature are running down. (34)

The basis of Beckett's plots emphasizes the absurdity of man's struggle. For instance, *Waiting for Godot* starts with Vladimir's remark that "Nothing to be done". This situation clarifies the atmosphere of life as a dream in which nothing is done truly. Here, life is portrayed as a dreamy play manifested on the stage of the world in which any struggle is in vain. Kennedy says that in *Waiting for Godot* "confronted with the illusionary nature of the waiting, and the certainty (the only certainty) of movement towards extinction, most readers/spectators ask at one point: is this not a mockery of all human effort?" (34)

Beckett considers a sort of plot for his plays that explores the subject of life as a dream. In order to promote this notion, he makes 'waiting' and 'ending' as the primary theme of *Waiting for Godot* and *Endgame* respectively. By concentrating on such integrals, Beckett's plays attempt to discover their own textures and their own

theatrical forms. That is why Beckett creates paralyzed or immobilized characters who are forced to wait stationary in one spot:

Pozzo: I don't seem to be able . . . (*Long hesitation*) . . . to depart.

Estragon: Such is life. (*Godot* 49)

They remain passive and are unable to act. Hamm, in *Endgame*, is blind in his wheelchair and Clov is not confident enough to leave him. Nagg and Nell are in their ashbins and cannot come out. Their legless situation implies their perfect immobility and, therefore, their movement is highly restricted. This non-action is justified by the notion of 'waiting'. In *Waiting for Godot*: Estragon sleeps in a ditch, Vladimir visits him at the foot of a tree, they are visited by Pozzo and Lucky, and a boy who comes to tell them that Godot will not come but surely will come on the following day. So, the two protagonists, Vladimir and Estragon, remain to continue their waiting. In this sense, the title of *Waiting for Godot* is not about the unknown Godot who never comes but on the action of 'waiting' which is the only possible act in a world in which nothing is ever done. Whoever Godot may be, Vladimir and Estragon are in the hope of his mercy as they pass their days of waiting for his arrival. In fact, in order to impose meaning on their meaningless life, they appeal to Godot as an outside force to distract them from their predicament. So, they use the action of 'waiting' as a pattern to impose on their chaotic situation. As Eugene Webb (1972) affirms: "*Waiting for Godot* is the story of two vagabonds who impose on their slovenly wilderness an illusory, but desperately defended, pattern: waiting" (2). That is why Vladimir in his soliloquy says:

What are we doing here, that is the question. And we are blessed in this, that we happen to know the answer. Yes, in this immense confusion one thing alone is clear. We are waiting for Godot to come-- (89)

They consider 'waiting' as a remedy to overcome their loneliness:

Vladimir: We are no longer alone / waiting for the night, waiting for Godot; waiting for . . . waiting. (86)

Therefore, Beckett has changed the notion of 'waiting' to a goal. Kennedy claims that waiting for an unknown being has given a center to the fragmented plot: "Attempts at defining Godot perpetually defeat Estragon and Vladimir; yet all those attempts cumulatively give a center to the process of waiting" (32-33). Here, the dark question of who Godot is and whether he will come or not give way to the human's hope for survival. Certainly, the arrival of their eagerly awaited man would bring the plot to a conclusion, but his refusal to come has restricted the plot of the play from moving toward its climax. He keeps Vladimir and Estragon from taking any action with deep meaning as their minds are hunted by an impending appointment:

Estragon: Then all we have to do is to wait on here. (57)

Without his appearance, the plot's theme remains as a confusing dream and it goes nowhere because it circulars back on itself to emphasize the metatheatrical quality of its own. By making such a circle, Beckett shows how theatre reflects on itself. Michael Worton says that "the title of *Endgame*, with its references to chess,

articulates an equally powerful sense of waiting as a reality and as a metaphor for infinity". To affirm this "infinity", she quotes Beckett's own comment:

Hamm is a king in this chess game lost from the start. From the start he knows he is making loud senseless moves. That he will make no progress at all with the gaff. Now at the last he makes a few senseless moves as only a bad player would. A good one would have given up long ago. He is only trying to delay the inevitable end. Each of his gestures is one of the last useless moves which put off the end. He is a bad player. (qut. in Worton 4)

So, Beckett constructs his metatheatrical notion upon the circularity of the plot. While in *Waiting for Godot* the repeated cycle of the play emphasizes an infinite waiting, in *Endgame* the circularity of its one act emphasizes the final aspect of life:

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

Clov: Looks like it. (*Pause*) (*Endgame* 13)

Kennedy affirms that "the one act cyclic structure embodies the sense of an 'everlasting', long-and-short, static-and-moving" (63). In *Endgame*, at times Clov decides to leave Hamm, but he hesitates:

Clov: So you all want me to leave you.

Hamm: Naturally.

Clov: Then, I leave you.

Hamm: You can't leave us.

Clov: Then I won't leave you. (*Pause*) (*Endgame* 39)

At the end of the play Clov stands, suitcase in hand, as if he is about to leave but he does not. He remains static and unable to abandon Hamm. Kennedy says that, "separation is both wanted and feared; movement is desired but paralyzed; the end is far from ending" (28). The notion of 'ending' is used by Beckett in a way that the spectator feels "the play ends with a kind of everlasting beginning" (34). This is felt at every level of the action:

We are dealing with a play that exploits the seemingly anti-dramatic process of 'making an end' in such a total way that on almost every page of the text an image of 'ending' is evoked. (Kennedy 53)

That's why the play begins with the word 'finished' to confirm the underlying philosophy of the play as Hamm says: "The end is in the beginning and yet you go on" (*Endgame* 70). Just like the underlying process of *Waiting for Godot* is waiting, Kennedy discusses the connotation of ending as "a completely set, a game of chess, a story, a performance, ending a relationship, parting, ending a life, a preparing to die, end of the world, lost things, apocalypse--with relentless concentration" (48). Therefore, the play's central theme is that 'ending' is an endless process. The opening words of "Clov: Finished, it's finished, it must be nearly finished," imply the sense of ending of the play rather than the beginning of the play. The coming of the end is

experienced in several occasions. The physical decay of things, persons and all other creatures are suggested everywhere. The key word 'no more' in different parts of the play is a good proof of this claim: 'no more bicycle-wheels, no more pap, no more sugar-plums, no more pain killer and no more coffins'. They have even lost their belief in nature which is the symbol of life. They talk of the end of the whole nature:

Hamm: Nature has forgotten us.

Clov: There is no more nature.

Hamm: No more nature! You exaggerate.

Clov: In the vicinity. (*Endgame* 11)

That's why Clov says: "The light is sunk" (32) and Hamm says: "The whole place sinks of corpses" (46).

Not only does Beckett base his metatheatrical plot on the notion of 'life is a dream', but also on the other definition of metatheatre as 'the world is a stage'. Therefore, Beckett portrays the artificiality of life as a stage on which people are playing their special roles. This notion is what draws Shakespeare's attention as he uses it repeatedly in his works. Shakespeare provides two examples of this extended type of play metaphor: Jacques's famous observation that,

All the world is a stage
And all the men and women merely players;
They have their exits and their entrances,
And one man in his time plays many parts.
(Jacques, *As You Like It*, II, VII, 139-142)

And the meditative comment of Antonio in the opening moments of *The Merchant of Venice*:

I hold the world but as the world, Grantiana
A stage, where every man must play a part,
And mine a sad one.
(*The Merchant of Venice*, II, I, 77-79)

Here, Jacques points to the bitter comedy of man's progression from his birth to death and Antonio to the melancholy that makes him hopeless. This sense of futility is the characteristic of Beckett's comparison of the world to the stage in his metaplays. He, like Shakespeare, tries to emphasize that the world is not more than a stage where everyone must act one's role. Of course, this notion is not only used by Shakespeare in his plays. Other version of this idea appears in the works of Webster's *Duchess of Malfi* when the Duchess is informed of the death of Antonio and her children:

I count this world a tedious Theatre,
For I doe play a part in't gainst my will. (*Duchess of Malfi*, IV, I, 99-100)

Thomas Nash also affirms such a notion in a play published in 1600 and contrasted 'Heaven is our heritage' with 'Earth but a player's stage'. In *A Book of Aris* (1601), there is a little poem by an anonymous writer that announces:

All our pride is but a jest;
None are worst and none are the best.
Grief and joy and hope and fear

Play their pageants everywhere;
Vain opinion all doth sway,
And the world is but a play. (845)

Conclusion: Whether Beckett has Shakespeare, Webster or any other dramatist in mind, he is the master of using the metaphor of 'the world is a stage' and uses it extensively to illuminate the experience of his characters. He tries to bring his characters to the stage as unwilling prisoners in the drama of existence who can have no control over their own lives. Thus, he constructs the plot of his plays upon a closed system from which there is no escape:

Pozzo: The tears of the world are a constant quality. For each one who begins to weep somewhere else another stops. The same is true of the laugh. (*Godot* 31)

In *Endgame*, Clov's decision to leave Hamm is indeed escaping from the closed world which is portrayed by Davies:

In *Endgame*, he dead-ends Godot's open road that had promised the tramps at least a modicum of freedom, enclosing the theatrical wings with a grey box set that is hermetically sealed save for two high windows on the back wall and a downstage door to the kitchen, on unwelcoming exterior: "Outside of here its death". (*Endgame* 97) (Davies 77-78)

Thus, Beckett has given a grotesque quality to his plays' world in which situations are imposed in an inescapable way on the actors who lose their struggle against a cruel world. Here, the downfall of the humanity cannot be justified by any reason and, therefore, it is absurd. That is why such grotesque worlds make use of the concept of a closed system which has been put in motion and cannot be stopped.

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