

From Absurd to Ecosophy: An Eco-Critical Observation in Samuel Beckett's *Endgame*

Dipal Pandya

PhD Research Scholar, Gujarat University, Ahmedabad

Abstract: *The ecological aspects have been presented in the various forms of literature throughout the centuries. The paper examines the famous play Endgame by Samuel Beckett through the theory of ecocriticism. World War II had greatly influenced Beckett as a writer. The present paper attempts to shift the focus of the reader from Absurdity and Existentialism to ecological thoughts. To reread this one-act play as a pioneer to ecocriticism, it is ironically the perfect play for the period of anxiety about climate change, which escapes both sensory apprehension and standard representation. Reading Beckett in this way can perhaps trigger a more radical conversation with those not initially persuaded by ecocriticism's focus on nature.*

Keywords: Ecology, Ecocriticism, Absurd Theatre, Anthropocentrism, Ecosphere, Post modernism, Post-structuralism, existentialism

Donald Hughes remarks:

Human ecology, then, is a rational study of how mankind interrelates with the home of the human species, the earth; with its soil and mineral resources; with its water, both fresh and salt; with its air, climates and weather; with its many living things, animals and planets, from the simplest to the most complex; and with the energy received ultimately from the sun. (Hughes 3)

Ecocriticism has developed as a study of the relationship between literature and the natural environment in the mid-1990's. "Ecocriticism" is a term derived from Greek *oikos* and *kritis*. "Oikos" means "household," a relationship of humans, nature and the spirit. "Kritis" means justice, "the arbiter of taste who wants the house kept in good order (Howarth 1988: 163) in all respects. This being a recent theory, different thinkers and critics have used the approach and mode variously, and, accordingly, defined the term—ecocriticism in diverse ways. However, their basic concerns being similar, the various approaches generally focus on the relationship between human and the earth. Ecocriticism is the study of literature and environment from an interdisciplinary point of view where all sciences come together to analyze the environment and reach at possible resolutions for the correction of the contemporary environmental condition.

Eco-criticism has established as an essential by-product of the raise in ecological awareness occurred during the 1960's especially in the United States. Rachel Carson's book *Silent Spring* (1962) is acknowledged to be a landmark in the birth of modern environmentalism. It was neither the only nor the first book on the problem, that had been debated for years before the American biologist and writer caught the attention of the public with her work on the destructive and indiscriminate use of pesticides, which was triggering serious damage to the environment and to the life of people and animals. It had tremendous impact on public opinion, which raised a fierce criticism and opposition as well as enthusiastic support and a growing realization that something was wrong with the health of the earth. The criticism and support both have been reflected in the literature of all over the globe.

Literature can be anticipated as an aesthetically and culturally assembled part of the environment, since it directly addresses the questions of human constructions, such as meaning, value, language, and imagination, which can, then, be linked to the problem of ecological awareness that humans need to conquer. The eco-critics state that the environmental crisis is a question that cannot be overlooked in literary studies. Ecological aspects and anxieties are well reflected in the different forms of literature such as poetry, novels, fiction-prose etc. except drama. Una Chaudhuri, in *There Must be a Lot of Fish in That Lake* comments:

Ecological victory will require a trans valuation so profound as to be nearly unimaginable at present. And in this the arts and humanities—including the theater— must play a role. (Chaudhuri.1)

The works of environmentally modulated literature in all the genres except drama abound. The plays that treat nature and environment, in all ages and nations, are exceptional. One can account for such basic difference by remembering that drama lends itself to neither the enthusiasm nor the scientific detachment that mixes environmental literature. Moreover, ecological crises are far more common now than before the Industrial Revolution, before the great world plays were written.

The theater academics have claimed that, formally and ideologically, landscape and ecology are approximately identical. The landscape struggles ecological concerns, contributing to anthropocentric attitudes by defining the natural world from humans and the theater they make. Maurice Maeterlinck's *The Blind* (1890), Anton Chekhov's *The Seagull* (1895) and Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* (1949) as examples, that landscape theater performs nature as a framed, aesthetic creation in order to criticize the "ruptures" between humans and the ecosystem generated, at times, by the theater itself. Equally, through readings of ecologically oriented plays including Henrik Ibsen's *An Enemy of the People* (1882), Anton Chekhov's *The Cherry Orchard* (1904) debate that ecology theater seeks relations between ecosystems, their occupants and the theater, pointing beyond the theatrical frame, physical or theoretical, to the ecosphere.

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Samuel Beckett's *Endgame*, is a one-act play consists of four characters. It was formerly written in French (entitled *Fin de partie*); Beckett himself translated it into English. The play is commonly considered, along with such works as *Waiting for Godot*, to be among Beckett's most important works. Samuel Beckett's *Endgame* states, in common with some environmentalists, that "there's no more nature" - but refuses to reveal the proportions of its nonexistence. Reread as a pioneer to ecocriticism, it is ironically the perfect play for the period of anxiety about climate change, which escapes both sensory apprehension and standard representation.

Post-structuralism setting still seems to be projecting in Beckett criticism. The latest phase of Beckettian criticism, an ecocritical perspective, has fundamentally transformed the conversation at hand through the work of Greg Garrard "*Endgame: Beckett's Ecological Thought*". This is absolutely against the grain of approaches to Beckett thus far, which Garrard openly reports in his analysis of *Endgame*. Garrard argues that *Endgame* can be read as a dramatic representation of life that anticipates global warming. He claims that Beckett's rejection to permit audience a view of nature in the play is a precise representation of global warming's un-presentability. Thus, Beckett's work bears the stamp of canonical literature in its capability to speak to different readers in different time periods on the issues facing their lives during their historical moment.

The play *Endgame* is in fatal decline, mourning of supports. From the beginning, Clov witnesses the outside world with only a "brief laugh" for its passing, implying depending on the actor and director- scorn, vindication or amazement. By contrast, Hamm's pompous understanding in desolation is demonstrated by trite nostalgia: "What dreams! Those forests!" (12). This sub-or post-nuclear family is abandoned in its shelter as supplies and physical flexibility run endlessly down because "Outside of here it's death" (15). Clov reports "Zero" from outside, and there are no more bicycle wheels and no more "pap" for Hamm's papa Nagg- he has to make do with a dog biscuit- prompting this mordant exchange:

HAMM: Nature has forgotten us.

CLOV: There's no more nature.

HAMM: No more nature! You exaggerate.

CLOV: In the vicinity.

HAMM: But we breathe, we change! We lose our hair, our teeth! Our bloom! Our ideals!

CLOV: Then she hasn't forgotten us. (Beckett. 16)

Hamm's interjection changes the meaning of "nature" has come to mean nothing but deterioration and weakness. At least in that awful, cheap sense, Clov reports, "She hasn't forgotten us." Whereas our orthodox sense of nature recognizes both vitality and decay, the world of *Endgame* will not allow so much as a seed to sprout: "Clov: If they were going to sprout they would have sprouted. [violently] They'll never sprout" (Beckett. 17). There are shelters from this violently entropic environment, but they are always either presented with absurdly histrionic wistfulness or else

more immediately weaken. Thus Nagg and Nell, resting on stumps wedged in sand:

NAGG: I've lost me tooth.

NELL: When?

NAGG: I had it yesterday.

NELL (*elegiac*): Ah

yesterday (Beckett. 18).

For imaginative failure at the core of the sublime. Beckett's depiction of nature and humanity in *Endgame* eventually challenged demonstration. Nature, in other words, is never represented on the stage. From his window, Clov reports on the status of nature as 'corpsed.' Lyotard's sublime is thus suitable for analyzing the internal and external waste of the drama. Furthermore, Hales' articulation of the nuclear sublime allows spectators to identify nuclear technology at the heart of *Endgame*'s wasteland.

Endgame becomes a portrayal of the end game of life itself in the wake of nuclear activity, as both the characters and the setting are in a state of highest corrosion. Hamm and Clov, however, exemplify broken humanity in a deeper sense. They are tangled in a brutal master-slave relationship where both are inescapably bound to one another. Hamm's parents, Nagg and Nell, are trapped in wastebaskets with sawdust as their only comfort. *Endgame*'s characters ultimately suffer and abuse one another to no end.

Human nature and nature itself become destroyed and unnatural. Put differently, nature in both these senses becomes unrepresentable by Beckett. The setting's external waste is reflected within the characters themselves in the drama. The play, further, registers the fears and anxieties surrounding nuclear warfare during the 1950's. Because of the drama's implicit portrayal of technology's destructive power, *Endgame* can also be read as a deeper critique of modernity.

The external and internal destruction resulting from nuclear warfare highlights the dangers of blind faith in technological progress. The nuclear bomb, which led to further developments in nuclear technology, began as a direct result of World War II. The Manhattan Project's successful completion of the hydrogen bomb helped to assure Allied victory over Nazi forces. It also caused one of the most horrific and destructive acts by humanity against other human beings:

Endgame portrays the total domination of both nature and humanity, that which has become unrepresentable, and thus implicitly acts as a warning to modernity's trust in ideologies that perpetuate technological progress towards human liberation by representing the aftermath such a project can have. This allows *Endgame* to be read as a critique of modernity's ideological project of the rational mastery of nature through technology. (Collins. 79)

Nell is perhaps the most concerned character in the play, forced to admit: "Nothing is funnier than unhappiness" (20). The Romantic notion of finding respite in nature is absurd.

When they do come across some vestige of the non-human world, usually some unwanted companion of mankind- the response is villainy and comedy:

CLOV (*anguished, scratching himself*): I have a flea!

HAMM: A flea! Are there still fleas?

CLOV: On me there's one. (*Scratching.*)

Unless it's a crab louse.

HAMM (*very perturbed*): But humanity might start from there all over again! Catch him, for the love of God!

CLOV: I'll go and get the powder. (*Exit Clov.*)

HAMM: A flea! This is awful! What a day!

(*Enter Clov with a sprinkling-tin.*)

CLOV: I'm back again, with the insecticide.

HAMM: Let him have it!

(*Clov loosens the top of his trousers, pulls it forward and shakes powder into the aperture. He stoops, looks, waits, starts, frenziedly shakes more powder, stoops, looks, waits.*)

CLOV: The bastard!(Beckett. 27)

As audience, we are limited to this room with these players. We are not approved ironic dominance over *Endgame*'s cast; we have no sense of what lies beyond the walls of this accommodation, and, for the duration of the play, we are as fixed in the dimness of *Endgame*'s setting as any of Beckett's characters. The only moment of dramatic perfection audience members and/or readers receive is when we physically put the play down or when we walk out of the theatre. There is, ultimately, no appeal to understanding - the ignorance of the drama is imposed upon the audience. Because of the apparently ruined environment, Beckett's *Endgame* seemingly alludes to natural desolation. *Endgame* indirectly invokes scenes of nuclear fallout and also of natural disaster, which will be explored later in this essay. And yet, *Endgame* records more than the natural disaster outside the shelter by concentrating with such painfully acute detail on the ruination of the players within. Absolute negation of all life reigns supreme in Beckett's vision of the world as portrayed in this play.

Beckett is directing his audience to the support that can come from memory and from story as a way of coping with bodies and minds that are trapped in a ruined world. Returning to the past, even if only through the act of memory or dreaming, provides some of the only pieces of hope in this space of despair. Hamm through memory, longs for the sky, the earth, the woods, and ultimately for a regenerated connection with nature and by allowance with himself. This reconnection is never granted. Hamm is instead planted in his chair and in the unfriendly landscape at hand, and only has recourse for solace from his longing through the purview of storytelling and dreaming. Humans are only able to recollect, not actualize, their connection to the environment. In a similar fashion, Nell also longs for nature and can only experience a connection to it through storytelling. Nell tells of a trip to Lake Como with depictions of nature as abstract, vague, and slightly disturbing. We learn that Nell's association to the natural world carries with it the effect of happiness and the potential for restored well-being that is ultimately unavailable in the same mode as Hamm: "It was deep, deep. And you could

see down to the bottom. So white. So clean" (29). She later repeats "you could see down to the bottom" (30), and "so white" (31). Nell's last line of *Endgame* refers to Lake Como as "desert!" (31)

Hence Beckett seems to be showing the desire Nell has to remember the natural magnificence of Lake Como, but instead is unable to do so much as Hamm is unable to recombine with nature as seen above. In short, through dreams and storytelling, Beckett shows us that a radical shift in nature and society has occurred which has caused the wasteland of *Endgame* to become manifest. However, Beckett never gives us a definitive answer as to what caused such violent death and destruction.

Conclusion

Beckett's depictions of inner and outer waste can thus be Eco critically analyzed as record-keeping the dangers modernity poses on the fragile and ductile relationship humanity has to nature. Beckett's work ultimately engages with the philosophical systems first-wave ecocriticism identify as at the root of our modern ecological crises. It does so by fictively and dramatically representing the horrific results on nature that threaten to radically change the way humans live on our planet. *Endgame* suggests life in the aftermath of modernity in its external and internal registers of waste. Thus reading Beckett in this way can perhaps spark a more radical conversation with those not initially persuaded by ecocriticism's focus on nature.

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