

Endgame: the  
tragedy of its time.  
putting a beckett play  
to the aristotelian  
test...



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At first glimpse, Samuel Beckett's *Endgame* has absolutely nothing in common with the model provided in Aristotle's *Poetics*. Where Aristotle claims the most important element of any tragedy is plot, *Endgame* seems to have no plot. Where Aristotle discusses the importance of speech(es) conveying moral purpose and character, *Endgame* has characters that speak metalanguage (language that talks about language), and only speak in order to pass time. Where Aristotle discusses action being a movement of spirit, *Endgame* seems to be totally devoid of characters that go through a movement of spirit. But after observing the structure of the play, Martin Esslin's essay *The Theatre of the Absurd*, and, most importantly, *Endgame* in context with the time period that it was written in, *Endgame* appears to have several points of contact with the model provided in *Poetics* and can be called a tragedy for the post World War II era. *Endgame*, written in French, was first produced in 1957. Esslin explains that the movement of absurdism emerged in France after World War II as a rebellion against the traditional values and beliefs of Western culture and literature (878). Absurdist drama creates an environment where people are isolated and the characters make their way through life ineptly because they don't know what else to do. The post World War II era was filled with people asking for meaning in their lives and that is exactly what the characters of *Endgame* are searching for. In *Endgame*, the characters stay together simply because they are afraid to be alone in such an incomprehensible world. They also live in a world of interdependence (Clov can't sit, Hamm can't stand or see; they rely on each other). Aristotle says "...poetry tends to express the universal.... By the universal I mean how a person of a certain type will on occasion speak or act, according to the law of probability or necessity..." (68). Aristotle believes <https://assignbuster.com/endgame-the-tragedy-of-its-time-putting-a-beckett-play-to-the-aristotelian-test/>

that it is important to educate the emotions, so that the spectator understands what they watch is universal. The only difference is that “ the universal” in Aristotle’s time was that fate is the great equalizer of man, while in Beckett’s time it is that death and dependence is the great equalizer of man. In terms of structure, Endgame’s presentation highly coincides with Aristotle’s concepts of mimesis. Poetics deals very much with the idea of mimesis, or imitation, and Aristotle believes that truth is embedded in imitation. Esslin discusses many writers that wrote about the senselessness of life before the absurdists, but they differ from the absurdists in that their plays contain logical and rational characters talking and reasoning about their meaningless lives. The absurdists, however, present the senselessness of the human condition by abandoning rational characters, actions, and plot. “ The Theatre of the Absurd has renounced arguing about the absurdity of the human condition; it merely presents it in being – that is, in terms of concrete stage images. This is the difference between the approach of the philosopher and that of the poet...” (Esslin, 877). In reference to Aristotle and his history, the difference between the philosopher and the poet can be seen as the difference between Plato and Aristotle. The former was a philosopher who explains why he is against drama and why drama shouldn’t be on stage; the latter was a theater theoretician who believed imitation to be the highest form of truth. If Aristotle sees imitation as the highest form of truth, then Endgame is a perfect example of imitating that which the time period believed in (rather than discussing the ideas of that time period). In Chapter IV of Poetics, Aristotle raises the question of the origin and development of poetry. He believes it comes from two instincts in human nature: that of imitation and that of harmony and rhythm (55-56). Here, Aristotle is

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recognizing both the content (imitation) and the form (harmony and rhythm) of art. Imitation has already been discussed. Harmony and rhythm can be seen clearly in Endgame: the characters talk in prose and the language is metalinguistic – it's dialogue about dialogue; the characters speak only to pass time. One of the most frequently used words in Endgame is "Pause," creating a monotonous, dragged-out rhythm. All of this is done with a rational purpose in mind; Beckett wants the theme of death, repetition, and meaninglessness to be conveyed to the spectator. Many could argue that Endgame does not follow Aristotle's model at all because Aristotle stresses the significance of rationality while Endgame seems irrational. However, for the time period it is representing, imitating, and commenting on, Endgame is actually highly rational, and harmony and rhythm is only one place that this can be seen in. Another place where this can be seen is through character. It is clear that in Endgame there is a focus on the incomprehensibility of the world, and each of the characters manifests this theme. If we look at one theme in Endgame being an attempt to rationalize an irrational, disorderly world, one need not look farther than the character of Clov. Clov is indecisive – constantly torn between duty and hatred. He asks questions like "Why this farce, day after day?" (761) and "Do this, do that, and I do it. I never refuse. Why?" (764) These are the questions that were asked at the time this the play was written: "Why live if we will eventually die?" "What is the point of our existence?" One of the goals of creating a character, according to Aristotle, is that the character must be true to life (81). At a time when the world is trying to make order out of chaos, Clov commenting that he loves order, that it's his dream, "A world where all would be silent and still and each thing in its last place, under the dust" (767), seems very true to life. If <https://assignbuster.com/endgame-the-tragedy-of-its-time-putting-a-beckett-play-to-the-aristotelian-test/>

Clov was a character in a play during Aristotle's time, the perception of him would be entirely different. If Clov asks the questions, Hamm provides, or tries to provide, the answers. The theme of life moving towards death in a meaningless world is emphasized by the seriousness with which Hamm talks about death and ending in his soliloquies. The metaphor for death or coming to the "end" of something is apparent in the very first lines of the play as Clov states, "Finished, it's finished, nearly finished, it must be nearly finished" (754). Hamm's response to Clov's ramblings as he awakens is "Me to play" (754), a metatheatrical response which suggests to the spectator that all we do in our meaningless lives is act to one another, or put up fronts and not reveal who we truly are. Hamm's reluctance to die follows shortly after when he says, "And yet I hesitate, I hesitate to...to end. Yes, there it is, it's time it ended and yet I hesitate to- to end"(754). This beginning scene suggests the unwillingness to end or to die. Yet, there remains a struggling to understand death, to give it some meaning so that life has meaning – once again coinciding with the ideas running rampant during the time it was written. Watching these characters, the spectator can't help but notice how pitiful they are. The end of Aristotle's definition of tragedy is "...through pity and fear effecting the proper purgation of these emotions" (61). This is where the term "catharsis" comes from. In Endgame, the spectator will go through a catharsis of pity and fear: pity for what the characters have to endure day after day (boring routine, senselessness of life, searching for meaning when there is none, etc.), and fear for themselves that during this time, post World War II, this is what their lives have become – meaningless, irrational, and extremely interdependent. It is through this interdependence of Hamm and Clov that a reversal of fortune, a recognition of a higher truth, <https://assignbuster.com/endgame-the-tragedy-of-its-time-putting-a-beckett-play-to-the-aristotelian-test/>

and an imitation of a movement of spirit occurs. Throughout the play, Hamm and Clov demonstrate a love/hate, dependent relationship. Hamm's disabled state makes him need Clov, but Clov needs Hamm simply because Hamm's home is the only home he has, and even if he did leave there is no place for him to go in the void which exists outside. This is illustrated in the scene where Hamm asks, "Why do you stay with me?" to which Clov asks, "Why do you keep me?" and Hamm responds, "There's no one else" while Clov responds "There's nowhere else. (755)" But they not only need each other physically, they also need each other to know that they exist. Clov asks, "What is there to keep me here?" to which Hamm responds, "The dialogue" (767). The entire play can be looked at as a single cycle of a daily routine or ritual in the endless life of these meaningless characters. The "reversal of fortune" that occurs is that they both realize that it will never end, that Clov will never leave. He's had plenty of opportunities to leave but in the end he explains that he is too old to "form new habits" (773). Hamm also realizes Clov will not leave him. The closing lines of the play echo this acceptance as Hamm states, "Old stancher! You...remain" (774). In Oedipus, the higher truth that was recognized was that every man is subject to the Gods and fate, and this reflected the beliefs of the time period in which it was written. The higher truth that is recognized in Endgame is that death is inching ever closer and is within our sights, and that we are all dependent on each other to know that we exist. This realization is highly reflective of the post World War II world in which it was written and also, in turn, goes back to Esslin's comment on the function of absurdity to help us live in closer accord with reality. The internal movement of spirit that occurs in Hamm is that he

realizes an end is coming while he previously was under the assumption that

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it will never end. He says - his thought - near the closing of the play, "...time was never and time is over, reckoning closed and story ended" (774). This movement of spirit will evoke a catharsis from the audience (as previously discussed). This reversal, recognition, and movement of spirit is definitely unlike those described in Poetics. This is because the Poetics is describing a completely different world than the one in which Endgame was meant to be presented to. Hamm and Clov are heroes, but not classical heroes like those discussed in the Poetics. Oedipus is a hero of his time; he presents the spectators with the truth of their existence- they are ultimately under the control of fate and multiple gods. Hamm and Clov are heroes of their time; they present the spectators with the truth of their existence- they are ultimately moving towards death, dependent on one another, and searching for meaning in their lives. Aristotle says that tragedy " is an imitation, not of men, but of an action and of life" (62). Oedipus Rex was a true tragedy of its time, and Endgame is too; one presents a world in which there is a belief in multiple Gods, the other a world in which the existence of a god is questionable.