The Post-Catastrophe Consciousness: The Semiotics of Alienation and Belief in Samuel Beckett's *Endgame*

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ABSTRACT

This essay explores how Samuel Beckett's Endgame *portrays the post-apocalyptic consciousness. Using Walker Percy's semiotic theory to understand the play, this paper posits that* Endgame *shows the struggle for individuals to apprehend themselves amidst catastrophe without objectifying themselves. Unable to find a semiotic referent to identify themselves with, people experience alienation as shown in* Endgame *through Hamm and Clov. Through their struggle to place themselves in their post-apocalyptic context, Hamm and Clov show the futility of rationally ordering life amidst catastrophe.*

In *Irrational Man*, William Barrett shows how the atrocities of World War II revealed to people in Western societies the disparity between their external power over nature and their impoverished ability to control that power (65). Though the West believed a rational organization of society would produce "uniform and continuous progress without limits" (Barrett 37), by the twentieth century, the increased economic production masked people's inability to understand the "[ab]surd and unpredictable" realities of their own existence (Barrett 35). Both the Holocaust and the use of nuclear weapons produced a cultural apocalypse that, as James Berger explains in *After the End*, seemed "to annihilate, along with a physical population, all previous ways of thinking and that transform[ed] the world that follow[ed] so as to make it incommensurable with what went before" (61). The catastrophes of World War II followed by the potential of nuclear war throughout the 1950s compelled people to examine their ability to rationally understand the world and their own existence. In his 1957 play *Endgame*, Samuel Beckett examines humans' ability to reasonably comprehend the world as Hamm and Clov struggle to make sense of their lives. Hamm, the master of the house, remains confined to his chair and unable to see, waiting to receive his painkiller from Clov, his unhappy servant. Hamm and Clov, trapped in an unknown post-apocalyptic setting, are unable to talk about the catastrophe that devastated their world and how they ended up in the house together. Though Clov intends to leave Hamm, he hesitates because "outside of [the house] is death" (Beckett 96). Both Hamm and Clov remain dissatisfied in their roles within the house but neither knows how to escape or change their master and servant relationship.

This essay uses semiotics to interpret Hamm and Clov's relationship within the context of the catastrophes of World War II. These catastrophes transformed how people understood their own experience because, as James Berger explains, apocalyptic effects of the Holocaust and nuclear weaponry created a "representational impasse" (13), obliterating previous historical narratives while impelling a reexamination "of how the remainder [of the world] has been transformed" (7). By examining how people order the world through language, a semiotic reading of *Endgame* interprets how Hamm and Clov's relationship reveals both the apocalyptic effects of World War II on language and the struggle to meaningfully restructure discourse afterward. The semiotic theory of the philosopher Walker Percy, who wrote during the same time as Beckett about similarly catastrophic events, can explain how humans can use signs to either objectify themselves or gain subjectivity and, ultimately, shows why Hamm's rationalized discourse alienates him from his own experience, accounting for his failure to find semiotic security in the post-apocalyptic world. Through showing Hamm's alienation from his own self in *Endgame*, Samuel Beckett reveals the meaninglessness of living rationally in a catastrophic world.

Philosopher William Barrett explains that as work became more abstracted and analytical throughout the twentieth century, people increasingly identified with their function within society. Because society only requires people to "perform competently [their] own particular social function," people identify with their function (Barrett 36). By identifying with something external to themselves, people allowed their being "to subsist as best it can—usually to be dropped below the surface of consciousness and forgotten" (Barrett 36). Western culture, "positivist to the core," exacerbated the contrast between people's external identity and their being as the modes of work in society (Barrett 38). This emphasized the manufacture of rational knowledge as corporations and the sciences attempted to develop a "complete systematization" of social life (Barrett 39). The progress of this systematization encouraged people to identify with their role within a system, stressing a rational understanding of themselves and their relationships to others. However, this rational understanding of one's social function encouraged people to develop a "strict and literal attachment to [the] objects" they associated with their function (Barrett 44). This "rampant extroversion" nearly led society to its own destruction during World War II as people threatened to destroy the world through genocide and weapons of mass destruction in order to protect their roles in society (Barrett 44), revealing that humankind's problems could not be solved through the exertion of external controls but only through the "change and conversion" of humans' entire being (Barrett 73).

Walker Percy, who was active in the decades following World War II, claims that this extroversion developed because people sought to understand their semiotic relationships rationally and became alienated from their own selves. Percy explains that people use signs—such as language, images, or sensory feelings—as “signifiers” to denote their experience (93). While these signs provide information about an experience, signs cannot wholly represent someone’s relationship to the “referent”—the actual experience the sign identifies (Percy 95). In recognizing this relationship, the individual begins to understand the signs around them and experiences consciousness, which Percy defines as the “act of attention to something under the auspices of its sign” (105). However, when people try to order their lives rationally, they lapse into “dyadic” semiotic relations and attempt to evaluate the signs they encounter in relation to other signs (Percy 91). By attempting to interpret their semiotic relationships rationally, people lose their ability to be conscious of their relationships with the world because they evaluate their semiotic relationships exclusively based on signs.

Failing to recognize the indirect nature of semiotic relationships, people attempt to identify with external signs and, in the process, alienate themselves from their own experience. Unable to examine the referents beneath the signs one encounters, the individual believes their world to be “totally construed by signs” (Percy 100). Yet, within this world of signs, “the self has no sign of itself” because the self is only composed by one’s experiences with the world (Percy 107). This paradox of a sign-less self compels the individual to attempt to place theirself in the world, though they can only do this through identifying with signs external to their own self in their search to discover “a permanent semiotic habiliment” (Percy 108). Through this futile search for semiotic security, as John Desmond, a Percy scholar, explains, the individual becomes alienated from theirself as they “objectif[y]” their own self with signs (Desmond 67). Though this objectification enables one’s self to temporarily transcend its subjective state, the self will “always incur the problem of ‘reentry,’ that is, the inevitable and often crushing return of the self to its existential, limited situation” (Desmond 80). “The pleasure of such transcendence,” Percy notes, “derives not from the recovery of self but from the loss of self,” and the same effect can often be accomplished through a dependence on anesthetics such as drugs or alcohol (124). Though these modes of transcendence allow the individual to escape their semiotic instability, the individual still must endure their subjective experience, which they no longer identify with and from which they have been alienated. As they endure the process of alienation from their experience, the individual will either regain consciousness by

recognizing the catastrophe of their own alienation or reassert their autonomy found in objectifying themself with signs. The catastrophe of alienation compels the self to change its being towards semiotic consciousness or autonomy; and this change, Desmond writes, "was what most interested Percy . . . the question of what shape, what self-understanding would emerge in the post-catastrophe consciousness" (67). If the individual recognizes their catastrophe, they can search inward for a "recovery of being and a recognition of one's place in reality" by questioning the signs they identify with (Desmond 66). But, if the self refuses to recognize this catastrophe, it will become autonomous in its pursuit of semiotic stability and, "believing in nothing, can fall prey to ideology and kill millions of people" (Percy 157). If the self rejects the experience it shares with other beings in order to maintain its semiotic identity, the autonomous self can use signs to rationalize endless violence in order to maintain its semiotic order.

During the 1950s, Western societies failed to interrogate the causes of violence during the Second World War and instead attempted to rationalize future violence as they prepared themselves for the potential of nuclear war. In his essay, "Trying to Understand *Endgame*," Theodor Adorno describes society's struggle to change in light of its moral failures, writing that "after the Second War, everything is destroyed, even resurrected culture, without knowing it; humanity vegetates along . . . on a pile of ruins which even renders futile self-reflection of one's own battered state" (122). Anything that remains the same after the war, such as "resurrected culture," reveals itself to be incapable of change and existentially dead. The survivors cannot stop future violence by reflecting on their state intellectually but, instead, should only look to change themselves. Adorno suggests, to provoke this change, people should understand history only as it affects their existential predicament—"as decline" (125). However, ignoring the catastrophe of the war, people continued to rationalize violence through the expectations they established for the Cold War. Adorno noted dramatizations of nuclear war "hopelessly [falsified] the horror of historical anonymity by shoving it into the characters and actions of humans, and possibly by gaping at the 'prominents' who decide whether the button will be pushed" (123). By preparing audiences for the possibility of how war may come about and shifting blame onto a select few, these depictions legitimized nuclear war as a possibility in the future for all humankind.

To challenge society's acceptance of future violence, Beckett used *Endgame* to show humans' inability to rationalize their experience and compel them to reject violent ideologies. Beckett developed his beliefs about art and its relation to history while he visited

Nazi Germany between 1936 and 1937 as well as while he lived in Vichy France[1] during World War II (Kennedy 196). Both regimes horrified Beckett with their emphases on racial purity and cultish variations of nationalism (Kennedy 196). After witnessing the atrocities caused by these countries, Beckett said, “Art has nothing to do with clarity” and instead proposed that “art must express the mess of history, not rationalize it” because any rationalization of violence became complicit with it (qtd. in Kennedy 197). Beckett, realizing humanity’s willingness to resort to violence during the Cold War, wrote *Endgame* to interrogate humankind’s image of itself as a rational being that had already yielded to mass murder (Morin 64). As *Endgame* takes place in a post-apocalyptic world where many have died and the characters are surrounded by death, Hamm and Clov attempt to rationally understand their surroundings and fail to find meaning, only alienating themselves in the process. Reading *Endgame* in light of Walker Percy’s theories about selfhood, semiotics, and post-catastrophe consciousness can help show how the self, amidst catastrophe, manages to reassert its own rationality and secures its self-alienation.

Without a history to provide meaning for his life, Hamm fails to rationally understand his existence. As the play opens, “the room’s sole ornament, a picture turned against the wall, suggests the bearing of a collective history that can only be articulated in the negative” (Morin 61). Because history cannot provide a positive explanation for his life, Hamm must attempt to account for himself apart from any justification beyond the immediate context of his life. Though he doubts the meaning of his life—asking Clov, “Have you not had enough?”—Hamm still attempts to rationalize his existence within the room (Beckett 94). While his ratiocinations about his life contradict themselves, these claims display Hamm’s desire to transcend his existential predicament. Hamm claims to accept his state because “there’s no reason for it to change” (Beckett 94), but later argues to Clov, “We breathe, we change! We lose our hair, our teeth! Our bloom! Our ideals!” (Beckett 97). These contradictory claims reveal Hamm’s desire to rationalize his existence in order to transcend his immediate predicament. However, this reasoning fails to ease Hamm’s existential uncertainty, as after both attempts at explanation, he asks Clov, “Is it not time for my painkiller?” (Beckett 95-97). Hamm tries to anaesthetize himself in order to dull himself and his anxieties about his existence. Yet, because it is not yet “time for [his] painkiller” (Beckett 95- 97), Hamm fails to numb his existential anxieties. Still faced with the problem of his subjective existence, Hamm can only seek to identify with external signs even though this

1 After the German takeover of France during World War II, the replacement French government that supported the Third Reich ruled southern France from Vichy. During this time, Beckett moved to the village of Roussillon, north of Avignon (McCormack 32).

identification alienates himself from his own experiences. After Clov denies him his painkiller again, Hamm recognizes the absurdity of his attempts to numb his condition and laments, “In the morning they brace you up and in the evening they calm you down. Unless it’s the other way round” (Beckett 104). Through being braced up and calmed down, Hamm recognizes that easing his pain does not change his condition or his ability to understand it. Understanding his own instability in the world, Hamm avoids introspection by trying to place himself within an external semiotic order. Hamm tells Clov to take him to “my place . . . in the center,” defining his own position in relation to the external room (Beckett 104). As Clov must gauge Hamm’s distance from each side of the room, this positioning makes no difference to Hamm who, being blind, cannot tell whether he sits equidistant from each wall or not (Beckett 104). By positioning himself in the center of the room, Hamm tries to identify with an external image of himself positioned rationally, though this idea of a “center” makes no difference in Hamm’s life because he cannot tell whether he is centered or not (Beckett 104). Hamm tries to find meaning through the externalized signs of his life as he later explains to Clov, “Imagine if a rational being came back to earth, wouldn’t he be liable to get ideas into his head if he observed us long enough?” (Beckett 108). Through his attempt to see himself through the imagined lens of a rational being, Hamm becomes alienated from himself as he invests his self-conception with meaning not present in his actual experience. In his attempts to identify with an image of himself, Hamm externalizes meaning onto a sign apart from his actual experience.

With his self-understanding separated from his actual existence, Hamm alienates himself from the other beings he encounters as he reduces their relationships to the signs he witnesses, divesting their shared experience of meaning. To communicate to Hamm whether Clov has left him or has died, they create a system of signs to relay Clov’s fate to Hamm. Clov explains, “You whistle me. I don’t come. The alarm rings. I’m gone. It doesn’t ring. I’m dead” (Beckett 115). In this system, Hamm only knows Clov through the servant’s functional role within the home as indicated by the signs—the whistle, alarm rings, or silence—he produces rather than attempting to experience meaning together. The exchange of signs similarly dominates Hamm’s relationship with Nagg, his father who lives in the garbage can at the back of the stage, when Hamm promises Nagg a sugar-plum for listening to his story (Beckett 116). In that moment, Nagg does not listen to empathize or gain consciousness of Hamm’s being but, at the story’s end, only demands, “Me sugar-plum!” (Beckett 118). Hamm epitomizes his commitment to rational relationships as he tries to pray to God but rejects God after his prayer fails to generate a sign in response. Hamm declares, “The Bastard! He

doesn't exist!" (Beckett 120). Hamm refuses to believe in a God outside of his rational order. Yet, the failure of his rationality to make sense of his life becomes evident when Hamm and Clov disagree over the meaning of order within their house. Hamm, hearing Clov pick up objects lying on the ground, shouts, "Order!" (Beckett 120). But Clov responds, "I love order. It's my dream" and continues to pick up the objects (Beckett 120). Though both Hamm and Clov share the same experiences within the room, both have opposing conceptions about what a rational order means within the room. This divergence reveals that neither Hamm's nor Clov's rational order comes from their shared existence within the room, but that both their ideas of order remain independent of their own experience.

Because his rational order neglects to understand his own experience, Hamm cannot experience meaning in his life. Hamm displays his inability to have an experience when, after asking to be placed under a window of light, he exclaims, "That's what I call light! [*Pause*.] Feels like a ray of sunshine," before Clov tells him he is not actually in sunshine (Beckett 123). Hamm trusts his own rational order—telling Clov where to place him—rather than his own experience to learn where he sits in the room. Hamm realizes his failure to experience reality when he says, "I was never there" and "Absent always. It all happened without me. I don't know what's happened" (Beckett 128). Though recognizing his consciousness failed to engage with reality, this realization of his failure does not enable Hamm to experience meaning, as he remains unable to change his being and is trapped in his alienated consciousness where he can only see the external signs of his life. Even after Clov leaves and Hamm sits alone, he repeats his actions literally aloud: "Raise hat," "And put on again," "Wipe," "And put on again" (Beckett 133). Trapped by his own alienation, Hamm continues to identify with external signs of himself, unable to even experience the meaning of his loneliness.

Through showing the process of alienation Hamm endures in his search for a rational order in the world, *Endgame* displays how humans can continue to pursue autonomy through asserting their rational order instead of examining their role in the universe. As long as humans attempt to rationalize their experiences within the world, they will only perpetuate violence. By showing Hamm's alienation from his own experience, Samuel Beckett uses *Endgame* to show the futility of attempting rationally ordered life amidst catastrophe. Only by believing in something beyond their own idea of order in the world can humans begin to experience meaning and transform their being. Without surrendering their own ideas of order, people will remain alienated in post-apocalyptic discourses and impotent to restructure life to prevent future catastrophes.

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