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Babble, Babble, Words: The Solitary Child, The Absent Father, and the Roles of Codependence, Love and Storytelling in Samuel Beckett's Endgame

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Abstract:

Samuel Beckett's Endgame can be a very uncomfortable experience for readers or the audiences it is performed for. The atmosphere it creates is almost unrelentingly bleak, with very little signs of hope for the future or for the characters we're introduced to. For victims of codependent relationships - particularly those that involved parental abuse, neglect and manipulation - the discomfort portrayed may be all too familiar.

This essay explores Endgame as a depiction of the oppressive dynamics of a broken home which outlines the generational nature of trauma, poverty and disability. It examines the narrative through the lens of psychology, a discipline Beckett himself showed keen interest in - this is both clearly reflected in his writing and supported by his records. Citations from scholarly works in the field of psychology provide both historical and contemporary context. The essay particularly focuses on the role of storytelling within the play, which of course also functions as a story itself. Who is really served by the stories we tell on life's stage - the audience, those we are close to, or ourselves?

Babble, Babble, Words: The Solitary Child, The Absent Father, and the Roles of Codependence, Love and Storytelling in Samuel Beckett's *Endgame*

> "KAUF, 8, a girl, thinks with her memory.
>
> "Memory is something in the head which makes us think."
>
> - What do you think this memory is like.
>
> "It is a little square of skin, rather oval, and inside there are stories (les histoires)."
>
> Jean Piaget, *The Child's Conception of the World*, 1929

"Then babble, babble, words, like the solitary child who turns himself into children, two, three, so as to be together, and whisper together, in the dark."

Samuel Beckett, *Endgame*, 1957

Samuel Beckett's play *Endgame* is many things - a commentary on parent and child relationships, on partnered relationships, and on power dynamics within these as well as between groups of people. These relationships are further affected by factors such as codependency, disability, aging, infirmity and death. *Endgame* also functions as an examination of the art of storytelling, its origins and its purpose, all while being conscious of its own status as a story. All of these elements are linked together so carefully that it is difficult to discuss any one without also examining the others. Much of Beckett's work focused on the workings of the mind and the relation of mind to body. Scholars of the medical humanities, Barry et al. note that "it is certainly hard to think of a non-medically-trained writer who has returned more insistently to the phenomenological experience of disorder and the technical language of neurological and psychological dysfunction" (127-128). They also relate that "Beckett took extensive notes (held in Trinity College Dublin) on contemporary psychology and psychoanalysis in the 1930s; he also read medical text books and the neurological conditions they detailed with more attention than one would expect from a casually interested amateur" (127). Regardless of this background and knowledge, like any good writer, Beckett chooses to show us what his story about rather than tell us explicitly. *Endgame* is written in a way that allows us to ask questions and invites various possible interpretations - while Beckett never says outright that this is a story about dysfunctional relationships and the cyclical nature of

parental abuse and neglect, an attentive reading and analysis of the text makes this an easy and well-supported conclusion.

While *Endgame* features a variety of relationships between individuals, the most prevalent are the relationships between parents and children, particularly fathers and sons. The central character, Hamm, functions as both a father and a child within the narrative. His ward, Clov, who Hamm eventually acknowledges to himself and the audience only as his adopted son, functions most noticeably as a child but also deals with the possibility of becoming a father figure himself later in the play. Beckett scholar Eric Levy notes that “the figure of the abandoned or neglected child” is a particular focus in *Endgame* (273). Throughout the play there are many behaviours, speeches and interactions that line up with what we expect to see from abused or neglected children.

Clov’s opening words almost immediately illustrate this when he states “I can’t be punished any more,” and follows up by saying he must “wait for him to whistle me” (Beckett 8). While there are various ways to interpret these statements, they resemble the thoughts of a child who fears their next interaction with an abusive parent. The meaning of “can’t be punished any more” is vague, however. Does Clov mean he won’t stand for any more punishment, or that it’s impossible for him to be punished any further as his life is already at its lowest point? He also laughs to himself in a stiff and mechanical way, not seeming truly amused (7). Is this simply a routine, or perhaps some sort of defence mechanism? Perhaps laughing at his situation, even if it’s insincere, helps him to feel more secure or in control. But then we’re introduced to Hamm, the person Clov fears, and quickly we see childish behaviour from him as well. His very first words are “Me - to play” (8).

"Play," like many things in *Endgame*, can be understood to mean various things. *Endgame* is very conscious of its own status as a stage play, with multiple fourth wall breaks and Hamm himself even named after a "ham" actor who sees his world as a stage. There's also the metaphor of playing a game, as demonstrated by the play's title which also appears within the text near the ending and refers to the final moves of a game of chess. But another possibility that comes to mind with this introductory speech is child's play, in which a child might entertain oneself alone or with others. While we can't be entirely sure what sort of "play" Hamm is so eager to begin, we can soon notice another behaviour common in children who have troubled relationships with their parents. He can't seem to bear to be left alone even for a moment. As soon as he orders Clov to move, causing him to be out of reach, he calls out to him to reassure himself that Clov is still there. The concept of anxious attachment, in which a child becomes distressed when a caregiver isn't present, wasn't clearly defined in child psychology until the 1960s. However, it's certainly possible that Beckett had himself observed the sort of behaviour that term categorizes, or read related psychology. It is currently believed that children who display avoidant/ambivalent or "anxious" attachment styles are more likely to be those who are abused or neglected by caregivers, and often experience difficulties forming healthy relationships as adults (McCarthy & Taylor 465). A similar cycle of dysfunction is clearly seen throughout *Endgame*.

Hamm also displays childlike self-centredness. In *The Child's Conception of the World*, a landmark text on child psychology from 1929, Jean Piaget states that a "child shows a keen interest in himself, a logical, and no doubt a moral, egocentricity" and suggests that a child "confuses his self with the universe" (125). We can see evidence of Hamm doing the same frequently. For instance, he refers to beings other than himself, even his family, as "creatures" who "suffer as much as such creatures can suffer" while asking himself "Can there be misery (…) loftier than mine?"

(9). Though he does acknowledge the potential that the others may be suffering just as much, he seems reluctant to believe it. Hamm feels his own suffering most keenly and dramatizes it, such as when Clov asks him “Do you believe in the life to come?” and he responds “Mine was always that,” suggesting he feels his life is yet to be lived even as he hogs the spotlight (57). This self-centred worldview, which later extends to complete disregard for not only his family but the outside world and the thought of a higher power, is a recurring theme.

Another of the childish behaviours Hamm displays which are especially seen in abused or neglected children is that of clinging to items that provide comfort, but temporarily or permanently discarding them in moments of intense stress. Hamm throws his toy dog away from him twice, once within view of Clov and once at the end of the play (65, 93). While this can be read as a rejection of Clov, who made the dog and appears to identify with it, Levy interprets the final act of discarding thus: “The abandoned child has himself been discarded, and so can find protection only through identifying with discarding” (273). A child who fears their possessions might be taken away by a parent may behave similarly, defensively throwing away the things they care for before they can be taken from them. Hamm’s handkerchief is one thing he doesn’t throw away or reject at the end, and may well be serving as a last item of self-comfort, which also allows him to hide (93).

Nagg’s neglect of Hamm in childhood, and Hamm’s treatment of Clov in turn, displays a pattern that can be taken beyond the two of them to illustrate what Levy refers to as the “problematics of love,” in which the “problem of love” is entwined with “the problem of God.” God, oft positioned as a father figure, is unresponsive to prayer - see the rote repetition in Nagg’s prayer and how meaningless it is (63). Hamm mocks the futility of the prayer, saying of God, “The bastard! He doesn’t exist!” (64). This same dynamic is echoed in the relationship of Hamm and his

father - Nagg admits that Hamm called to him as “a tiny boy (…) frightened, in the dark, and I was your only hope” and that he “didn’t listen” when woken up (64, 65). Now the situation has been reversed - Nagg is only woken to be an audience for Hamm, though Clov insists “he doesn’t want to listen to your story” (57). Nagg wishes to see it reversed yet again, telling Hamm, “I hope the day will come when you’ll really need to have me listen to you, and need to hear my voice, any voice. Yes, I hope I’ll live till then” (64-5). In Hamm’s final speech, he corrects “You prayed” to “you CRIED for night; it comes,” but does it make any difference when neither a child’s cries nor prayers get any response? (91). The existence of a loving parent and the existence of God are both cast into doubt, and this doubt may also serve as a source of the fear and unease the characters display. Piaget states that “it is when some phenomenon appears doubtful, strange and above all frightening that the child credits it with a purpose” (189).

This fear of the unknown extends to the outside world as well. The very concept of an “outside world” is complicated in Endgame, as we are not given much information as to what has happened in that landscape. It is a common assumption of scholars that the majority of Beckett’s writing is about the interior workings of the mind, and that his settings, including Endgame’s non-descript room with two windows, might represent a skull or head. Beckett himself once remarked in his own collection of stories, “Stories and Texts for Nothing,” that “we are needless to say in a skull” (Levy 265). With this context in mind, it is easy to see that the outside world might simply represent other people, and thoughts and feelings outside one’s own. Note Hamm’s observation that “beyond is the…other hell” (33). Perhaps, as Beckett’s contemporary Jean-Paul Sartre said in *No Exit*, “hell is other people.” Hamm’s description of all outside as “zero” and “corpsed,” implying that it is nonexistent or dead and therefore lacks relevance to him, can thus be read as a refusal to acknowledge the feelings of others (37). When Hamm wishes to hear the sea though one of the

windows, Clov says “you wouldn’t hear it,” but Hamm orders him to open it anyway and hears nothing (73). We are left believing that even were there something to hear, Hamm might ignore it anyway. And during a fourth wall break when Clov examines the audience with a telescope, his description of “a multitude… in transports… of joy” is scoffed at, and Hamm and Clov consider laughing at the very idea of other people experiencing happiness but decide not to (36-7). Is this because they don’t believe such people exist, or that happiness itself doesn’t?

Love and emotion in general are just as much of a problem here. Hamm displays some self-awareness of this when he says he saw “inside my breast (…) a big sore” and Clov scoffs “you saw your heart” - Hamm replies “No, it was living.” His capacity to feel and display emotion have diminished such that he sees his “heart,” likely in the emotional rather than the physical sense of the word, as dead. He follows this up by asking incredulously of Clov, “We’re not beginning to…to… mean something?” which is followed by an equally disbelieving response and laughter (40). Hamm’s chief emotional investment is seen to be in his own feelings, and he is filled with self-pity, as shown when he claims to have had “no father” and “no home” (46). Is he denying the very existence of Nagg and the roof over his head, or simply asserting that they do not count as such? As for Clov, he mechanically admits that Hamm was a father to him, and that his house was a home, but he displays no emotion during these statements, giving the impression he is only saying what is expected. In disregarding the possibility of a loving father, a loving god, other people, and happiness and love themselves, Hamm and to a lesser extent Clov take childish self-centredness to an extreme. They treat the very idea of love, pity and compassion for others as meaningless, and as Levy notes, “love cannot be distinguished from the fear of abandonment” (274). Another scholar, Michael Davidson, focuses on the role of compassion. Clov says to Hamm near the end, “There’s one thing I’ll never understand. Why I always obey you. Can you explain that to me?”

Davidson notes how manipulative Hamm's reply is, in that he is "providing moral justifications for living under oppression" when he calls it "a kind of great compassion" (Davidson 23; Beckett 84). One rare hint of genuine emotion is shown when Hamm states twice of a painter and engraver he once knew, "I had a great fondness for him" (52). The repetition draws emphasis to his statement, almost as if he is begging someone to take notice of the fact that he felt this way for someone, once. His relationships with Nagg, Nell and Clov show little of such sentiment, though at one time Hamm does ask Clov "Will you not kiss me?" (75). Clov's refusal to display affection for Hamm in this manner is simultaneously reminiscent of a troubled relationship between partners or one between a touch-averse or fearful child and a parent. The lines between father and son, romantic partners, or caretaker and ward are all blurred here, and further complicated by the characters' disability and codependency.

In examining the condition of "abject dependency" in Endgame, Davidson notes that it is "a condition underwritten by attitudes about gender and class." While it is easy to read Hamm and Clov as father and son, Clov also functions in a caretaking role that resembles that of a romantic partner - more stereotypically, a wife. Davidson notes that Hamm is a "pitiful version of the breadwinner," largely emasculated by his current state of disability and dependency, and Clov does labor he is never thanked for and is often "relegated to the domestic kitchen" (Davidson 25). At one point Hamm makes a leering and somewhat misogynistic comment about his own mother, stating she was "bonny once" and "a great one for the men," and this illustrates that he may resent women in general (50). It is also interesting that Nagg's name is a bit of a gender reversal, as the "nagging wife" is a common stereotype. The name may have been chosen to illustrate his role in the narrative - he nags his son for displaying sentiment and weakness, often seen as "feminine" qualities - but this seems hypocritical given the role he plays.

Nagg and Nell, when they are shown to interact, display no more genuine love or sentiment than the others, though attempts are made. When Nell first appears and asks Nagg “Time for love?” it feels jarring, because we already feel that love has no place here. She quickly acknowledges this, asking “Why this farce, day after day?” (21). At one point Nagg laughs at Hamm when he’s being introspective, and Nell asks him to stop but admits “nothing is funnier than unhappiness” and then examines that statement, saying “we laugh, with a will, in the beginning. But it’s always the same thing. Yes, it’s like the funny story we have heard too often” (26). When Nagg and Nell reminisced upon their youth just beforehand, it felt uncomfortable and mechanical - their laughter forced like the laugh track in a sitcom - and her analysis drives home the impression that their stories have been told over and over to each other for years (22-3). When Nagg asks if Nell can scratch his back and she is unable to do so, he asks “Are you crying again?” and she responds “I was trying” (27). It’s unclear whether she means she was trying to scratch him, or trying to cry - if she must *try* to cry, this displays further emotional numbness. They show the same sort of codependency Hamm and Clov do, but it’s even more severe thanks to their advanced disability - when Nell says “I am going to leave you,” we know she can only retreat into her can or die, which she later does (26). Clov at least has the potential to walk away.

Regardless of this potential, is becomes increasingly difficult to imagine Clov freeing himself from the dysfunctional cycle he is stuck in as we observe his poor physical condition and the extent to which he and Hamm are locked into their routines. Levy asserts that these automatic, emotionless interactions are performed as a source of comfort - if a child no longer needs parental love that might never be returned, then the child has reached a state of autonomy, and that is more comforting than feeling need (Levy 276). The very first interactions we see display the depth of the pair’s dysfunction, as Hamm tells Clov “You pollute the air!” while simultaneously relying on

him as a caretaker (10). Hamm is aware that this is not a healthy situation, as we can see from his asking Clov "Have you not had enough (…) of this thing" (11). Clov's detached response, "It may end," followed by "All life long the same questions, the same answers" displays his resignation. Both know the pattern and that freeing themselves from it is unlikely (12).

When Hamm says "I'll give you just enough to keep you from dying. You'll be hungry all the time" he is talking about food, but could just as well be talking about their emotional connection (12). Once love enters the discussion, Clov admits he loved Hamm once, and Hamm recognizes "I've made you suffer too much" (13). However, he makes no effort to ease this suffering, instead immediately ordering Clov to forgive him, a selfish demand rather than a request (14). He also shows victim-blaming behaviour when he asks Clov "Why don't you kill me," placing the blame on Clov for not acting rather than himself for making Clov miserable (15). When he says "outside of here it's death," we can't be sure whether he's showing concern for Clov or simply trying to control him, but the latter seems more likely (16). Hamm is overly critical of Clov, as seen when he gets angry about the toy dog Clov made for him, asking nit-picking questions about its colour, sex and whether it's wearing a ribbon. Clov, in response, becomes frustrated and defensive (48). This sort of interaction would feel familiar to anyone who's lived with a consistently overbearing and critical parent or partner. Hamm is often mocking and scornful towards Clov, such as when he orders him to have "A bright idea" and exclaims "What a brain!" when Clov cannot solve the problem of how Hamm can know for certain whether he's left the home or not, when he himself cannot work it out (54, 55).

Clov's role in this cycle of dysfunction is a bit more reflective and self-aware, though he still clearly struggles to face the idea of making any changes. When asked "Don't we laugh?" he responds with "I don't feel like it" after considering the possibility (18). He's apathetic and sees

no point in playing at having a good time when they're obviously not. His self-pity seems to take others into consideration more than Hamm's, such as when he remarks "No one that ever lived ever thought so crooked as we" (18). He includes Hamm in this statement rather than being entirely self-focused, and his concern about the crookedness of their thinking could be seen as concern for others who might have to interact with them. He realizes that harm is being caused, as shown when Hamm says "We do what we can" and he replies "We shouldn't" (18). Together, they find little to agree on, like a bickering couple who resent each other too much to share an opinion on anything, as seen when they argue about something so inconsequential as the sound of the clock's alarm - Clov thinks the end is "terrific" while Hamm says "I prefer the middle" (56). They do agree that there's one thing worth laughing at, and that's the idea of Hamm having honour - when Hamm suggests he can swear on it, they both laugh "heartily" according to the stage direction, a rare moment of genuine mirth (58).

As prevalent as routine, detached interactions are within Endgame, there are also many instances of the anger, frustration, manipulation and control that are hallmarks of abusive and codependent relationships. See Hamm's self-serving demands for forgiveness from Clov (14;19), as well as his anger at his own parents for keeping him awake (25) and for procreating, resulting in his birth (16-17). His abuse of Clov intensifies and is particularly notable near the end of the play, when the possibility of Clov actually leaving him is introduced. He becomes agitated, pleading for Clov not to leave his chair in the wrong part of the room (85) and going so far as to ask Clov to hit him "with the gaff (…) or with the axe" instead of the toy dog, basically asking Clov to kill him. Yet he still responds "Never!" when Clov asks "Let's stop playing" (85-6). This makes perfect sense, as the idea of Clov's departure indicates a shift to the balance of power and control that Hamm has previously enjoyed, and the escalation and subsequent refusal to stop "playing" is

an attempt to recapture his power and to continue perpetuating the cycle. Davidson notes how "dependent relationships in Beckett are never symmetrical" - the balance of power is clearly in Hamm's favour for most of the play - and that "when characters are alone, they are haunted by spectres from the past" which we observe through some of Hamm's speeches and stories, particularly his ending monologue (Davidson 17). When Hamm says "You want him to bloom while you are withering? Be there to solace your million last moments?" it is unclear whether he is referring to the man in his story - likely Clov's father, who sought help from Hamm for his child at home - or himself, who now looks to Clov in the same way. Most likely, it is both. When he says "You ought to know what the earth is like, nowadays," he is then finally criticizing his own actions as well (92).

Clov, too, has moments of anger, frustration and childlike rebellion. See his annoyance with the seeds he planted, saying "If they were going to sprout they would have sprouted" and following with "They'll never sprout!" (20). He's identifying with the seeds, his anger at them for not sprouting standing in for his anger at himself for not leaving. He compares himself to a dog multiple times, saying he's been trying to "be off," or leave, "ever since (he) was whelped" and asking Hamm "Do you not want your dog? (…) Then I'll leave you" in a way that suggests he sees Hamm's toy dog, which he made, as a stand-in for himself (21; 76). When Hamm asks him what "yesterday" means, he responds "that means that bloody awful day, long ago, before this bloody awful day. I use the words you taught me. If they don't mean anything any more, teach me others. Or let me be silent" in a response that recalls teenage rebellion, which Davidson refers to as an attempt to "challenge parental authority" (Beckett 51; Davidson 25). He even admits of Hamm, "If I could kill him I'd die happy" but seems to be resigned to the fact he probably won't do so (35). Such fantasies of revenge are common for victims of continuous domestic abuse. We know

Clov is such a victim from his ending speech, describing how he was taken in by Hamm and how he was subsequently treated:

"They said to me, That's friendship, yes, yes, no question, you've found it. They said to me, Here's the place, stop, raise your head and look at all that beauty. That order! (…) They said to me, What skilled attention they get, all these dying of their wounds. (…) I say to myself - sometimes, Clov, you must learn to suffer better than that if you want them to weary of punishing you - one day. I say to myself - sometimes, Clov, you must be there better than that if you want them to let you go - one day" (89).

Clov acknowledges, however, that he gave up long ago, when Hamm asks if he is "neither gone nor dead" and he replies "In spirit only (…) both." When Hamm replies "Gone from me you'd be dead," Clov's response is "And vice versa." This illustrates a codependent relationship at its most extreme (79).

They both show fear towards the thought of this vicious cycle continuing, as we can see when Hamm worries "humanity might start from there all over again" as Clov mentions having a flea on him, and from Clov's dismay at seeing a small boy approach through the window (87). Clov takes the last painkillers when he departs, and we can't be certain why - does he simply not want Hamm to have them, does he need them for himself to be able to walk, or might he be considering suicide (80)? Does he actually ever depart at all? Hamm's final speech may display regrets but it is also spiteful and theatrical, self-serving to the last. When he asks that Clov "cry in darkness" he paints himself as a life-giving light that Clov will now be without, and the effect is horrific given what we now know about Clov's mistreatment (91).

Hamm's use of storytelling to manipulate others and aggrandize himself is a repeated theme of Endgame, as is storytelling in general. The excerpt from Piaget at the outset of this essay shows one concept of the origins and role of storytelling - the child quoted associates stories with memory in a very literal way, believing memories are physical objects within the head. Remember also the assertion by some scholars that the entirety of Endgame may take place within a skull. Throughout Endgame stories get repeated over and over, from one character to another as well as to the audience. But how did all this tale-telling begin? There's that "solitary child who turns himself into children" to "whisper together, in the dark," telling himself stories, making up characters and dialogue so as not to be alone (78). When describing this process, Hamm is alone, and refers to Clov as his son a single time. It's a moment of intense vulnerability and might prompt the audience to feel sorry for Hamm, even though much of the play inspires no such sympathy. But Hamm's acknowledgement of how his storytelling habit may have been formed only raises more questions. Is all of this taking place in Hamm's mind? Are his parents and Clov simply creations with which he keeps himself company? When Hamm brings up the idea of being observed by some "rational being" - an outsider - is he simply asking Clov, or us as an audience, whether anything or anyone matters if it is not observed by others (41)? Clov calls Hamm's autobiographical tale "the one you've been telling yourself all your days" (67). But in the end, who is that story really for?

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