Self-Awareness and Metatheatre in Samuel Beckett’s *Endgame*
Paul Beimers

Samuel Beckett’s *Endgame* represents fiction at its most conscious: a form of storytelling in which imagination becomes cognizant of its own artificiality. While the playwright’s handiwork is generally designed to intentionally avoid the traditional linearity of informative plot and illuminating dialogue, the play in question is especially deviant in the fact that it breaks down the implicit breach between performer and audience. Beckett’s characters demonstrate a sly recognition of their fabricated nature and call attention to it throughout their time onstage, and do so to emphasize their lack of customary accessibility as understandable archetypes. Metafiction is thus ultimately exploited by *Endgame* to give its author a sure voice through which he can demonstrate discernment of his literary transgressions and emphasize their power.

Unsurprisingly, there is not much to *Endgame*’s story so far as clear meaning is concerned. Hamm and Clov – our leads, for better or worse – squabble in a near-empty room about the trivialities of their meagre existence in a world that may or may not have ended. They meander through lines regarding rats and bicycle wheels, and on occasion speak with Hamm’s decrepit parents, who live in cans. It is a wandering narrative with no clear direction, and Beckett relies upon the ability of his characters to realize this in order to make his writing choices explicit to the audience. In effect, he wants you to know that he knows that you know.

What results is a loss of the usually omnipresent “fourth wall” that implicitly exists to contain fiction within its own microcosm. It is, as Nathaniel Davis explains in his examination of Beckett’s oeuvre, a device “wherein on-stage actors acknowledge the presence of the audience” and so insinuate their own falsity (86). This is metafiction: a series of storytelling techniques that “draw attention to a text’s status, working together to self-consciously expose its means of representation” (Mackay 66). *Endgame*’s most essential tool in its inventory of experimental
recountal is this malleability. The impregnable gulf that keeps the viewer an invisible spectator, continually apart from the suspension of disbelief that is called for when one is exposed to fantasy, is violated, and so the otherwise inviolable rules for disclosure are broken.

Beckett actually appears to exploit this in the first lines of the play, spoken by Clove as he faces the auditorium. “Finished, it’s finished, nearly finished, it must be nearly finished,” he intones (2395), in reference perhaps both to the tedium of his introductory survey of the stage’s one-room set and more broadly to the routine life that he and Hamm are implied to live beyond this one peek at it. As Davis notes, however, this bit is characterized as more of a traditional aside representing the speaker’s self-addressal rather than the genuine recognition of the otherness of the viewer (99). The moment acts almost as a tease, however, for the character and his companion’s later, more subtle proddings at the boundaries of their little universe.

Subsequent metatheatrical moments better represent a leaning on the fourth wall rather than an outright rending of it, as the actors speak to one another of the unusual progression of their tale in an indirect acknowledgement of the fact that their moments together do occur within the context of a viewable spectacle. Given the largely unexplainable nature of the production and the apparent randomness of the dialogue, however, these examples are such primarily because the audience is able to interpret them in a specific manner. This ambiguity heightens the dubiousness of understanding that pervades *Endgame*, which seems to be Beckett’s fundamental goal with the piece: his metatextual discourse represents a “self-consciousness” of narrative methodology meant to “transgress medium specificity” and make the template of the play something more than a vessel for popular culture (Mackay 68). By rejecting recognizable plotting conventions and a relatable cast, he questions the apparent necessity and importance of theatrical linearity and easily consumable entertainment.
Beckett first calls attention to the oddities in his writing after Hamm and Clov argue over the inability of the latter to get seeds to sprout. “This is not much fun,” Hamm grumbles (2399), simultaneously commenting within the story on his dislike for the negativity of the discussion while also mimicking outside of it the expected opinion of the audience. In doing so, he admits to the surreal and potentially alienating effect of the dialogue’s sporadic focus, which in turn reveals the author’s awareness of his unusual approach. This is followed almost immediately with another moment of self-reflection: “What’s happening, what’s happening?” asks Hamm in anguish, to which Clov answers that “something is taking its course” (2399). The “what” that Hamm so worries over is unclear, as is the “something” that Clov refers to. The exchange can consequently be read as a vocalization of the viewer’s confusion: the former question mirrors the frustration of the spectator in being unable to understand what he is witnessing, while the latter declarative almost mocks the selfsame onlooker for his desire for the events to reveal their meaning. By naming the sequence of moments only as a vague “something” rather than a cohesive narrative, Clov thus refuses to organize his actions for another’s sake of clarity and ensures the witness that they will not, as he may expect, become clearer in time.

Perhaps more explicit is a scene in which Hamm asks about the weather. Clov states that he will need to get the telescope and ladder to check it properly through the high window, which results in a violent shouting match between the pair. “Things are livening up,” Clov subsequently admits (Beckett 2403), making note as he does so the energy that the play is now infused with due to the agitation of the performers. He then turns the telescope on the audience (for once directly breaking the fourth wall in doing so) and states that he sees “a multitude . . . in transports . . . of joy” (2403). He follows this with a joke: “That’s what I call a magnifier” (2403). When Hamm does not respond, he asks him if they do not laugh. “I don’t,” Hamm claims (2403). “Nor
I,” agrees Clov (2403). Davis notes the use of contradiction here: after admitting to his fictionality by making an ironic joke about the crowd’s enjoyment of his and Hamm’s conflict to inspire laughter, Clov abruptly robs onlookers of their mirth by declining to take part in it, and so demonstrates the differences in feeling between them and himself (100). The action highlights the vastness of the two party’s discrepancies: one is free to make light of the situation as a bystander in a distant world, while the other must actually live with it and its effects.

A similar rebuff is made through the story’s conclusion. Just as a twist to the established norm threatens to take the play in a new, arguably more interesting direction – something that the players themselves refuse to allow: “Not an underplot, I trust,” Hamm says when Clov mentions seeing a strange boy outside (Beckett 2418) – the action abruptly winds down to its closing without any sort of traditional climax or resolution to the concept’s many unexplained moments. “It’s the end, Clov, we’ve come to the end,” Hamm discloses (2419), signaling to the theatergoers an end of their voyeurism despite a lack of definitive resolution or buildup to such.

*Endgame* is therefore largely inaccessible as a narrative, but that is what its creator wants. By eschewing the safety of immediate comprehension and making it clear to his audience that he knows of the strangeness in his decisions, Samuel Beckett uses metatheatre to create something new. And with an altogether weak fourth wall and pair of medium-savvy characters, he makes his unconventionality undeniable. Beckett knows of his quirks, and you should, too. With such knowledge comes a peculiar but undeniable power: the power of preemptive sensibility.
Works Cited

