

# How Hamm Delivers Existential Anxiety in *Endgame*

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## **Abstract:**

*Endgame* is a play that encapsulates Samuel Beckett's existential ideas. It is set in a fictional, enclosed house and unfolds through conversations among four characters. Hamm and Clov engage in a dynamic master-slave relationship as they await the end. The play illustrates the recognition of existence and the anxiety surrounding the impending end through conflicts between the characters, addressing themes of life and existentialism. It exemplifies Beckett's distinctive aesthetic qualities and offers spectators the opportunity to reflect on humanity's struggles with fate and the inevitable end of life through this absurd tragicomedy. *Endgame* has attracted scholars for analysis due to its unique narrative style and the core idea of existentialism. Nothingness, vacancy and misery have been widely discussed since its publication. This essay will focus on the existential anxiety conveyed by the main character, Hamm, examining Beckett's narrative style and how Hamm responds to the anxiety of existence by referencing Sartre's ideas of existentialism.

**Keywords:** Existential Anxiety; Samuel Beckett; *Endgame*; Master-Slave Relationship; Disability and Control

## **Disabled body**

The disabled body in *Endgame* aids readers in understanding the existential anxiety conveyed by the play. Hamm is blind and cannot walk unaided; he relies on a wheelchair to navigate the room. His blindness limits his direct perception of the world. Without sight, Hamm loses vital control over his body. As soon as he can see nothing, he is unable to interact with his surroundings or himself. This visual impairment diminishes his ability to self-regulate. According to Wahl, 'humankind strives from birth to death for what they have labeled primary control, that is, ways and means to impact one's own environment

to achieve important life goals.'<sup>1</sup> However, older individuals face the challenge of diminishing physical function as time progresses. Visual impairment, including blindness, poses a significant challenge to bodily control. This condition can lead to anxiety and depression stemming from the loss of primary bodily control. Furthermore, the loss of vision may result in additional psychological issues, such as heightened loneliness and despair. The loss of sight renders Hamm's anxious movements understandable. Moreover, his blindness can be seen as a form of rejection; the world has rejected both his sight and his efforts to feel and explore. Hamm's spiritual realm is estranged

from the material world, deprived of its most immediate sense. A vacuum exists between his self-awareness and the external world, which refuses all interaction. This setting creates a platform for spectators to investigate the essence of existence. As Sartre once illustrated, 'We choose in the presence of others, and we choose ourselves in the presence of others'.<sup>2</sup> The character's isolated consciousness in the play demonstrates the dilemma of existence. Hamm is acutely aware of his own depression and irritability; these feelings are both valid and troubling. However, when considering his isolation, he appears not to exist in the world. The contradiction of existential theory and his anxious feelings provide space for discussion on existential anxiety. Additionally, as Hamm loses control of his body and the outside world, his self-consciousness intensifies. Based on the anxiety of losing control, Hamm demands many things he believes he can dominate. In this case, his intense self-consciousness could be appeased. For example, he asks Clov to move him to the centre of the room. When Clov placed him in the right place, he asked Clov to move left and right. He needs the centre, which he thought, rather than the actual center of the room. Hamm is blind and would not know the middle of the room, yet he insists that his perception is more accurate than Clov's sight. Hamm does not seek the centre of the room; he asks for an affirmation of his consciousness. In moving him, Clov's obedience validates the authenticity of Hamm's feelings. Hamm's domination over Clov bridges the vacuum that exists between his consciousness and the outside world. There is a connection between him and Clov that may validate his existence. However, he still requires Clov's obedience and affirmation to substantiate his consciousness since Clov sometimes refuses to follow his orders. The disability of the body and the uncertain response of Clov place Hamm in a passive status with sensory isolation, which demonstrates his anxiety about existence.

#### Dependent relationship

Hamm's anxiety is rooted in his identity as a failed dominator. Throughout the play, he appears to establish a master-slave relationship with Clov. However, their relationship remains one of dependence rather than domination, as Hamm perceives it. Popovic once noted that 'o. Their statements mean that the existence of one protagonist, no matter how insignificant it might seem, depends fully on the presence of the other.'<sup>1</sup> Their existence is interdependent, and this mutual reliance manifests as a sense of presence. As long as Hamm is unable to move, his height-

ened self-awareness fuels his desire to dominate and control others. His demands of Clov transcend daily life and simple movement; he seeks agreement and spiritual obedience. Hamm knew that he had made Clov suffer too much and required Clov's forgiveness. He tries to manipulate Clov's mental responses to alleviate his anxiety within their relationship. He realises he is irritating and has caused Clov considerable suffering, yet he cannot resist his urge to dominate Clov. As Sartre illustrates, 'While I attempt to free myself from the hold of the Other, the Other is trying to free himself from mine; while I seek to enslave the Other, the Other seeks to enslave me. We are by no means dealing with unilateral relations with an object-in-itself, but with reciprocal and moving relations.'<sup>2</sup> The mutually dependent relationship between Hamm and Clov underscores Hamm's existence. Clov's obedience reflects Hamm's domination and contributes to the formation of Hamm's presence. However, Hamm's commands go unfulfilled due to Clov's persistent resistance throughout their exchanges. In this scenario, Hamm experiences anxiety over losing control of Clov. Rei Noguchi remarks that 'by counter, I mean a type of speech which, instead of satisfying the expectations and obligations established by the immediately preceding solicitation (i.e., which succeeds as a 'proper response'), simultaneously challenges and solicits a speech of its own.'<sup>3</sup> Noguchi argues that Clov's resistance to communication signifies his challenge to Hamm's authority in their relationship from a socio-linguistic standpoint. Clov's defiance places Hamm in an awkward position, rendering his commands futile to his subordinate. In their discourse, Clov's responses encapsulate his resistance and disregard for Hamm. With no one else to command, Hamm's only servant has the opportunity to set aside his mental obligations and refrain from responding. From Hamm's perspective, as a man who has already lost his physical status, his intense desire to engage in social interaction is neglected and dismissed by Clov, the only individual he could connect with and was eager to integrate into the social framework. His attempts to assert his presence through Clov fail as Clov resists his dialogue. Faced with this situation, Hamm can do nothing but experience disappointment and accept that his demands will remain unanswered. This circumstance fuels the inherent motivation behind his anxiety. As soon as he fails to establish a connection and communicate with the

1 Pol Popovic, 'Beckett's "Endgame", As a Bond of Dependency', *Francofonia*, 25 (Autunno 1993), 15-26.

2 J.-P. Sartre, *Being and Nothingness: An Essay on Phenomenological Ontology*, trans. by H. E. Barnes, intro. by M. Warnock, with a new preface by R. Eyre (Routledge, 2003).

3 R. Noguchi, 'Style and Strategy in "Endgame"', *Journal of Beckett Studies*, 9 (1984), p.105.

world, both physically and mentally, his existential anxiety intensifies, and the audience can perceive his discomfort from the unacknowledged commands.

Abandon by nature

In *Endgame*, nature also plays a vital role in expressing Hamm's anxiety. Throughout the play, Hamm repeatedly mentions nature and conveys his longing for it. In his imagination and memory, nature manifests with specific times, weather, and animals, which might be interpreted as his experience of existing in the world. However, he can no longer feel it due to his inability to move, and Clov continually reminds him that the scenario and time outside are 'zero'. When he receives the negative reply from Clov, Hamm does not tend to accept the outcome but continues to express his imagination, which relies on his memory. He responded, 'But it should be sinking. Look again.'<sup>4</sup> The word 'should' implies modification and persuasion. He fails to accept the actual condition and even attempts to deny and alter the truth from his perspective. However, he cannot change the truth, and he maintains a denying attitude towards the condition, which differs from his memory. His extensive experience becomes futile in the face of the current situation. The passage of time invalidated his previous experiences, and his insistence reflects this phenomenon in nature. Hamm can no longer rely on his former recognition with nearly everything beyond his control. This circumstance plunges him into deeper anxiety. It is difficult to grasp what Clov means by 'zero,' leaving both the audience and Hamm confused. What readers can ascertain is that his nonsensical response exacerbates Hamm's anxiety regarding existence. Since he is unable to gather any information about nature, which includes time and space, he seems to have been forsaken by the world. His inability restricts him from perceiving and experiencing the world firsthand, and Clov's previous denial further weakens his situation. Moreover, his memory also declined as time passed. Since he was already isolated from the outside nature, losing his sense, his memory, which was constructed over his past sense, was removed

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 78.

by time. Hamm is slowly entering the vacuum and cutting off any connection with nature. This could be interpreted as the vanishing of his existence. The unrecognised nature and the vanishing memory towards it built the anxiety of not being in the world anymore.

## Conclusion

A disabled body, failed domination and isolation from nature contribute to the anxiety of Hamm. Beckett used those absurd settings to place the character in a vacuum in which he owned nothing and could not disobey the rule of fate. It delivered the feeling of a human being when facing the issue of existence and nothingness. In this way, Hamm's irritable status reflects the writer's concern about existential anxiety. As stated by Sartre, the dynamic dependent relationship between people illustrates the nature of human existence. Once isolated and outside of the material world, people will be surrounded by nothingness and fail to recognise their identity and ensure their existence. Through the same situation with Hamm, spectators will earn a new idea of the anxiety of existence.

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