

A Psychoanalytic Review of *'Endgame'*

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Abstract

While this play can be analyzed from different aspects, the psychological aspect has an important contribution to the theme of play. According to different schools characters can be considered the outcome of different forces; in Marxist view they are products of cultural, economic and ideological forces; according to Darwin and naturalistic views human are outcome of natural selection; according to Freud and Lacan current situation of human are determined by their past, memories, the way they have been brought up, language and whatever characterized their past. In this play there are some references and evidences that support what have said above. Hamm, Clov, Nagg and Nelly are the characters to whom their past are significant. The role of unconscious and its effects on conscious, the repression of their desires, their melancholic response to what has been lost, the master/ slave relationships, the interpretation of dreams, the feeling of abandonment and their relationships to the theme of the play are all aspects that can be examined psychoanalytically in this play.

Key words: unconscious; melancholia; sadism; masochism; loneliness; dream

1. Introduction

In the following essay, different psychological elements and aspects of the play and the characters and their relationship to the theme of the play are going to be examined.

2. Sigmund Freud

The ideas and theories of Freud in twentieth century changed the course of many fields specially literature. The characters were viewed from psychoanalysis perspective. The importance of Freud was so high that twentieth century called "Freudian century". (Turchwell : 1). His theories has unlocked different aspects of human psyche; "Freud's theory, psychoanalysis, suggested new ways of understanding, amongst other things, love, hate, childhood, family relations, civilization, religion, sexuality, fantasy and the conflicting emotions that make up our daily lives." (Turchwell : 1). Hence many critics and reader uses Freud's theories about psychoanalysis in order to reveal the real motivation and situations of fictional characters.

3. Beckett and Endgame

“Samuel Barclay Beckett was born on Good Friday, 13 April 1906.” McDonald : 7). Beckett is known by theatre of absurd and his reading is one of the most difficult tasks. Moreover his own personal life is reflected in his own works and knowing his life and biography helps to better understanding of his works. As McDonald puts it in his book in this way:

Beckett is one of the most innovative and difficult writers of the twentieth century. It is tempting, faced with the often elusive meanings of his work, to seek refuge in as certain able facts by pointing out correspondences with his life....Even if there is no absolute separation between Beckett's life and his work, neither Should there be an absolute identification. The work will always produce meanings far in excess of its biographical or contextual annotations and, if we can find any coherence in Beckett's life, it should not be permitted to stand in for the incoherence and recalcitrance of his drama and prose.(p.7).

One of his plays which is very perplexing and difficult to interpret and has a strange setting is ‘Endgame’ .“Endgame is set in a world even more unfamiliar than that of *Waiting for Godot*.”(McDonald :43). This was Beckett's favorite play and was written in twentieth century. “Endgame, written in French between 1953 and 1957 (and entitled *Fin de partie*), was Beckett's favorite play.” (Boulter : 41). As it was mentioned different aspects of life can be found in this play. “Endgame, which is a much more tightly structured and focused play, shares familiar themes with *Godot*—the problems of time, painful relations, and self-consciousness—but distills these ideas in amore forceful, one might even say brutal, manner.”(Boulter : 41). The issue of psychology is the dominant aspect of the play. “Indeed, Beckett spoke fondly of the play ‘clawing’ its way into the consciousness of its audience....” (Boulter : 41). The play is about the inevitability of outcome like the play of chess which cannot be avoided.

The play's title refers to the third and final stage of a chess match, the endgame, where most of the major pieces have been exchanged and the two kings remain. When asked about the meaning of the play by Lawrence Held (an actor playing the role of Nagg in a late 1970s production), Beckett, a fanatical chess player, responded: ‘Well, it's like the last game between Karpov and Korchnoi. After the third move both knew that neither could win, but they kept on playing’. (p.41).

Now the psychological elements of this play are going to examined briefly .

4. Conscious and unconscious

Being conscious have different meanings. It equals to knowing and awareness of surrounding environment. “Consciousness means subjective experience or phenomenal experience. This is the way things seem to me, as opposed to how they are objectively.” (Blackmore : 18). However the question remains here; are men really aware of their world and surrounding? Lets narrow the question by asking are human aware of their own psyche? In Freud's theory and terminology several definition have been proposed. In his dynamic model of psyche he asserts, “The unconscious perceives and external reality and is the reasoning part of the mind.” (Bressler : 144). In another developed model of psyche, he calls this rational and knowing part ego, “the rational, logical, waking part of the mind” (Bressler : 146). Unconscious is another part of psyche which the forbidden desires and yearnings have been gathered. “the storehouse of conflicting energies and disguised desires, is the individual's unconscious.” (Turchwell : 4). Among these two terms unconscious has the primary role and is more significant to latter. “For Freud every thought is unconscious before it is conscious”. Based on the given account it can be said that people live with illusion of conscious and awareness; they think they know but as a matter of fact they live in illusion.

This claim can be applied to the play; in the soliloquy by Hamm he says, “the bigger a man is the fuller he is.” (Endgame : 3). This statement signifies the insignificance of conscious in life. The characters try to find meaning in their meaningless life through awareness however it fails. According to typographical model of Freud, in the conscious part of psyche the repetitive patterns of behaviors are stored by which this memories goes into another part called preconscious. “The preconscious is the storehouse of memories that the conscious part of the mind allows to be brought to consciousness without disguising these memories in some form or another. (Bressler : 145). This repetition of experience can be the reason of Hamm’s failing to find meaning as he always inquires the time for his pain-killer. “HAMM: Less. (*Pause.*)Is it not time for my pain-killer?” (Endgame : 7) or “HAMM: This is slow work.(*Pause.*)Is it not time for my pain-killer?” (Endgame : 10) and this statement goes on repetitively in the play. In another part of the play Hamm emphasizes the unconscious over conscious by talking about the madman whom he once met.

HAMM: I once knew a madman who thought the end of the world had come. He was a painter---and engraver. I had a great fondness for him. I used to go and see him, in the asylum. I'd take him by the hand and drag him to the window. Look! There! All that rising corn! And there! Look! The sails of the herring fleet! All that loveliness!(Pause.)He'd snatch away his hand and go back into his corner. Appalled. All he had seen was ashes.(Pause.)He alone had been spared.(Pause.)Forgotten.(Pause.)It appears the case is... was not so... so unusual. (Endgame : 36-37).

Here, the madman is not actually mad. He trespasses his own conscious and boundaries through unconscious. That is why he gets the real nature of present. “Freud often claims that the unconscious (which is the same as the id) knows no time but the present..” (Turchwell : 82).

5. Repression

In Freud’s terminology, repression is a defensive mechanism in which painful memories or forbidden desires cannot be accessed easily and it goes into unconscious part. “An operation whereby the subject repels, or confines to the unconscious, a desire that cannot be satisfied because of the requirements of reality or of the conscience.” (Turchwell : 20).

The repression in the play can be understood when Nagg and Nell talks about the accident that they had. This accident resulted into their being crippled. “NAGG: Do you remember---NELL: No. NAGG: When we crashed on our tandem and lost our shanks.(*They laugh heartily.*)” (Endgame : 14). This accident was so painful for Nell that she doesn’t want to know about however they laugh at it ironically.

6. Hamm and Anal Phase

Having read the play, it can be understood that Hamm has a manipulative character who has power over every other character directly or indirectly. He uses Clov to get what he wants. “HAMM: Time enough. (*Clov halts.*) Give me my pain killer.” (Endgame :21). Also by Clov, he can control Nagg and Nell. “HAMM: Ask my father if he wants to listen to my story. (*Clov goes to bins, raises the lid of Nagg's, stoops, looks into it. Pause. He straightens up.*) CLOV: He's asleep. HAMM: Wake him. (*Clov stoops, wakes Nagg with the alarm. Unintelligible words. Clov straightens up.*) (Endgame : 40). This characteristic of Hamm shows that he is trapped in anal phase.

The next erotogenic zone that the child discovers as he explores his own body, is the anus. The anal stage emerges from the pleasure the child takes in his excretory functions. Anal pleasure comes

initially for the child from emptying his or her bowels; the bowel movement is often viewed (by both parents and child) as the child's first gift to the parents....The holding back and expulsion are related to issues of control, orderliness and neatness later in life. The anal personality, as we have come to know it in popular jargon, refers to someone who is, according to Freud, orderly, parsimonious, and obstinate. (Turchwell : 55).

7. Loss and Sense of Melancholia

According to Freud melancholia is a response to loss of valuable entity to human. It is an illogical way to deal with the trauma and the subject cannot accept what has been lost. "Freud posited that unsuccessful mourning, what he termed melancholia, is the inability to mourn, the inability to separate oneself from the loss, from the past: the melancholic thus is continually haunted by loss, by history." (Boulter :45).

One of the main themes of play is concerned with the sense of past; its relation with present and its effect on the current situation of characters. The sense of loss and the feeling of nostalgia are dominant throughout the play. Hence the characters are melancholic and cannot understand the concept of time. "Beckett signals an awareness of how melancholia pervades the world of *Endgame* by continually foregrounding his characters' peculiar relation to temporality, to time." (Boulter : 45).

"NAGG: I've lost me tooth. NELL: When? NAGG: I had it yesterday. NELL (*elegiac*): Ah yesterday.(*They turn painfully towards each other.*" (Endgame : 13). The way she talks about yesterday shows how nostalgic she is about it. "Nagg and Nell are deeply nostalgic for this yesterday." (Boulter : 45). In the other part Hamm and Clov talks about nature. "HAMM: Nature has forgotten us. CLOV: There's no more nature. HAMM: No more nature! You exaggerate." (Endgame : 10). The statement here shows that once there was something and meaning in their life; it was nature however it has gone and the characters cannot overcome this loss. Hence they are melancholic and yearn for past. "And certainly Hamm's central narrative, the keystone of the play, is a study in both nostalgia and melancholy, a return to a past which continually haunts the present moment." (Boulter: 45)

8. Interpretation of Dream

Freud asserts that Dreams contain hidden desires that their interpretation can unveil the unconscious. "When we sleep, it is believed that our defenses do not operate in the same manner they do when we are awake. During sleep, the unconscious is free to express itself, and it does so in our dreams." (Tyson :18). While sleeping the conscious mind doesn't work and it is the opportunity for unconscious to reveal itself. "Consciousness is so rapidly and dramatically reduced during sleep that it was natural to assume that the brain simply turned off at sleep onset and turned on again just before awakening." (Hobson : 32).

In this play, both characters – Hamm and Clov – talk about their dreams. When they are awake they don't directly talk about what they want, their desires and anxieties. It is just through these dreams that their hidden issues can be revealed. Their pessimism and negativity are shown in dreaming. "...all dreams are characterized by negative emotions such as anger, anxiety, or fear." (Hobson :32). In one part Clov reveals indirectly what he wants.

"CLOV (*straightening up*): I love order. It's my dream. A world where all would be silent and still and each thing in its last place, under the last dust.(*He starts picking up again.*)" (Endgame : 47). This shows he loves order and he likes to dream about it; he is tired of chaotic world though in his chaotic there are few residents. In another part Hamm talks about his fantasy

and dream about nature which he misses. "HAMM (*wearily*): Quiet, quiet, you're keeping me awake. (*Pause.*) Talk softer. (*Pause.*) If I could sleep I might make love. I'd go into the woods. My eyes would see... the sky, the earth. I'd run, run, they wouldn't catch me. (*Pause.*) Nature! (*Pause.*)" (Endgame :16). Hence pure nature, something that is in his distant memory from childhood and of course sexuality and his erotic thoughts that have been repressed can show themselves in dreams.

9. Childhood Memory and Fear of Loneliness

As it was mentioned earlier, in psychoanalysis school, men are products of their past especially their childhood. The roles in their family forms the unconscious of people and who they really are however maybe they are not aware of this process. "...family is very important in psychoanalytic theory because we are each a product of the role we are given in the family-complex. In one sense, the "birth" of the unconscious lies in the way we perceive our place in the family and how we react to this self-definition.." (Tyson : 13).

One of the aspects in the play that is alluding is the fear of loneliness and abandonment which always frightens Hamm throughout the story. Although he always wants Clov to leave and even orders him to leave, his dependence on him is a crystal clear issue. He cannot do things without him. He cannot survive and he has no one else but him. "CLOV: Why do you keep me? HAMM: There's no one else." (Endgame : 6). According to his father the reason for this has roots in Hamm's childhood. "NAGG :

...Whom did you call when you were a tiny boy, and were frightened, in the dark? Your mother? No. Me. We let you cry. Then we moved you out of earshot, so that we might sleep in peace..." (Endgame : 46). This statement proves what has been already said.

10. Conclusion

So far different psychological aspects and elements of the play have been examined and the evidences from play which support the mentioned claims have been extracted. It was shown that the identity of characters, their current situation and understanding of life and time are production of psychological forces. It is the family and their desires that shape their subjectivity and once they are discovered so is meaning of life.

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