

# Postwar Trauma and Neglected Culture in Samuel Beckett's *Endgame*

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## Abstract

Irish writer Samuel Beckett's play *Endgame* portrays the living situation of the only four survivors in their waste world after World War II. It reflects the postwar trauma suffered by human beings as well as their neglect and disregard of culture, revealing westerners' survival and psychological crisis after World War II. The theme of postwar influence underlies seemingly absurd dialogues in the play. The emptiness and hopelessness embodied by the characters in *Endgame* are a reflection of westerners' disillusioned religious belief and psychological trauma. This paper explores the lingering shadow after the Second World War reflected in *Endgame*: westerners were fully aware of the fragility of human life, and thus felt extreme empty and hopeless; they realized the great lethality of weapons, which led them to overemphasize machinery and technology without valuing the importance of culture. By writing this play, Beckett warns people to face up to the postwar trauma, attach importance to cultural construction and development, and reshape their values to get out of their spiritual plight gradually.

**Keywords:** *Endgame*, Samuel Beckett, trauma, culture, War

## 1. Introduction

Samuel Beckett (1906-1989), the Irish playwright, is one of the most important playwrights of the twentieth century. His second play *Endgame* (1957) is a one-act play with four disabled characters, considered as Beckett's most obscure and difficult play. Beckett himself describes *Endgame* as "rather difficult and elliptic, mostly depending on the power of the text to claw, more inhuman than *Godot*" (Wolf and Fancher 1956: 5). Similarly, as Theodor Adorno famously notes, "understanding it [*Endgame*] can mean nothing other than understanding its incomprehensibility, or concretely reconstructing its meaning structure—that it has none" (1982: 120). For the reason that it is highly obscure and complex, this masterpiece has received numerous interpretations and criticism since its first premiere at the Royal Court Theatre in London in 1957. Researches in English mainly concentrate on existentialism, imperialism, Irishness and writing techniques in *Endgame*. In Marwa Hussein's study, he argues "Beckett's *Endgame* is an experience or a process through which human beings live in isolation and at the same time they long for the past that has been lost, for a sense of meaning, and for identity" (2011: 4). Hussein's paper focuses on isolation and alienation in *Endgame*, which bring about anxieties and prompt people to find their identity in the gloomy circumstance. What's more, many studies in China analyze *Endgame* from the perspective of existentialism, meta-theatrical study, symbolism, and so on. For instance, inspired by the meta-theatre theory of Lionel Abel and Richard Hornby, He Chengzhou's article explores the characteristics of Beckett's meta-theatre from the following three aspects: play-within-play, characters' self-consciousness and theatrical comments in Beckett's plays. In his view, Beckett's meta-theatre reveals the fictionalism of his stage. The characters, stage scenes and performances in Beckett's plays function as symbolic systems which need to be explained in detail (He 2004: 83, 85). Therefore, the interpretations of *Endgame* cover a wide range of issues, such as ecology, theology and philosophy.

Nowadays, scholars and theatre practitioners continue to produce groundbreaking work on *Endgame* with its limitless potential to facilitate various critical thinking. The devastation that followed the Second World War cast a lingering shadow on westerners, leaving them in a hopeless and faithless state, without a way out. People panicked and even lost their ability to survive the chaotic life after the War. It was against this background that Samuel Beckett writes *Endgame* in 1957. The issues of postwar influence play a significant part in *Endgame*, so this paper attempts to explore the characters' trauma and neglected culture after the Second World War, and reveal Samuel Beckett's attitude towards the war and his intention to write such a complicated and fascinating play.

## 2. Postwar Trauma

*Endgame* is set in the aftermath of the Second World War where the four disabled characters are caught in the plight of emptiness and despair. The play begins with Clov's announcement that "finished, it's finished, nearly finished, it must be nearly finished" (Beckett 2009: 5). Later, he complains that the whole universe stinks of corpses, which suggests the context of *Endgame*: the Second World War. Some critics do not attribute a specific background to the waste world in *Endgame*, but Adorno advocates its historical singularity—the World War II. "In *Endgame*, a historical moment is revealed, the experience which was cited in the title of the culture industry's rubbish book *Corpsed*. After the Second War, everything is destroyed" (Adorno 1982: 122). Similarly, Russell Smith argues that "*Endgame* addresses itself in particular to the historical situation of Europe after the Second World War, and to the problem of loss and of what to do with what remains" (Smith 2007: 100). The desolation and ruin depicted in the play allude to the western society after the War, which causes the miserable situation of the characters.

In *Endgame*, characters are anguished in the postwar society, suffering from personal wounds physically and spiritually. The four characters are all unhealthy and crippled: the protagonist Hamm is blind, hemiplegic, and placed in an armchair on castors; by contrast, his servant Clov suffers from a strange disease that makes him unable to sit down. Worse still, Hamm's parents have no legs and live in two ashbins. In order to relieve his physical pain, Hamm relies on pain-killer from time to time. However, he finds difficulty in alleviating his psychological suffering after the War. "Infinite emptiness will be all around you, all the resurrected dead of all the ages wouldn't fill it, and there you'll be like a little bit of grit in the middle of the steppe" (Beckett 2009: 36). This traumatic utterance exposes Hamm's isolation and tribulation. "Death is sensed inside and outside the room. The room symbolizes a shelter from the outside danger and in the same time it symbolizes a prison of the modern man who cannot move freely" (Hussein 2011: 20). Trapped like a speck in the dark forever, Hamm fails to go around freely, let alone get rid of endless emptiness and misery. He puts a blood-stained handkerchief over his face, and it not only embodies violence, damage and death in the War, but also indicates the shadow of emptiness and pessimism over his life.

Confronted with the scene of desolation and ruin after the War, the characters are fully aware of the fragility of human life, and hold out no hope for a promising future. In the depressing and gloomy shelter, two small windows high up in the wall serve as the medium to perceive the outside world, symbolizing hope for tomorrow and new possibility. However, out of the windows is just "muckheap" and "death" (Beckett 2009: 74), resulting in the despair and hopelessness of the characters. "Humanity vegetates along, crawling, after events which even the survivors cannot really survive, on a pile of ruins which even renders futile self-reflection of one's own battered state" (Adorno 1982: 122). Although the four characters survive the War, they are traumatized and even share a belief that it's nearly finished. "In presenting the last human survivors of some ill-defined catastrophe, who prolong their meager existence in a shelter among dwindling supplies, *Endgame* is a play about remainders, about the fact of remaining, about the awkward being-there of "remainderhood" (Smith 2007: 99). The War has killed all living creatures except the only four remainders. Unfortunately, they fail to treasure their life and live normally. Two ashbins in the room are supposed to collect trash, but they collect the stems of Hamm's parents unexpectedly. The trace of deserted human beings unveils that the surviving human is deserted ruthlessly for a lack of hope and faith.

In the postwar society, disillusioned religious belief exacerbates characters' emptiness and despair. *Endgame* is set in an era of transition after World War II where religious faith and other progressive faiths are shattered by the War. "After the Second World War, Britain witnessed a religious crisis when the number of people going to church declined a lot" (Zhang and Yang 2008: 14). There was a decline in piety and a crisis of religious belief in that postwar society, and the thought of "God is dead" was prevalent among people in 1950s. In *Endgame*, when prepared to pray to God, Hamm abuses that "the bastard! He (God) doesn't exist!" (Beckett 2009: 15) "Cut off from his religious, metaphysical, and transcendental roots, man is lost" (Esslin 1961: 5). Hamm's enlightenment of religious faith is broken by the War, which causes him to feel disillusioned and even desperate. "The Absurd theatre dealt with a deeper layer of absurdity—the absurdity of the human condition itself in a world where the decline of religious belief has deprived man of certainties" (Hussain 2014: 1479). Thus, he hurls a question at his father Nagg: "scoundrel! Why did you engender me?" (Beckett 2009: 49) He does not appreciate his father for bringing him into this world, and denies the meaning of life. "Europe, maybe the world without a future best describes the historical situation of postwar Europe.... Esslin read the period leading up to the war through the decline of religious faith...." (Bennett 2011: 14) With the loss of spiritual belief in the western society, Hamm fails to get the answer and cherish his life in the postwar period. Albert Camus (1969) describes the concept of absurdity as "the deprived old memories of mankind who has no hope for the Promised Land" (Nadernia et al.,

2012:3). In his opinion, life will be senseless if no God resolves contradictions in the world. In *Endgame*, confronted with a universe devoid of his former faith in God, Hamm is at a loss with boredom, monotony, and senselessness.

In the run-down world lack of religious faiths, characters are trapped in the depths of despair, and thus they do their monotonous and repetitive actions without enthusiasm and vitality. In *Endgame*, Clov gets up and down the step-ladder to see the scenery outside the window left and right. He claims that “it’s a day like any other day. All life long the same inanities” (Beckett 2009: 45). Therefore, Clov does his habitual movement mechanically and repeatedly day by day, unable to trace the signs of anticipation and vigor. Clov’s everyday routine is sleeping, waking, morning, and evening because he thinks that he is too old to form new habits. Later, he sees his light dying unfortunately, signifying his miserable fate that he will breathe his last just like Mother Pegg who died of darkness in the past. “Light can be a symbol of life and its absence is a symbol of death” (Fletcher and Spurling 1972: 69). Apart from his dim light which symbolizes his future death, Clov also finds the light outside extinguished. When he looks out of the windows, he only sees “Gray. Gray! GRRAY!” (Beckett 2009: 31) without sunshine. “The sun, cause or source of being and reality, has disappeared, leaving all in a state of mental blindness” (Postlewait 1978: 478), making people incapable of leading a normal and comfortable life. “In a universe that is suddenly deprived of illusions of light, man feels a stranger. His exile is without remedy since he is deprived of memories of a lost home or the hope of a promised land” (Camus 1969: 13). The extinguished light outside deprives Clov of his anticipation of a promising future, and gives rise to his endless horror and despair in the postwar society. Therefore, Clov’s disillusioned religious belief and hopelessness for tomorrow results in his mechanical movements day by day.

### 3. Neglected Culture

The War not only shatters westerners’ religious faiths, but also causes great damage to their culture. Hamm once knew a painter and engraver who later suffered from a mental disorder because of war and even thought the end of the world had already come. When the madman was taken to appreciate the rising corn, the sails of the herring fleet and other loveliness outside the windows, “all he had seen was ashes” (Beckett 2009: 44). Traumatized by the bloody awful war, the former painter and engraver mistakenly believes that the world has been destroyed, so he fails to enjoy the beautiful scenery out of the windows like other normal people. Unfortunately, his ability to perceive beauty and loveliness is destroyed after the war, let alone his former mastery of the art. What’s worse, the madman had been forgotten by people, and “the case is ... was not so ... so unusual” (Ibid. 44). The majority of people tend to turn their back on the former art and culture, so the lingering effects of war pose a threat to the construction and development of culture afterward.

Culture is heavily damaged by the war and gradually overwhelmed by machinery and technology. “After the Second War, resurrected culture is destroyed without knowing it” (Ibid. 72). In the postwar society, westerners are acutely conscious that the human body is very fragile and vulnerable while weapons are well-made and powerful. In the waste world destroyed by the violent force, the whole universe stinks of corpses. Deeply shocked and impressed by the great lethality of weapons and machinery, the only four survivors in *Endgame* attach greater importance to the machinery and technology while neglecting the value of culture. In the beginning, a picture hangs near the door with its face to the wall. The rejection of the content of the picture is linked with the neglect of culture in the past. Characters are unwilling to appreciate the beauty and value of the picture which contains certain cultural connotations. At a later time, “Clov sees the picture, takes it down, stands it on the floor with its face to the wall, hangs up the alarm-clock in its place” (Ibid. 79). Clov uses the alarm-clock to displace the picture because he places a higher value on the former. From his perspective, machinery and technology are more useful and powerful in practice, so they can replace art and culture. In addition, Clov “looks at alarm-clock, takes it down, looks round for a better place to put it” (Adorno 1982: 122). According to Clov’s action, compared with the picture, the mechanical device deserves a better place to keep it, which gets more attention and care in the play. Overstating the value and importance of machinery, meanwhile, brings about the neglect and disregard of culture. Hence, The War exerts a negative effect on culture, which gradually gives way to machinery and technology because people attach greater importance to their practicality and power. Furthermore, this disregard for culture is also caused by their postwar trauma. Since the attention to the former culture may remind protagonists of their miserable experience during the War. Thus, the picture is always placed with its face to the wall, reflecting the characters’ hidden psychological stress and mental problem after the War.

Instead of valuing culture, characters in *Endgame* give priority to the machinery and technology in the postwar period. Ironically, the technology not only brings people convenience, but also emphasizes the characters’ physical and spiritual suffering. “Beckett does not argue directly about science or technology...rather he shows

'how it is'...that is, he 'objectifies' his diagnosis of the human condition by aiming his irony in *Endgame* at technology. Technological tools are used to highlight physical pain and disease in a pathetic manner" (Restivo 2000: 109). On the one hand, Hamm's catheter helps him urinate, and his armchair on castors enables him to get around the interior with the help of Clov. On the other hand, His catheter and armchair remind Hamm of his poor physical condition and unmovable situation from time to time. Besides, Clov's telescope functions as a tool to view the scene out of the windows, but the desolation outside which he observes brings about hopelessness and despair in the dark and gloomy shelter. Thus, in this play, machinery and technology are used to expose the characters' physical injuries and psychological trauma after the War. "In *Endgame* a full range of ironies invests the technological or scientific attitude" (Ibid. 105). By using the ironies regarding machinery and technology, Beckett expresses his disapproval of the characters' overemphasis on technology and neglect of culture. The double-edged sword causes so many people to die painfully in the War, but the survivors blindly use machinery to replace culture. Survivors' improper attitudes and behaviors warn the audience to value cultural development and guard against the harm of technology.

#### 4. Conclusion

Having experienced the Second World War in person, Beckett is quite familiar with the westerners' emptiness and despair during and after the War. Suffering from psychological stress and mental problem, westerners had difficulty in facing up to them as well as addressing them. In *Endgame*, there is no complete and healthy body, and all of the four characters are disabled in their intolerable tribulation. They are traumatized by the War, and thus trapped in infinite emptiness and uneasiness for the loss of hope and bankruptcy of religious faiths. After experiencing the formidable power of machinery and technology in the War, characters pay too much attention to them while neglecting the value of culture gradually. *Endgame* paints a bleak picture of western society and the mental state of some westerners after World War II, and offers unique insights into the psychological crisis and the collapse of religious faiths. In this masterpiece, Beckett expresses great concern for westerners' postwar trauma and their neglect of culture. By depicting people's physical and psychological suffering, he makes clear his attitudes towards the War. In addition, Beckett facilitates the audience to face up to the postwar trauma rather than being insensible of those psychological wounds. Meanwhile, he appeals to the westerners to emphasize the development of culture in the postwar society and reshape their values, which is beneficial for them to get out of their spiritual predicament. Hence, *Endgame* reflects Samuel Beckett's anti-war attitude and the social significance of his postwar trauma writing.

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