

## **“YOU’RE ON EARTH, THERE’S NO CURE FOR THAT!”: THE DYSTOPIAN FUTURE OF NATURE IN SAMUEL BECKETT’S ENDFGAME**

**Kevser ATEŞ**

English Instructor, School of Foreign Languages, Karabuk University, Karabuk /Turkey



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### **ABSTRACT**

In this dystopian, chaotic future, Samuel Beckett depicts a world with barren, desolate nature, which is a warning for humans to be more careful with their attitude towards nature. Beckett displays how destructive effects this lackness of nature may produce on people with the illustration of a few characters who suffer from the pain of this desert land as well as suffering from their physical deterioration. In this world of nothingness, the characters of the play, Nagg and Nell, living in dustbin, their blind son Hamm, unable to walk, and his servant Clove spend all their time together though they are not content with this situation. The nostalgia for old nature is noticeable in happy memories of Hamm, longing for the old days with beautiful forests, gardens and the sky, which prominently manifests the significance of nature to our mental health. This paper sets out to discuss Endgame from an environmental perspective, focusing on the relationship between characters and their environment.

**Key words:** Endgame, Environment, Nature, Pastoral, Samuel Beckett.

### **1. INTRODUCTION**

Endgame tells the story of what happens after a disaster strikes earth. In this dark ecological absurd play, Samuel Beckett depicts four people that need each other in order to continue their lives because of their deficiencies in a world that has run out of its natural resources and does not seem meaningful anymore. As it is explained by Mckibben, the coexistence of nature surrounding us for centuries with human population and habits is impossible (170). In this bleak, desolate dystopian future, “Beckett demands a confrontation with what the green thinker and anti-nuclear campaigner Joanna Macy might call the “ecological repressed”, the refusal of human beings to accept that their actions have environmental effects, and, consequently, that their fate is bound up with that of the earth” (Lavery and Finburgh, 10). Once nature becomes barren, gloomy, dreary wasteland with depressing smoke-coloured grey overcoming refreshing green, human beings will have to face the detrimental effects of their reckless affiliations with nature. Beckett draws a vivid picture of a chaotic, desperate world in which characters seem to be uneasy with the idea of being alive in a barren land. Hamm is an old man who can neither walk nor see and always wants Clov, a young servant that has pain in his legs, to do something for him and there are also Hamm’s very old parents, Nagg and Nell, who cannot move and stay in ashbins. They live in an environment which has been destructed by the unnamed disaster leading the world to nothingness, which is declared by Clov when he looks through a telescope: “Nothing... nothing... good... good... nothing...” (26). The play begins with the description of inside of their home “Bare interior. Grey light.” There is nothing much inside but two small windows, an armchair, a door, a picture and two ashbins. When Clov starts to talk about outside, it is immediately seen that there is not much difference between their home and environment. The interior design of this home in which there are a few properties described is a representation of barren land outside. Bare means dry, leafless which can describe what Clov sees outside as he says “Grain upon grain, one by one, and one day, suddenly, there’s a heap, a little heap, the impossible heap” (1). Then he says he will go

to the kitchen, but does not mention what he will cook or if there is anything to cook. It seems that nature has eventually dried up and does produce very little, just few grains, which seem impossible to make a heap. "Grey light" also shows the negative atmosphere inside their home and implies the negativity in nature as grey reminds the colour of the smog produced by factories that pollute air, which may be one of the reasons that have caused the destruction of environment. This is environmental catastrophe predicted by ecologists and narrated in *Mankind and Mother Earth*, published in 1976, by the English historian Arnold Toynbee, afraid of man's capability to "make the biosphere uninhabitable, and that it will, in fact, produce this suicidal result within a foreseeable period of time if the human population of the globe does not now take prompt and vigorous concerted action to check the pollution and the spoliation that are being inflicted upon the biosphere by short-sighted human-greed" (qtd. in Glen A. Love 225). It is not clear in the play whether this catastrophe is caused by humans' actions, but it is clear that this will be the result of the indifference of people to nature since they treat it as if it never ends. However, Clov makes it clear that "it's finished, nearly finished, it must be nearly finished" (1).

Hamm insistently wants Clov to tell him what he sees outside, so Clov looks out of the window, but he sees nothing. Hamm says "It'd need to rain", but Clov declares in a certain way that it will not rain. Though while Beckett was writing this play, global warming was not known as it is now, he predicted that there would be no rain in the future if people went on treating earth in this way or he just thought nature would not be able to put up with human beings who cannot succeed in living in peace even with their own kind. This is how wars have made writers give up on hope about the future of the world. In this hopeless world, it is obviously shown that Hamm and Clov desperately need each other.

HAMM: Why do you stay with me?

CLOV: Why do you keep me?

HAMM: There's no one else.

CLOV: There's nowhere else. (14)

Clov has nowhere to go and Hamm has no one to keep with him and he's afraid that Clov will leave him since he probably does not love Hamm, who confesses to have made Clov suffer. There is probably no tree, no road, nothing to see outside, which makes this home an escape from outer reality for them. He yearns for old days by remembering the forests which have vanished: "What dreams! Those forests! (Pause.) Enough, it's time it ended, in the shelter, too" (1). He seems sad for the beauty of past, for what they have unfortunately lost, the loss of peace, stability, green, better days, which can be called pastoral that "has always been characterised by nostalgia, so that wherever we look into its history, we will see an 'escalator' taking us back further into a better past" and in this case we see an orientation of it, the elegy which "looks back into a vanished past with a sense of nostalgia" (Garrard, *Ecocriticism*, 37). Hamm talks about a madman he used to see before Clov was born when there was the beauty of the environment which was worth of admiring:

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! (32)

The fear of this man about the end of the world seems to have turned out to be true as neither Hamm nor Clov have no friends to talk or no garden to walk in, no rising corn to see. The desperate situation the playwright feels he is in is easily seen in their dialogues declaring everything has come to an end, which may stem from Beckett's worries about a possible war between governments which will unfortunately put an end to everything lovely about this world because there is nothing lovely about wars as much as there is no meaning in them, but just the interests of the governments trying to show their power over others. Steven Barfield thinks though in this play there is no nature, "pastoral imagery plays out to suggest poignant memories of what once was" because "the madman's words have come true and the world is now truly dead, but they still share their memory of the pastoral scene of men sailing out to fish upon the ocean" (171). For Clov and Hamm, who spend their whole time talking to each other at home, there is nothing lovely about the world to be admired or even to be looked at now. Moreover, Hamm, suffering from the pain of his existence, blames Nagg for it by calling him "accursed progenitor". Lawley states that "[h]orror at natural reproduction haunts the play: for example, the deeply enigmatic ending, which leaves Clov

onstage but apparently preparing to depart, seems to be prompted by the appearance of a small boy in the wasteland outside, a ‘potential procreator’” (qtd. in Garrard, 389-390).

Since Hamm remembers his old days when there used to be sea and rising corn in his city, it can be deduced that the disaster which has made the world a barren land did not happen very long ago. However, now Clov says he cannot hear the waves because there is no sea or no ocean which have probably dried out. When Hamm is criticized because he continuously asks Clov questions about his family, he says “I love the old questions... Ah the old questions, the old answers, there’s nothing like them!” (25), which shows his obsession with the old, old times when people were still hopeful about future and his rejection to face with present problems. With a nostalgia for the past, he holds on to the old and wishes to dream nature which seems as a sanctuary for him in order to escape from these problems.

HAMM: 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! (19)

Even if Hamm could walk, there are no more woods to walk in or even if he could see, there is no more the beauty of the sky or of the earth, which is asserted by Clov, who, though able to walk and see, is not very different from Hamm with respect to his incapability to see the beauty of nature which does not exist anymore. The pessimism Clov feels about nature is obvious in their conversation about the seeds he has planted:

HAMM: Did your seeds come up?

CLOV: No.

HAMM: Did you scratch round them to see if they had sprouted?

CLOV: They haven’t sprouted.

HAMM: Perhaps it’s still too early.

CLOV: If they were going to sprout they would have sprouted.

(Violently.)

They’ll never sprout! (17)

It is apparent that people can grow nothing in this catastrophic environment that has lost its generating capability. The reason why Hamm, thinking that seeds will come up later, is more optimist than Clov may stem from the fact that he cannot see what has happened to environment around him. This pessimism about the seeds reminds the part called “The Burial of the Dead” in T.S. Eliot’s *Waste Land*, in which the narrator asks his old acquaintance, Stetson, if the corpse he planted in his garden has begun to sprout, which is about the people who died in World War I, and hints lack of hope about future as well. The concern of Eliot, who destructs Romantic ideal of nature that has no place in modern period when too many people die without knowing the reason of their death, is shared by Becket as he shows us “a handful of dust” in this waste land in his play.

In order to make Nell happy, Nagg wants to tell her a story about a tailor that he argues makes her laugh, but before letting him start, Nagg tells their own story which is set in Lake Como, where they went out rowing in one April afternoon, the day after their engagement, when they can make use of natural resources. In order to prove a point about the Cricks in *Waterland* by Graham Swift, Serpil Oppermann makes a connection between storytelling and man’s struggle to live in order: “Ironically, however, man’s stubborn desire to order and shape reality and nature to protect himself from chaos and disorder by means of storytelling proves the opposite and causes humans to lose their connection to storytelling” (251). Nell tries to continue their connection to past by telling a story about their enjoying in a lake in one April afternoon that is normally associated with spring, the precursor of joy and happiness in green nature, to protect them from the pain of living in a desert land in which there are probably no positive connotations of April which does not seem very different from the cruel month Eliot describes. When talking to his father, Hamm points out the dryness of their land that cannot be regenerated in spring: “But what in God’s name do you imagine? That the earth will awake in the spring? That the rivers and seas will run with fish again?”

That there's manna in heaven still for imbeciles like you?" (30) Hamm's cry makes it obvious that Romantic idea of seeking for peace in nature is not possible anymore.

The physical deficiencies of Beckett's characters, though few in numbers, may have different meanings such as the deterioration of the relationships, deterioration of the environment. In the article called "On the Dialectic of Closing and Opening in Samuel Beckett's End-game," Gabriele Schwab and D.L. Selden, who make a connection between the "bodily deterioration" of Hamm, Clov, Nell and Nagg, and a possible global disaster in future, argue that: "this is so suggestive of symbolic meaning that one can hardly evade the atmosphere of finality, decay, and apocalypse ... Nothing seems more evident than to see this scene as anticipating the advancing decay of our culture or an imminent global catastrophe" (192). If we assume Hamm, who is in a wheelchair, is a representative of the present and Clov is a representative of future, there is lack of hope in future, too, as Clov also complains about the pain in his legs, which probably means that he will eventually not be able to walk when he gets older like Hamm, Nell and Nagg. This continuous deterioration in bodies of these people can be linked with the vicious circle of people's continuous destruction on earth, which justifies a possible disaster waiting for us. Moreover, the hopelessness felt through the play implies there is no solution for this disaster, which is also illustrated by Hamm, who complains "you're on earth, there's no cure for that!" (35). Living on earth is like an incurable disease whose pain you have to get used to. Greg Garrard asserts this play "is literally, though not clearly, about both the end – of nature 'in the vicinity,' of comfort, of kindness, of some semblance of peace or equality" (395). With the loss of nature, it seems that people have simultaneously lost their comfort, kindness and peace, which ultimately make their worlds unbearable.

In this play, there is a recurrent theme of loss in everything they talk about: "There's no more pap... There are no more sugar plums!... There is no more nature... There's no more tide." And there is no explanation about why these losses have come into existence and the relation between them and the disaster, so it calls to mind the question: "was it a sudden event, or a drawn-out decline? Evidence points to the latter: Hamm's chronicle records the last survivors of a declining human population, presumably dying as the result of there being 'no more nature'" (Smith 114). Obviously, it is not a disaster that happened one night, but the result of the recklessness of people. Without thinking the consequences of their actions, people considering themselves as the master of nature have caused the deterioration of its beauty and finally completely consumed it and at the same time have paved the way for their doom.

HAMM: And the horizon? Nothing on the horizon?

CLOV (lowering the telescope, turning towards

Hamm, exasperated): What in God's name could there be on the horizon? (Pause.)

HAMM: The waves, how are the waves?

CLOV: The waves?

(He turns the telescope on the waves.)

Lead.

HAMM: And the sun?

CLOV (looking): Zero.

HAMM: But it should be sinking. Look again.

CLOV (looking): Damn the sun.

HAMM: Is it night already then?

CLOV (looking): No.

HAMM: Then what is it?

CLOV (looking): Gray.

(Lowering the telescope, turning towards Hamm louder.)

Gray!

(Pause. Still louder.)

GRRAY! (23)

Hamm's search for something to hold on to, to be hopeful for is immediately destroyed by Clove, who diminishes Hamm's enthusiasm about the waves, the sun by asserting there is nothing to be seen on the horizon but just "Gray" that is apparently enough to summarize what is happening outside on earth, and in future there will be no change about nature which has almost extinguished. Clov cannot help laughing when Hamm talks about a man offered a job as gardener, whereas Hamm cannot understand what is funny about it as he possibly has the images of old gardens in his mind unlike Clov, who can just see the waste land now. Paul Lawley argues *Endgame* is a play which is "explicitly structured on binary oppositions" such as "the 'onstage/offstage, inside/outside opposition' alongside 'past/present, land/sea, nature/non-nature, light/darkness'" (qtd. in Campbell 259). Hamm wants Clov to bring him under the window to feel the light on his face and under window left that is called to be the earth, he says it "feels like a ray of sunshine" (33) which is denied by Clov. Hamm wants to hear the sea, and when Clov tells him he cannot even if he opens the window, he stubbornly orders him to open it, which shows his insistence on believing nature has still its beauty.

HAMM: Nature has forgotten us.

CLOV: There's no more nature.

HAMM: No more nature! You exaggerate.

CLOV: In the vicinity.

HAMM: But we breathe! We change! We lose our hair, our teeth! Our bloom, our ideals!

CLOV: Then she hasn't forgotten us. (16)

Hamm does not want to believe in the non-existence of nature, but since he cannot see and has no one else who can see around, he is dependent on the observation of Clov. Theodor W. Adorno thinks even if there was exaggeration in Clov's observation, this would not make much difference: "If catastrophe amounted to a partial end of the world, that would be a bad joke: then nature, from which the imprisoned figures are cut off, would be as good as nonexistent; what remains of it would only prolong the torment" (123). Even the remains of nature after the catastrophe only enhance the agony people feel in this desperate situation where it seems that they no longer have anything to fix it after what they have done to nature; there is no way of undoing this harm and there is no painkiller to soothe their pain.

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