

Politics of Existence in Beckett's *Endgame* and *Waiting for Godot*: "Yesterday" as the Only Timeframe, and Egocentric Characters¹

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Abstract The aesthetic and epistemological implications of time consciousness have been profoundly treated by Samuel Beckett throughout his writing for forty-five years. Time, in Beckett's two masterpieces *Waiting for Godot* and *Endgame*, functions not as an escape from the present by means of the fullness of memory, but as a sad reminder of the past cut off from the present experience. As a reminder of the past, "yesterday" is the only time process observed to reveal the fullness of the characters' memory and existence. In *Endgame*, "yesterday" is a melancholy which evokes the break-up of a relationship of Nagg and Nell, Hamm and his parents, and Clov and Hamm and their tragic memories they put behind; while in *Waiting for Godot* "yesterday" is the merciless and insidious flux of time which uncovers the metamorphosis throughout the limited lifespan of Vladimir and Estragon. On the other hand, though Beckett projects the existence of the characters within the frame of "yesterday," he puts a few characters to the center, both metaphorically and realistically. Characters' egocentric depiction is interrelated to the modernity and what the two world wars introduced: the individuality and alienation of the characters in the modern community. This paper aims to reveal Beckett's narration of "yesterday" as a history narrative and the depiction of egocentric characters to show the challenge for existence in his two *magna opera*: *Endgame* and *Waiting for Godot*.

Key words Samuel Beckett; *Endgame*; *Waiting for Godot*; existence; yesterday; egocentrism

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There is no escape from the hours and the days. Neither from tomorrow nor from yesterday, because yesterday has deformed us, or been deformed by us. [...] We are not merely more weary because of yesterday, we are other, no longer what we were before the calamity of yesterday. (Beckett *Proust 2*)

As it is clear from the statements above, Samuel Beckett categorizes time zone into three as yesterday, today and tomorrow in which human beings are physiologically evoked in the aim of a guarantee of gaining recognition for the physical presence of their own. As a defender of existentialist philosophy, Beckett exemplifies the view that man's existence is certified through the physical and concrete presence of space and time; there are hours and days, there is yesterday and tomorrow, there is now and then within the limited lifespan of human beings; the man is presented as a man directing time or directed by time on the life stage.

Beckett often stresses "yesterday" as a period of time. He queries the interaction between the decomposing body/the essence of man and the phenomenon of "yesterday." Within each period of time left behind, man is metamorphosed into somebody else: the essence of man is also deformed or transformed. Man reveals his existence through a new transformation. This transformation is a result of the calamity of yesterday; in other words, the calamity of the two world wars that introduced the project of modern men. Here and now, yesterday introduced a newly-proven being: an egocentric modern man. Beckett portrays the modern man who points himself just to the center; a man who mirrors the so-called individualistic and humanist perspectives of harsh, old and rotten World Wars. Being the only timeframe revealed in both plays, yesterday is analytically conjured with the depiction of egocentric characterization through which Beckett toughens the politics of existence. Man lives in a single timeframe to which he strongly clings; life revolves around a specific time: yesterday and the dialogues come out to be monologues or soliloquies (words spoken by egocentric characters). Each character has his own duty: to challenge the dichotomies of outside world to establish the truth that he is in the center, for that reason he exists. There is no any

other timeframe upon which to base his idea of existence other than “yesterday.” There is no any other place/space in which to root the politics of his existence other than “the center.” Man exists in “yesterday,” and he existed in “yesterday.” Man exists in “the center”, and he existed in “the center.”

Considering these points of views, this paper intends to reveal Samuel Beckett's portrayal of “yesterday” as a reminder of the (perhaps) long-awaited past experiences of Nagg and Nell, Clov and Hamm, Vladimir and Estragon and their egocentric affairs to emphasize men's thirst for existence. In this context, the paper will try to evaluate the merciless and insidious flux of time, its impact on the bodily putrefaction of man within man's survival through his lifespan from childhood (though Beckett is inclined to use an indefinite “beginning”) to senility. The paper will firstly pay attention to the time phenomenon and its representation within Beckett's existentialist perspective: first, a physical body composed of flesh and bones; second, a spiritual body that takes form of an essence and spirit. In the second phase of the paper, I will exemplify Beckett's stereotypical characters in terms of their representation of bodily putrefaction and spiritual loss within the limits of “yesterday” in which time is revealed to have no circulation, and we will show how characters are centered to the point. That will take us to the individualization of each man in modern society.

Beckett's Time Dilemma: Yesterday as Melancholy and Flux of Time

The interrelations between time/existence and past/present are focal issues that Samuel Beckett stresses. *Oxford English Dictionary* defines time as “the indefinite continued progress of existence and events in the past, present, and future regarded as a whole.” Considering the continuity and wholeness of the unique elements of time as expressed in this dictionary definition, Beckett's perception of the time as a whole and in a continued progress reveals not only his philosophical inquiries such as “who are we?” and “why are we chosen?” but also his obsession with human and “being.” Stressing Jean-Paul Sartre's often-repeated dictum, “Existence precedes essence” (qtd. in Walkey 105) within his works, Beckett predominantly focuses on the latter: essence. In *Endgame*, Nagg and Nell are staged as moribund characters stuffed into dustbins and unconscious of time phenomenon. They are characterized as the samples of “existence;” two physical bodies composed of flesh and bones, having mortal defects, nibbling biscuits baby-like, having no teeth, mourning indifferently, and thirst for familial interest. The metamorphoses in their physical appearances are directly associated with “yesterday” in which the measure of durations of events and the intervals between these events reflect spiritual

putrefaction: the corruption and corrosion of the essence. The dialogue between the two characters represents this joint putrefaction:

NAGG: I've lost me tooth.

NELL: When?

NAGG: I had it yesterday.

NELL (*elegiac*): Ah yesterday.

(*They turn painfully towards each other.*)

(*The Complete Dramatic Works 79*)

The physical corruption (losing tooth) is automatically linked with time (yesterday) and time is, though indirectly, associated with spiritual agony (elegiac manners). Nagg's and Nell's reciprocal and painful looking at one another represents their longing for their own nostalgic past. They yearn for the past and the past (which is thoroughly squeezed into yesterday timeframe) reminds their spiritual loss.

Another thing to be emphasized is the "indefiniteness" of timeframe. The very starting point of "yesterday" is not clearly indicated. This "indefiniteness" echoes an unspecified sign of past experiences of Beckett's characters. The characters are portrayed to have an unknown past; there is no clear background information related to their former identity. The only timeframe to question their previous identity is "yesterday." Beckett constantly uses this time image to portray backs and forths between yesterday and now to represent the (un)limited period of time. There seems a flux of time, and as expressed by Anthony Uhlmann "The time-image, [...], presents the flow of time (which is not simply monodirectional from past to present but involves flux)" (12). Yesterday as a time image is noticeably revealed in *Waiting for Godot* as well. Estragon's unconsciously-uttered statements have a close connection with their previous social life and identity:

ESTRAGON: We came here yesterday.

VLADIMIR: Ah no, there you're mistaken.

ESTRAGON: What did we do yesterday?

VLADIMIR: What did we do yesterday?

ESTRAGON: Yes.

VLADIMIR: Why . . . (Angrily.) Nothing is certain when you're about.

ESTRAGON: In my opinion we were here.

(*The Complete Dramatic Works 13*)

When they question their past, or interrogate their “yesterday,” they seem to be unaware of what really happened the day before. Beckett links this mental dimness or loss of consciousness in close connection with “indefiniteness” of timeframe in which “Nothing is certain...” (*The Complete Dramatic Works* 13, 40). The beginning of yesterday is indefinite; as a matter of fact, there is an ambiguity about the existence of “yesterday.” Estragon searches for what they did yesterday, while it is replied with the same question by Vladimir. Though they forward the same questions (What did we do yesterday?), their mimicry is also different from each other in that they both are really unaware of what they did yesterday; however Estragon is worried about what happened while Vladimir is worried about not being able to answer to the question related.

But Vladimir and Estragon, like all human beings, exist in other sets of circles: living organisms subject to the cycles of time, on a round planet, orbiting the sun. Within the cage of that circle their possibilities are limited. They have been born, they will live for a term and then die; but at the same time that they acknowledge these facts they resist them by recreating and asserting meaning in the face of the fundamental negative constraints that define their condition. (Graver 25)

Touching on Aristotelian terms and emphasizing the dramatic links, Richard Schechner, in his article “There’s Lots of Time in *Godot*,” underlines the breakage of these Aristotelian links in *Waiting for Godot* and focuses on “discontinuity of time” (193). This discontinuity of time has something to do with a fixed circulation of daily activities in which Estragon and Vladimir are not at one with. Though they do not remember what they did yesterday, Vladimir’s confident statements (that Estragon is mistaken, or the uncertainty when Estragon’s about) reveal his fear of time loss (is there time actually?). This unintentional forgetting “represents time in that we arrive at an understanding of time not by being shown time directly but by being shown a line of action which necessarily involves the passage of time in its unfolding (an empirical progression)” (Uhlmann 12).

The question whether there is something called time, apart from the discontinuity just mentioned, is dealt in accordance with the tragicomic appearances of Beckett’s characters on the stage. The existence of something called time is revealed through the dialogues between the characters and “The pairing of characters — those duets — links time and space, presents them as discontinuous coordinates” (Schechner 192).

In *Endgame*, “yesterday” is addressed as a reminder of tragic memories and melancholic history which evokes the break-up of a relationship of Clov and Hamm they put behind. Touching on the same issue, and taking into attention Mircea Eliade’s categorization of time phenomenon referred as time for religious men and for secular men, Katherine H. Burkman puts forth that in *Waiting for Godot* all time becomes “the same day” (38), which seems to be the same in *Endgame* as well. The vast distance between the time during which dialogues are held and the previous time before the dialogues is very evident.

HAMM: Yesterday! What does that mean? Yesterday!

CLOV (violently): That means that bloody awful day, long ago, before this bloody awful day. I use the words you taught me. If they don’t mean anything anymore, teach me others. Or let me be silent.

(Pause.) (*The Complete Dramatic Works*, 90)

Clov’s description of “yesterday” as “long ago, before this bloody awful day” evokes the longevity of the same day: yesterday. The description given within the meaning of yesterday recalls some bad reminiscences of the past (bloody and awful). Clov’s remark that “I use the words you taught me. If they don’t mean anything anymore, teach me others. Or let me be silent” reflects some ambiguities within their approaches. If they mean nothing, then, it may be put forth that yesterday is nothing: there is nothing called yesterday. However, “[...], the only thing that seems to retain its solidity is the present” (Graver 36).

Egocentrism: I am in the Center, Therefore I Exist

Since Rene Descartes’ famous dictum “*Cogito ergo sum*” (I think, therefore I exist), many differing points on the ontological reflection of existence and the meaning of life have been reformulated by different scholars worldwide. Terry Eagleton, in *The Meaning of Life*, refers to Aristotle’s *Nicomachean Ethics*, Nietzsche’s *The Will to Power*, Heidegger’s *Being and Time*, Sartre’s *Being and Nothingness*, Wittgenstein’s *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, Schopenhauer’s *The World as Will* to emphasize some philosophical views on the notion of existence and the meaning of life (1-32). As for literature, the reflection of reality and unreality has been a matter of debate since the classical period. That to what extent the relationship between the characters and the textual events to real life events is have been explained through different theories and orientations. In ancient Greeks, Aristotle regarded the representation of nature as *mimesis* — “imitative representation of

the real world in art and literature” (*Oxford Dictionary*) — while Plato argued the opposite opinion through *diegesis* — “the (fictional) world in which the situations and events narrated occur” (Prince 1964). Building their ideas on these two opposite opinions, modern authors have mostly tried to reflect the un/reality through the “individual(s),” and they have gone towards the texts questioning the individual’s status in life.

Depicting man as a stand-alone Self in nearly all his works, Samuel Beckett, as a “postmodern modernist” (Abbott 25), questions the physical presence and ontological existence of man’s authenticity on a piece of land which is revealed to be “the world” itself. Besides emphasizing man’s individuality, Beckett stresses on man’s Self and degrades man into “a ball of emotion and thought” entrapped in his body — entrapped in the horns of a dilemma: the mind and the heart. As expressed by Thomas Postlewait, in *Self-Performing Voices: Mind, Memory, and Time in Beckett’s Drama*, “The mind and its words attempt to take the measure of the body’s existence, trying to tell how it is and was and will be, now and forevermore” (473) in Beckett’s works. It is precisely at this point to cite Eagleton: “Meaning is no longer a spiritual essence buried beneath the surface of things. But it still needs to be dug out, since the world does not spontaneously disclose it” (17). Paraphrasing Eagleton, it becomes clearer that what Beckett would like to show is to “dug out and unravel those that are buried beneath the surface of things.” Beckett’s depiction of the characters, the stage, and the vehicles are observed to be close reminders of “real life” though they are revealed to be far away from real-life characters. Beckett represents every character to stand for a universal quality of human being. For Hamm, who is “Center[ed], in an armchair on castors, covered with an old sheet” (*The Complete Dramatic Works* 74), life is composed of his own interests: the orders, insults, self-centered activities. Hamm’s anthropocentric tendency is not just an exaggerated depiction of a typical character; Beckett’s anthropocentric depiction of him signifies a typical position of the modern man. This anthropocentricity is also a humanistic and modernistic perspective of Beckett’s own view. Beckett portrays a stage on which the centered individual is sublimed: Beckett echoes the dictum Protagoras once uttered: “Man is the measure of all things” (qtd. in Nuyen 211).

The reality of life is addressed by Beckett through an exact depiction of individual man. Beckett emphasizes man’s existence and his Self via a portrayal of his body’s unity: not a fragmented self, but a self that is integrated with the body. Considering the stage as a silhouette of human being, Hamm, who stands in the middle of the scene, represents three central parts of the human body: the mind,

heart, and reproduction organs. A man's life is directed through these three parts of body, each directs differently and accordingly; however, the coordination of the two parts is sometimes applied. Beckett often uses this mind-heart coordination to exemplify man's existence, his superiority to the other living creatures. Within the depiction of an analytical and emotional man, Beckett figuratively reveals the reality of life in human evolution. Real life is the life that is performed on the stage (remember Shakespeare's motto: All world's a stage, and all the men and women merely players...). Whether it is a life like that of Clov's who is in search of a more meaningful one that is invisible without a telescope, or it is a life like that of Nagg's and Nell's who are stuffed in trash bins, living a "trash life," the reality is the thing that we are in the actual moment and the thing that we try to direct by means of our thoughts (mind) and emotions (heart) at that exact moment: this is what Beckett portrays. Considering Hamm's and Clov's following dialogue:

HAMM: Why do you stay with me? (Question 1)
CLOV: Why do you keep me? (Question 2)
HAMM: There's no one else. (Answer to Question 1)
CLOV: There's nowhere else. (Answer to Question 2)
(Pause.) (*The Complete Works* 76)

The author does not only put forth a logical inference, but he also exhibits an emotional result. The answer "There's no one else" to the question "Why do you stay with me?" and "There's nowhere else" to the question "Why do you keep me?" complete each other in close connection with mind and heart (logic and emotion). What Beckett addresses is the reality of man's insistence on unity of mind and heart, the reality of human's desperation, the reality of his need of someone with such feelings and ideas, the reality of his thirst for someone who can share his loneliness and desolation in the modern world. These depictions are addressed by Beckett to reveal the reality of man's existence, his being in need of help from infancy to senility: Beckett emphasizes the search for the meaning of life of human being who is ruled by his heart and mind. The other character, Clov, portrayed as a caretaker, has also some idiosyncrasies with universal features. This character symbolizes the desperateness of the modern man, the reminiscences of the past days, and the inability of the human body. Representing today's monotonous human life and human relationships, Clov manifests this feature via his repetitive and intimidating statement addressed to Hamm: "I'll leave you" (*The Complete Dramatic Works*, respectively 71,78,81,88, 89, 92, 96, 99, 104).

This statement is not only an expression of threat but also a representation of weak human relationships which echo the people who look after their own interests. It is also a metaphorical statement mirroring the idea of Clov's anthropocentric or egocentric status. Depicting Hamm and Clov as modern men who continue to live on their own in one room, Beckett exhibits the mutual relations of Hamm and Clov, and emphasizes the fact that they both need each other; in fact, Beckett depicts the fact that people cannot tolerate loneliness. Clov's asking Hamm "Do you believe in the life to come?" (*The Complete Works* 92) reveals a "double entendre" which takes us to both Aristotle's *mimesis* and Plato's *diegesis*. This sentence is uttered by a fictional character in a fictional world; however, identification with this character through a close connection with his utterances makes us lose ourselves in the world hereafter. Beckett's subtle diction and his philosophical views are echoed within each of his sentences. Though the two figures believe that "Life goes on" (*The Complete Dramatic Works* 99), their desperately questioning the reality of life exemplifies a contradictory standpoint. He [Beckett] attempts to show in his drama internal consciousness as external event, thus adapting his self-reflective language-concerned as it is with the limits of knowledge, the body as prison, the mind as prisoner, and life as an unfulfilled quest for meaning to a mimetic mode. In other words, he is holding a mirror up to the act of reflection (Postlewait 479). Hamm is dissatisfied with Clov's previous description of the world as "Zero" because Hamm's search for existence and meaning appears to be denied by the word "Zero."

The egocentric characterization is all over again revealed in Estragon and Vladimir in *Waiting for Godot*. The two characters reveal some dialogues which cover contrasting points. Estragon and Vladimir, each with an individualist perspective, take their words to the center. They merely speak to each other, whether meaningful or not. This may be considered within Piagetian interpretation of cognitive developmental stage of human being. This developmental stage is titled as "collective monologue" by Piaget, though he verifies this developmental stage for the preschool children; collective monologue is the stage "so long as the child talks about himself without collaborating with his audience or without evoking a dialogue" (qtd. in Junefelt 30); that is, children are chatting to each other in sequence, but each child is entirely unaware of what the other is saying. This is an egocentric approach. This is also true for Estragon and Vladimir. In the play, both characters recurrently speak to each other; however, many dialogues disclose a meaningless, empty, inconclusive result. Here an example:

VLADIMIR: Let's wait till we know exactly how we stand.

ESTRAGON: On the other hand it might be better to strike the iron before it freezes.

VLADIMIR: I'm curious to hear what he has to offer. Then we'll take it or leave it.

ESTRAGON: What exactly did we ask him for?

VLADIMIR: Were you not there?

ESTRAGON: I can't have been listening.

VLADIMIR: Oh ... nothing very definite.

ESTRAGON: A kind of prayer.

VLADIMIR: Precisely. (*The Complete Works* 15)

It is not of any significance to create an evocative speech, but to enhance the evidence that "I speak, therefore I am." Both Estragon and Vladimir do stress their turn to speak. Who speaks is to the front. Who speaks is to the center. This is just what Postlewait concludes: "Caught in time and space, Beckett's characters use language and number, however inadequately, to define the basic stuff of empirical reality: who, what, where, when, and how" (477).

As it is noticeably seen, Samuel Barclay Beckett conceives "yesterday" as the merciless and insidious flux of time, the indefiniteness, the reminder of past, and the metamorphosis. On the other hand, he confirms that "yesterday" is the discontinuity of time, the guarantee of background identity and social life, the proof of the present, and the basic verification of existence. Through the depiction of Clov and Hamm and Vladimir and Estragon, Beckett establishes that modern man, as a result of the harsh consequences that the new world order brought, is the lonesome person on the planet who aspires to guarantee his existence. Modern man strives to put himself to the center. To establish man's position, Beckett brings the only timeframe — yesterday — together with the central stature of man's being. Yesterday is not only an emblematic agenda that foregrounds the revelation of man's politics to survive, but, it is, at the same time, a central time concept which is conceptualized to announce the unique existence of an egocentric or anthropocentric creature: man. To be to the center is to root the notion that "I am." Beckett creates highly challenging characters to make them speak the modern man, and they say "I speak, therefore I exist; I am in the center, therefore I exist."

Note

1. Some parts of this paper were separately presented at the International Semiotic Conference

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