

Never give a bicycle to a child of the future

Dylan Emerick-Brown¹

Endgame, the one-act play written by Samuel Beckett and first performed in 1957, epitomizes the theater of the absurd. Set in a post-apocalyptic world, reminiscent of the nuclear Cold War threat everyone – including the audience – was facing at the time, the four characters are Hamm, Clov, Nagg, and Nell. Hamm is a tyrannical, blind, and immobile man seated in a chair in the middle of the stage; Clov, is a young man who never seems to cease moving across the stage and acts as a servant to Hamm; Nagg, Hamm’s legless father lives in a trashcan next to Hamm’s legless mother, Nell, in her trashcan. All of the characters are symbolic of chess pieces as the title of the play implies given that an endgame is when, towards the end of a chess game, there are merely a few pieces left on the board to protect the king. Hamm is the king, highly limited in his movements; Clov is a pawn, the ever-moving workhorse of the play; Nagg and Nell are the pair of rooks, as even their trashcans resemble the cylindrical turrets of the chess pieces. The names also appear to be symbolic of the global conflicts so relevant during the play’s conception: “Ruby Cohn and other critics have noted that the characters’ names echo associations with hammers and nails: Nell is a homophone for *nail*; Hamm is a shortened form of *hammer*; Nagg is from the German *nagel*, for nail; and Clov is from the French *clou*, also for *nail*...By using English, French, and German versions of *nail* Beckett involves the principal combatants of modern European wars” (Jacobus 1048). Well into this play, Hamm decides to tell a story, though we never know for certain if it is fictional or not; it reveals one of the most fascinating and yet overlooked plot points in the entire production. It is about how the madman in Hamm’s story taught him that true suffering was the loss of something desirable and so Hamm’s behavior, which Clov found intolerably cruel, was in fact a subtle and disguised effort at saving his surrogate son – and infertile heir – from a life spent in a post-apocalyptic world.

¹ Dylan Emerick-Brown is an English teacher at Deltona High School in Deltona, Florida where he enjoys teaching James Joyce's works to his engaging students. He has presented on Joyce internationally and has numerous articles on his favorite author published. For more information on his work with James Joyce in secondary education, please visit <https://www.teachingjoyce.com/>. E-mail: dylaneb@live.com

In the beginning of the play, Hamm “...holds the handkerchief spread out before him” and says, “Old stancher!” (Beckett 1050). This is a reference to the cloth from his face which stanching or stopped the flow of blood. After returning his handkerchief to his breast pocket, Hamm ponders, “Can there be misery – (*he yawns*) – loftier than mine? No doubt. Formerly. But now?” (Beckett 1050). He is lamenting his suffering in the post-apocalyptic world in which he is living. The most succinct description of the world outside comes from Clov when he says to Hamm from the window, “What all is? In a word? Is that what you want to know? Just a moment...Corpsed” (Beckett 1059). The world has ended and is lifeless beyond their walls.

In this post-apocalyptic world, life seems to have ceased beyond the characters on the stage, with the exception of a flea or crablouse in Clov’s trousers and a rat in the kitchen – the former exterminated, the latter still at large. Hamm can only dream of life with, “What dreams! Those forests!” (Beckett 1051). Even Clov, attempting to grow some seeds, admits, “If they were going to sprout they would have sprouted. (*Violently.*) They’ll never sprout!” (Beckett 1053). The lack of fertility in this environment is reminiscent of “The Waste Land” by T.S. Eliot and his Fisher King allusion. This comparison is made discreetly when Nagg and Nell are recalling their engagement on Lake Como, long before the end of the world, and Nell reminisces, “One April afternoon” (Beckett 1056). What would normally be a happy memory, becomes all the more tragic when contrasted against what the world has become. This relates beautifully with Eliot’s first line of, “April is the cruelest month...” (Eliot). The dichotomy of spring in April with losing one’s legs or the death of the world echoed through Eliot’s and Beckett’s work and is central to the theme of Hamm’s paternal style regarding Clov.

The infertility of this world also tragically and comically contrasts with the lineage of Nagg to Hamm to Clov. These references are made throughout the play such as when Hamm yells to his father, “Accursed progenitor!” (Beckett 1052). and “Accursed fornicator!” (Beckett 1053). Nagg even reminds Hamm, the symbolic chess king, that he was once as Hamm is now: “I was asleep, happy as a king, and you woke me up to have me listen to you” (Beckett 1068). He says this despite earlier Hamm telling Clov, “But for me, (*gesture towards himself*) no father” (Beckett 1062). Even though Clov is not Hamm’s biological or even officially-adopted son, they have a very similar relationship despite Clov’s role as a servant. Hamm asks Clov, “Do you remember when you came here? CLOV: No. Too small, you told me. HAMM: Do you

remember your father? CLOV (*wearily*): Same answer...HAMM: It was I was a father to you. CLOV: Yes. (*He looks at Hamm fixedly.*) You were that to me” (Beckett 1062). Hamm even goes so far as to predict in the future how his father, Nagg, will be dead and Clov will have left him: “I’ll have called my father and I’ll have called my...(*he hesitates*)...my son” (Beckett 1073). It is significant that despite Hamm treating Clov as a servant for the entire play, he reveals that on a deeper level he regards him as a son.

Towards the beginning of the play, Clov recalls how he had never had the joys a typical young boy would have experienced. “I never had a bicycle,” he says to Hamm. “When there were still bicycles I wept to have one. I crawled at your feet. You told me to go to hell. Now there are none” (Beckett 1052). Interestingly, it was on a bicycle that Hamm’s parents lost their legs in a terrible accident as Nagg reminded Nell: “When we crashed on our tandem and lost our shanks” (Beckett 1054). There is certainly the aura of tragedy surrounding the symbol of the bicycle. However, the denial of a bicycle to Clov from Hamm was not an intentionally cruel act, but rather an act of mercy he learned from an experience he had long before Clov was born and not yet “in the land of the living” (Beckett 1064).

Hamm tells Clov, “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” (Beckett 1064). Interestingly, a painter and engraver would be in the business of capturing ephemeral moments in a state of permanence. In a post-apocalyptic world, ephemerality seems to be dead and all moments appear stagnant with no future possible. Also, the madman had been spared from the desolation of the apocalypse, as Hamm lamented in his opening lines concerning his lofty misery, because there had been no change for him – he already saw nothing but ashes. This was a pivotal experience in Hamm’s life as will be revealed by the end of the play.

In Hamm’s other story, he tells of a man who came to see him one Christmas Eve long ago to beg for bread or work in order to feed his little boy. While it is never confirmed whether this story is fictional, it relates too closely to Clov’s life to be dismissed as impossible. Hamm yelled at the man, “(*Violently.*) Use your head, can’t you, use your head, you’re on earth, there’s no cure for that!” (Beckett 1067). This is a

sentiment about the pre-apocalyptic world he repeats later after recalling all those he could have helped prior to Armageddon. Fascinatingly, just before this reflection, as Clov leaves the room, Hamm reintroduces old stancher from the beginning of the play. “(He takes out his handkerchief, unfolds it, holds it spread out before him.) We’re getting on. (Pause.) You weep, and weep, for nothing, so as not to laugh, and little by little...you begin to grieve. (He folds the handkerchief, puts it back in his pocket, raises his head.) All those I might have helped. (Pause.) Helped! (Pause.) Saved. (Pause.) Saved! (Pause.) The place was crawling with them!” (Beckett 1073). Hamm had, in fact, saved one – the one who weeps for nothing: Clov. And Clov’s connection with old stancher, the handkerchief, will be revealed in the end.

However, Hamm wasn’t an entirely callous man. As the father in his story was groveling, Hamm interestingly noted to Clov, “It was the moment I was waiting for. (Pause.) Would I consent to take in the child...” (Beckett 1067). This was a revealing sentiment Hamm repeated at the end of the play to Clov as the young man stood in the distance watching him: “If he could have his child with him...(Pause.) It was the moment I was waiting for. (Pause.) You don’t want to abandon him? You want him to bloom while you are withering? Be there to solace your last million last moments? (Pause.) He doesn’t realize, all he knows is hunger, and cold, and death to crown it all. But you! You ought to know what the earth is like, nowadays. Oh I put him before his responsibilities!” (Beckett 1078). It is easy to see Hamm addressing Clov at the end here. This begs the question, why would someone so cruel be waiting for the moment when the man would beg him to take his son? It would seem to be an act of kindness. But then why would Hamm agree to accept Clov into his life, only to treat him so poorly such as denying the young boy a bicycle? We also have the chess-inspired royal lineage allusion from Hamm to Clov with the mention of a “crown”.

The connecting thread comes near the end of the play when Hamm asks Clov for “a few words...to ponder...in my heart” (Beckett 1077). Clov eventually replies with his hope that one day he can break this cycle – reminiscent of the word *bicycle* – of misery and leave. He says, “I open the door of the cell and go. I am so bowed I only see my feet, if I open my eyes, and between my legs a little trail of black dust. I say to myself that the earth is extinguished, though I never saw it lit. (Pause.) It’s easy going. (Pause.) When I fall I’ll weep for happiness” (Beckett 1077). The key to Clov’s freedom and happiness is that he never saw the earth lit and so it can never be fully extinguished for him. Through the denial of worldly pleasures such as a bicycle, Hamm

was preparing Clov for a life in a world of pain and emptiness. We cannot know if the cold and empty world Hamm imagined for the future was the old world of the audience or a prediction of the post-apocalyptic hell to come, but he prepared Clov regardless. Just as the madman from Hamm's story was spared from misery because all he saw were ashes from the beginning, so long as Clov had not experienced pure joy and thus, loss, he would be better adapted to this world with nothing. And for Hamm to ensure Clov never experienced loss, he would deny him worldly pleasures. Hamm's acts of cruelty in the beginning of the play are revealed not to be acts of unkindness, but rather acts of mercy, stemmed from his lesson with the madman. The permanence of the artist and engraver would not be the prison of Clov; he would break free.

Hamm always knew one day Clov would – and likely should – leave and go out into the world beyond. Unlike the endless and inevitable hell Hamm has accepted, Clov seems determined to break his bonds with destiny and use free will to govern his future. When Hamm predicted Clov would end up like him, but alone, Clov responded, “It's not certain” (Beckett 1062). When Hamm said Clov was not able to refuse him, Clov replied, “Soon I won't do it anymore” (Beckett 1064). And as Clov places the alarm clock – which he earlier explained would signal to Hamm by its ringing that Clov had left him – and “*puts it on lid of Nagg's bin...*” he says to Hamm, “I'll leave you” (Beckett 1076). The subtle placement of the alarm clock on Nagg's bin is a reference to the breaking of the paternal lineage. Just as Hamm rejected his father, Clov must now reject his symbolic father in order to free himself and live in this “corpsed” (Beckett 1059) world.

Poetically, Hamm had revealed all of this in his brief line while Clov was absent from the stage: “The end is in the beginning and yet you go on” (Beckett 1073). This is reminiscent of the doxology *Gloria Patri* – also known as “Glory Be To The Father” – which states, “As it was in the beginning, is now, and ever shall be, world without end” (*Gloria Patri*). The use of the word “yet” as a conjunction implies free will. Should Beckett have chosen to excise that word and simply write, “The end is in the beginning and you go on,” this would have implied a sense of inevitability. However, “yet” reveals that despite the end being in the beginning, Clov chooses to go on. Here there is again the father-son analogy with “Glory Be To The Father”. In Catholicism, there is a predestined plan set forth by God; in chess, the pieces must be moved by a player; and in theater, the actors must perform from a pre-written script. Despite all of these

inevitably, Beckett symbolically gives Clov the gift of free will which he will use to leave Hamm.

And just as Hamm said, “The end is in the beginning...” The play ends with Clov ready to leave forever, dressed in a “*panama hat, tweed coat, raincoat over his arm, umbrella, bag*” (Beckett 1077-1078). Hamm “*holds handkerchief spread out before him.*) Old stancher! (*Pause.*) You...remain. (*Pause. He covers his face with handkerchief, lowers his arms to armrest, remains motionless.*)” (Beckett 1079). As one may recall from Hamm’s opening lines – connecting the end to the beginning – a stancher is a cloth that stops or stanches the flow of blood. In the lineage of Nagg-Hamm-Clov, it is Clov who is symbolically the stancher, the end of the bloodline so-to-speak. Just as the forests of Hamm’s dreams are gone and Clov’s seeds refuse to sprout, this is an infertile waste land. This again connects to T.S. Eliot’s poem inspired by the destruction of the Great War and the infertility of the Fisher King. In the final lines of the play, Hamm could be referring to his handkerchief or, perhaps, Clov who is still standing near the door. Either way, it was Hamm’s seemingly callous and cruel behavior towards Clov, such as denying him a childhood bicycle, that inevitably prepared him to escape this post-apocalyptic world – if not physically, mentally; and it was Hamm’s experience with the madman long ago who taught him the way to raise a boy of the future by denying him a past.

WORKS CITED

Beckett, Samuel. “Endgame.” *The Bedford Introduction to Drama: Second Edition*, edited by Lee A. Jacobus, Bedford Books of St. Martin’s Press, 1993, 1045-1079.

Eliot, T.S. “The Waste Land.” *Poetry Foundation*, 1922, <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/47311/the-waste-land>, accessed 30 April 2019.

“Gloria Patri.” *Hymnary.org*, https://hymnary.org/text/glory_be_to_the_father_and_to_the_son, accessed 20 April 2019.

Jacobus, Lee A., editor. *The Bedford Introduction to Drama: Second Edition*. Bedford Books of St. Martin’s Press, 1993.