

A Study of Existentialism in Samuel Beckett's Endgame

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Abstract

Endgame is one of the masterpieces of Samuel Beckett, which embodies the philosophical thinking of life and presents a hopeless and absurd picture of the world. After *Waiting for Godot*, Endgame is Beckett's more comprehensive and thorough negative portrayal of the western reality and life after the war. It is also a reflection of the western spiritual crisis and survival crisis after the war, showing the complete disillusionment. Studies have been conducted to illustrate this work from the perspectives of spatial analysis, modernist drama, and Beckett's poetics. This paper attempts to interpret this work from the perspective of existentialism.

Keywords

Endgame, Beckett, existentialism

1. Introduction

Samuel Beckett was a 20th century French writer who wrote in the fields of drama, fiction, and poetry, with drama as his greatest achievement. He is so famous that he is even sometimes titled "the ghostly founding father of Irish theatre"[1]. As a bold and radical innovator, he is an important representative of absurd theater, known as the father of absurd theater. He was known for *Waiting for Godot*. Beckett was awarded the 1969 Nobel Prize for Literature because of his extraordinary forms of fiction and drama that have lifted the spirits of the modern man. In *Waiting for Godot*, although the two protagonists are still waiting, there is hope, and they are still healthy people; But in *Endgame*, several of the characters are crippled, they're all gripped by utter emptiness and despair. The characters in the play are not able to find the meaning of life, so they torture and abuse each other out of desperation, and rely on each other because of loneliness and helplessness, which conveys the inner emptiness of modern people and reproduces the absurd world of the 20th century. The open ending also leaves endless space for readers to expound. Theodor W. Adorno points out the difference between Beckett and the existentialists is that Sartre's didactic plays remain rather traditional, while Beckett's are raised to the level of the most advanced artistic means[2]. Many studies have done on this work. Some scholars have analyzed Endgame from the perspective of Beckett's poetics, modernist drama, and space and so on. For instance, Brian Richardson argues Endgame reveals just how multiform, changeable, and contradictory that space can be[3]. This paper analyzes this work from the perspective of existentialism.

2. The Development of Existentialism

Starting with Kierkegaard and Dostoyevsky and culminating with Sartre and Camus after World War II, it has largely disappeared since the 1970s. Existentialism originated in the age when traditional religious beliefs died out. In the past, the concept of good and wrong was that if you did good, you would go to heaven, if you did bad, you would go to hell, and the value of a person was to go to heaven. But in modern times, according to Nietzsche, God died of mercy on mankind. And if God did not exist, then everything was allowed. The value of human existence

was thus questioned, and philosophers returned to Socratic speculation to rethink the meaning of life.

Existentialism emerged in Germany in the 1920s, mainly represented by Heidegger and Jaspers. Heidegger takes existence as the starting point of his philosophical research. He believes that without existence, there can be no existence. During the Second World War, the center of existentialism was transferred from Germany to France, and the main representative figures were Sartre, Marcel and so on, among which Sartre had the greatest influence. Existentialism is a philosophy of life. It aims to hold that traditional philosophy is too out of touch with human nature to allow people to apply philosophy to practice. Every existentialist has a completely different system, and the goal of existentialism is the same: to liberate human nature and create a philosophy that can explain life choices.

Existentialism has the following five themes:

First, existence precedes essence, and we are the result of our choices.

Second, time is the essence of life. It cannot be measured, and it varies from one experience to another.

Third one is about humanism. It is people-oriented and looking for the meaning of life, against the alienation of inhuman.

Fourth one is about freedom and responsibility. Our individual choices cannot be framed by any moral standard, and our choices create us, but we have a responsibility to our freedom.

Fifth, ethical thinking is the ultimate proposition. Everyone has his own theory, but the overall theory is the search for the true ethics of our individuals and society.

An essential purpose of existentialism is to emphasize the importance of the individual. However, it should be noted that existentialism is not individualism. Existentialism emphasizes the interpretation of society from individuals, attaches importance to human experience and emotion, and believes that human emotional experience is the evidence of our existence. It also attaches importance to individual imagination and sense of experience, which is very similar to literature, so basically many existentialists are literary masters, such as Dostoyevsky, Kafka, Camus, etc. Many people have the impression that existentialism originated in leisurely coffee shops and among literary and artistic young people, but this is completely wrong. Existentialism is born in the winter, in the prison cells, in the curses, in the eyes of the wanderer, in the destitute and desolate sand. Actually, Existentialism is serious optimism, not pessimism. It advocates that the world is not a good place, but we have to do our best to live our own meaningful and wonderful life. The only hope we can hold on to is ourselves.

I tend to believe the view of Camus in understanding existentialism, so I'm going to try to explain it from Camus's point of view. Secular values are not subject to scrutiny. In short, there is no point in being alive. The more you think about meaning, the more painful it is. Therefore, people have two choices, physical suicide and philosophical suicide, and philosophical suicide is to stop thinking about this question. If we have a meal and ask our table mates what is the meaning of life, people will laugh at you, but they don't have an answer. It's called philosophical suicide. If people do not want to give up, continue to think, the result is bound to face the embarrassment of finding no meaning, so it is likely to go to nothingness. When the absurd nothingness comes to its climax, the man's passion of resistance returns. So many existentialists rise up, and since there is no meaning, they define meaning for themselves. But there's a problem with defining our own meaning. If one gets pinched in the head, and defines the meaning of life as burning and looting, so Sartre put forward the idea of taking responsibility, which is to say that the choices we make are a kind of call to humanity. If you ask someone who steals from public places all the time, what would happen if everyone did it, he might say not everyone does it. In other words, he himself denied the legitimacy of his choice. Therefore, existentialists demand that people take responsibility for their actions.

3. Meaningless Universe and Painful Human Beings

Existentialism holds that the existence of human beings and all the existence of the world are contingent and uncertain. In this desolate world, the individual is in unbearable loneliness and pain. Les Essif thinks that in the works of Samuel Beckett, the void that surrounds the mind is duplicated within the mind[4]. Sayyed Rahim M. and Bamshad H. Tabari believe Samuel Beckett's works adopt semi-taboo labels like absurdism, universality and placeness[5]. Beckett's plays, we see just such an absurd and irrational world. It is a world in which the mind is dulled, the spirit numbed, the emotion drained, in which all men fall into a state of helplessness and decadence, without reason and with little hope.

First of all, the scene of the play is very grey, the stage has no furniture, only grey light. The room had only one small window. The four characters in the play live in such a sort of basement house. The room is deserted and desolate, with nothing but a few simple objects. In addition, in *Endgame*, all four characters are disabled. They sit in wheelchairs because of health problems, hide themselves in trash cans because of old age, or cannot sit down because of leg problems. All of them have been damaged to some extent and have lost the ability to move. And they do not have enough food to eat, except for the occasional biscuit. From Clov's words in the play, it can be known that food is not enough for them, which seems to imply the irreversible fate of the character: death is approaching, and there is nothing the character can do about it. Living in a room where the sun is dark and the world is lifeless, the characters have nothing to do but sleep and wake up occasionally to eat and talk pointlessly. In this play, when Nagg is crying, Hamm say coldly that he is still alive. This answer actually has a certain logic. He cries, so he lives. Life is absurd and uncertain. This is the way it is. In the absurdity, life is like a leaf, which does not know where to go, as individual life cannot find a true destination. This word really describes the state of human existence in the universe. As a synonym for pain, crying describes the life as a state of impermanence. Hamm thinks that one day Clov will become a blind like him in this house, sitting somewhere, empty, forever, in the dark.

4. Human Survival Crisis Reflected by Broken Relationship of the Characters

The pain of the Second World War has long cast a shadow on the modern western people. they no longer believe in God, lose their way, lose their faith, and doubt reason. In the chaos of post-war life, people scare and even lose the ability to live. The "wasteland" scene depicted in the drama alludes to the reality of the western society at that time, which is characterized by economic depression, human indifference and lack of personal consciousness, and reveals the confusion and loneliness of people in the post-war peaceful times.

Like *Waiting for Godot*, Beckett uses a small, enclosed basement as the stage space, and the characters in the play are very unique: they are father and son, husband and wife, master and servant, friends. They depend on each other, and they hate each other. They cannot separate, but they cannot communicate. They have nothing to talk about, but they chatter with nonsense. This is Beckett's picture of human existence in the western world in the mid-20th century.

They are the only survivors of the world in which all life had been wiped out by the disaster that had taken place outside the stage house. Moreover, the relationships between these people are broken and misplaced. Hamm is the master of the house and has absolute leadership, and his servants, his parents, his toy dog and even his neighbors are subordinate to him. But in reality, Hamm is a very powerful and very sad man. He was a selfish master, more interested in pleasure than sympathy. His servant, Clov, is filled with hatred for his master, Hamm. Clov threatens to leave on several occasions in the show, even when Hamm pleads with him without dignity. A master is threatened by his servant, which is a break in the character's relationship.

It can be seen that Hamm, though master, actually is a slave. He has no freedom of movement, and is confined to a room where Clov is the only person who can serve him. If Clov leaves, he will die. Therefore, their inseparable and dependent relationship is like two people bound by an iron chain. If one tries to escape from the other, he will be pulled back by a huge force. At the beginning of the play, the dialogue between the two parties shows this awkward situation. Hamm asked, "Why do you stay with me? Clov: Why are you keeping me? Hamm: Because there is no one else. Clov: Because there is nowhere else" [6].

The relationship between the son and his parents is also broken. Hamm's parents lose their legs because of the accident, but Hamm even refuses to provide them with basic survival food, and does not even allow them to speak. He also orders Clov to nail them to the dustbin and throw them away, which shows the tension and deformity of their relationship. However, when Hamm needs an audience to listen to his expression of affection, he shamelessly uses food as bait to trick his father. He even denounced his father, who gave birth to him and raised him, as a "cursed ancestor" and a "shameful adulterer". His indifference when he learned of his mother's death was astonishing.

Hamm does not help his neighbors as a master, but watches others die because of the darkness. He radically gives up the western god's teachings-love your neighbor. It was a sign of his abdication of power that he does not care about his parents or his servants, that he does not give them food or oil for the lamp. He knows that the result is destruction, but he is disappointed in the world, so he does not want to exist in this world. Just as he drives away his servant Clov, who is his leg and his eye. They depend on each other and hate each other; They cannot separate or communicate; They get into the "endgame" in the mutual involvement of memories, hopes, dreams.

This is Beckett's awkward but true picture of human existence. Throughout *Endgame*, there is no touching plot, no colorful images, and no much meaningful dialogue, but it outlines the absurd existence and spiritual crisis of human beings. People are victims of war and they are on the margin of their time. They are numb as well as twisted, dependent and indispensable, resentful and callous. This is the absurd existence of human beings. People lose faith and walk in difficulties. The only way out is waiting for death, which is the tragic fate of human beings written by Beckett.

If we regard this stage as a microcosm of human society as a whole, then Nagg, Hamm, and Clov can be seen as a three-generation cycle of grandfather, father, and son. Nagg and Nell are supposed to be the biological parents of Hamm, who once complained to Nagg: "Why did you give birth to me?" And Nagg replied, "I am sorry, I did not know it was you". But their parent-child relationship was not good. Hamm orders Clov several times to "shove" Nagg and Nell "back into the trash," and Nagg once left Hamm crying and screaming in the dark as a baby. Hamm's relationship with Clov is more complicated. According to Hamm's own story, someone entrusts the child to Hamm, who adopted him. According to the clues in the play, it can be found that the fates of Nagg, Hamm and Clov form a relationship of reflection from generation to generation. Nagg has lost all legs and lives in a trash can; Hamm is paralyzed and in a wheelchair; Clov's legs and eyesight began to deteriorate. From Clov, we see a "young Hamm" figure that almost overlaps with the present-day Clov. We can imagine that sooner or later Nagg would die like Nell. Sooner or later Hamm would become Nagg, and sooner or later Clov, if he does not flee the house, would repeat the fate of Hamm and Nagg. In a word, these three people are one person, and together they represent different stages of development in a person's life, and in Nagg we see the final end of this cycle, which is to go into the trash can, become garbage, become scrap. Although the world is dark and lifeless, readers can still find love in the play. From Hamm's words, the reader can sense Hamm's nostalgia for Clov and their love for each other. As a husband, when Nagg has only one cookie, he left three quarters for his wife. A simple plot highlights the husband's caring and consistent love for his wife.

Existentialists believe that what connects oneself with others is sympathy and love. Only on this basis can people communicate with each other, so that they can feel that they are not alone and see hope. Therefore, whether it is a writer's duty or a breakthrough to human nature, when the iceberg between people begins to melt a little bit, the sun will shine in the heart of people, and light will then begin to spread in the sky of the world.

5. A Better Life Created by Free Choices

Endgame is full of existentialism. Of course, in Beckett's play, existentialism emphasizes a void state of human beings. Human beings live in the universe without essence, and their existence itself is meaningless. However, there is hope. Existentialism holds that people live in a meaningless universe, and their existence itself has no meaning, but people can choose freely on the basis of existence and live a wonderful life.

In this work, hope also runs through the play. At the beginning of the play, Clov talks about leaving Hamm several times, implying his dissatisfaction with his current situation and his determination to change. Hamm has the same idea. He wants to travel around the world. He asks Clov to go south and go to sea with him. He imagines that the current carry them to a far place. Even Hamm's parents, who lives in a trash can, will reminisce about the past in their sleep, and appreciate the happiness of life in that brief dream. The yearning for a better life never dies in their hearts. All these make us feel that life contains hope and heat from beginning to end, and this makes the absurd and uncertain life have its value and significance.

In the play, the author repeatedly implies that the degeneration of the characters' health occurs gradually, and it is precisely the result of their own choices. Hamm, for example, predicts that Clov will repeat his own fate: "There will come a day when you say to yourself. I'm tired. I'm going to sit down, and you go and sit down. And then you say to yourself. I'm hungry. I'm going to get up and cook for myself. Yes, but you can't get up". If Hamm had not chosen to sit, would Hamm have fallen into the end of the paralysis? The answer is negative. At the very least, he has the option of being like Clov, who, in spite of his stumbles, retains the least possible action and the option of leaving the house.

According to the play, Clov stands on a ladder and looks out twice. For the first time, there is nothing but beacons on board. And another time he sees a child who might have died. Outside the house, therefore, there must now be a lifeless wasteland, as Nell had told Clov before she died. Horowitz once put forward "Why should we pay attention to where Clov is standing if the world is hopelessly desiccated?" [7]. Although the future is uncertain and even scary, Clov is still eager to leave, eager to get out of this room and into the unknown universe. He chooses to leave. when he faces the door, the play is over. The author does not tell us his final choice, leaving the reader to imagine. In fact, the open ending shows that there is no meaning and no answer to life in this absurd world, which is the essence of existentialism. Clov can only walk into the wasteland as an existential tragic hero. *Endgame* has no touching plots and colorful pictures, but it outlines the absurd existence and spiritual crisis of human beings. Because of the war, people lose their faith and the only thing to do is to wait for death. However, Beckett reveals a hope when shaping the tragic fate of these characters. When Clov is helpless, he looks through the window and sees a little boy in the distance, which seems to be the hope of human regeneration. In this dark world, a new life begins to show the light of hope, but these desperate people can break through the constraints? Beckett does not have an answer.

At this point, the curtain came down, leaving the audience infinite aftertaste and imagination. But no matter how it ends, Clov makes his choice with the determination to leave. Readers can imagine that when Clov walks out of this door, he will find a new world, a world with flowers and grass, a world with the sea, a world with real dogs. In this world he is a free man rather than Hamm's slave or servant, so the right to choose freely brings him a better life.

Like Clov, Hamm also makes a free choice. He sits at the top of power relations, either traveling the world from his tiny prison or stubbornly holding onto his place in the middle of the world. For Clov, Hamm treats him as a servant. However, Hamm have both a desire to travel the world and a fear of sharks at sea. He loves Clov and fears his departure. At the same time, he hates Clov and curse him. At first, Hamm is afraid that Clov will leave him and that he will not be able to survive. The two spend the day exchanging insults and tortures. Hamm expresses a desire to see the outside world, but he is afraid of the unknown. Clov, too, is drawn to the lighthouse and the children outside the window, and longs to leave. In the end, the two seem to come to an accommodation, and Hamm makes a free choice in order to get Clov out of his current life, so Hamm agrees to let Clov escape from the house. He slowly put the rag over his face and waits for his fate.

6. Conclusion

As one of the great literary achievements in the world drama literature, the drama of the absurd is becoming more and more important and shining in the history of human literature as time goes by, which is directly related to the profound philosophical connotation of the drama of the absurd and the deep thinking of individual life. As one of the absurdist writers, Beckett's works have stood the test of time and become more dazzling. One of the important reasons is that his open meaning of works provides a variety of possibilities for the interpretation of his works. He expressed his humanistic concern and philosophical thoughts in the form of literature and art, thus winning the Nobel Prize for Literature. This paper interprets the *Endgame* from the perspective of existentialism, and points out the existentialism connotation contained in the work. The analysis may be biased, but I only hope that this paper can provide a different perspective to understand the work.

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