

Tragic elements in absurd theater

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Abstract---*Tragedy is a term that has a variety meanings and applications in criticism and literary history. In drama, it refers to a particular kind of play, the definition of which is established by Aristotle in his Poetics.*

Aristotle's definition remains among the best and is often used as background against which later tragedies are to be analyzed. However, many plays, which have been written after Aristotle do not conform completely to his definition. The purpose of this paper is to trace the changes that the concept of tragedy has been undergoing from the early beginnings of its emergence as a literary genre in Greek theatre to the modern age where the various dramatic changes that people experience make the formulation of a new concept of tragedy a must.

The discussion of the concept of tragedy in post-war drama is the major concern of the second section. The major dramatic movement that dominates post-war drama is The Theatre of Absurd. In fact, the dramatic conventions that mark this theatre serve primarily to shatter the traditional conventions of the naturalistic or fourth-wall drama: sequential plot, dialogue, realistic characters and setting. The second section is concluded with an analysis of Samuel Beckett's Endgame, which conveys the tragic sense in modern man's experience, which emerges as a reaction to the collapse of moral and social values in the modern western culture.

Key words---*tragedy, absurd theatre, drama, faith*

I. Introduction

Tragedy as a dramatic genre in English speaking drama was one of steady decadence from the end of the great Jacobean period until the middle of the nineteenth century, (Fremor, 1954: 2). Melodrama with its substitution of sensation for emotion, situation for structure and spectacle for nearly everything had taken the place of tragedy, (ibid: 3). Kenneth Burke refers to the destructive impact modern sciences exert upon the high poetry of tragedy, (Burk, 1965: 284). Gareth Lloyd Evans cites the “decay of religious faith and observance, a disregard for discipline, a dismissal of authority, and a gross slackening of personal and general moral standards”, (Evans, 1977: 205) as possible reasons for the decay of tragedy. Tragedy, as we have indicated in Chapter One, was developed out of a sense of theological or metaphysical stability. Man was dignified; he had some direct or personal relationship with forces of the cosmos. Moreover, his problems were of vast importance in the universal scheme. Consequently, tragedy is ruined when the illusion of man's personal connection with superhuman processes is lost, when he is

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looked upon as a mere species of animal that happens to inhabit the earth for a certain number of years between its birth and death, according to Charles Darwin's theory of Evolution. Raymond Williams points out that the French Revolution in 1870 was a decisive step in changing the premises upon which tragedy is based. He remarks that since then, the idea of tragedy can be seen as, in different ways, "a response to a culture in a conscious change and movement.", (Williams, 1986: 62). Tragedy, which has traditionally dealt with the fate of singular individuals from the privileged aristocratic class of society, has to cope with the fact that the destiny of nation is no longer being shaped exclusively or even predominantly by a dynasty or an aristocracy. Hence the reduction in status of the conventional tragic hero to the lower level of the social classes: the lay or common man. In fact, the most obvious reason for the disappearance of the 'larger-than-life' tragic hero and his replacement by the 'slice-of-life' victimized hero is the change wrought in the structure of society as Evans points out, (Evans, 1977: 210).

Research problem

The current study is trying to uncover the tragic elements in absurd theatre and their functions in drama in general. Since drama, in the first half of twentieth century, witnessed the emergence of somehow a new form of tragedy that best responds to the spirit of the age and seems compatible with it. Shaw's indictment of the social, political and economic dilemmas of modern age in his tragic plays foreshadows the cries of protest and indignation released by the members of the Angry Young Men movement of the late nineteen fifties.

II. LITRATURE REVIEW

In the first half of twentieth century, witnessed the emergence of somehow a new form of tragedy that best responds to the spirit of the age and seems compatible with it. Shaw's indictment of the social, political and economic dilemmas of modern age in his tragic plays foreshadows the cries of protest and indignation released by the members of the Angry Young Men movement of the late nineteen fifties. He also foreshadows them in his employment of prose as the main dramatic medium and the naturalistic techniques. The attack on naturalistic drama from verse drama, although short-lived, paves the way for more striking challenges in European theatre as exemplified in the theatre of the absurd. It is noteworthy that except in Synge's tragic plays, one notices a deliberate mixture of the comic and the tragic that best reflects the ironic mood of the age and the disillusionment of modern man. Moreover, Christopher Fry's viewpoint concerning the inevitable inseparability of the tragic from comic foreshadows the absurdists' insistence on the necessity of mixing these two dramatic genres.

Therefore, a common realism takes the place of ideality to which the art of tragedy aspires by historical examples since the time of Aristotle. The most important exponent of Realism in modern theatre is Henrick Ibsen whose views on tragic drama are of special importance here. He wrote what might be called, "bourgeois tragedy", (Bently, 1961: 340) in which he deals with the lives of people from middle class. He prefers prose to verse in writing his drama for he believes that "verse has been most injurious to dramatic art", (Bigby, 1983: 125) and that "the aims of the dramatists of the future are almost certain to be incompatible with it" (Madden, 1970: 145).

The Absurd theatre can be seen as the reflection of what seems to be the "attitude most genuinely representative of our modern time."¹⁶⁶ The hallmark of this attitude is its sense that the certitudes and unshakable basic assumptions of former ages have been swept away.

In this sense, absurd drama is anti-realistic. In fact, it is quite clear that the immediate concern of this drama is to question practically all the accepted conventions of naturalism.

Samuel Beckett asserts that not only are we unable to express, but we "have no desire to express" (Essline, 1965: 23). As a matter of fact, the absurd theatre is to a very considerable extent concerned with a critique of language. It is, above all, an attack on all fossilized forms of language, which have become devoid of meaning.

Greek Tragedy: The Beginning and Developments

The first appearance of the tragedy as theatre is traditionally related to the plays and practices of the Athenian religious festivals of the god Dionysus in the sixth and fifth centuries B.C. Our earliest ideas of drama, physical theatre space, costume, mask and the relation of the drama to audience begin with these Athenian celebrations", (Fremor, 1954: 2). Thus, it seems convenient to say at this early section of this study that in Greek theatrical practices we find ourselves standing beside the "cradle of modern Western drama", (Fremor, 1954: 3).

Drama in its origin, whether in Greece or elsewhere, sprang from a primitive and universal human inclination not only to imitate, narrate and impersonate, but also for the ritualistic expression and interpretation of the power of supernatural forces and natural ones too, the cycle of life and death, and the nexus of past, present and future, (Burke, 1965: 284).

Tragedy might have been developed from the ancient dithyramb or choral songs, which were sung by men in the annual celebration of Dionysus. Step by step, the dramatic element increased, and the chorus leader took on a character, as in Bacchylide's *Thesus*, and interchanged a song with the rest of the chorus, (Evans, 1977: 210).

A new stage in the development of the tragic art has been appeared in the second half of the sixth century B.C. The official and religious authorities of the State enhanced the dignity of tragedy and made it an important thing and national tradition. Philip Whaley Harsh states, "The ancient theatre was not a commercial enterprise, but a religious institution under the direction of the state", (Evans, 1977: 211).

A supplementary effect was added to the stateliness of the dramatic achievement by the fact that actors all wear masks. The mask facilitates the leader of a religious ceremony to make a god apparent. Thus, typically identified, the communicant was activated to speak in the first person, thereby supplying birth to the art of drama. The masks on which a fixed tragic or comic expression was designed or drawn, were practiced indicating the domineering attribute of the characters in the mind of the audience, (Mercer, 1973: 53).

Additionally, Aristotle advocates the use of well-known materials like myths in making the plots of the tragedies. Anyhow, the Greek tragedians, as their plots show, were not the "obedient servants but the imperious masters of their own sources", (Donoghue, 1959: 34). This indicates that they did not act like Homer blindly. In a certain degree, they inclined to modify the content of the Homeric stories in such a way that suits their dramatic goals. For instance, in *Prometheus Bound*, Aeschylus turned Prometheus from being a minor god of no great significance in the historical account of Hesiod into a god who had given human everything that recognizes him from a brute creation, and empowers him to compare himself even against Zeus.

Modern Drama: The Absurd Theatre and Angry Young Men Movement

We can consider the Absurd theaters the reflection of what seems to be the “attitude most genuinely representative of our modern time”, (Esslin, 1966: 16). The authentication of this view can be proved by the fact that the certainty and unshakable basic assumptions of former ages have been swept away. As a consequence, modern man thinks that he is living in a universe where he is cut off from his religious and metaphysical roots and live in a meaningless desperation. Communication with others In such a universe, is almost impossible, and the language of these plays is emblematic of their authors’ belief in man’s failure to communicate and convey his basic ideas and feelings.

This sense of the unmeaning or hollow of human condition and puzzlement is expressed by “open abandoning of rational devices and discursive thought”, (Esslin, 1966: 6).As a result, this leads to the appearance of somehow a new dramatic form that is empty of meaning, purpose, order and harmony as the world of the absurd itself. Actually, all that happens in these plays beyond rational motivation and occurs at random or through the “demented caprice of an unaccountable idiot fate”, (Corrigan, 1963: 12). Henceforth, the absurd plays are approximately always presented in a series of tangible stage images. They do not have the common and familiar dramatic structure: beginning, middle and end. They do not develop rationally from step to step. In this sense, absurd drama is anti-practical. It is quite clear that the immediate concern of this drama is to ask practically about all the accepted traditions of naturalism. It is like the verse of drama experiment in the sense that it puts language at the center of the dramatists’ investigations. Samuel Beckett affirms that not only are we unable to express, but furthermore, we “have no desire to express”, (Esslin, 1965: 16)³¹In fact, the absurd theatre is to a very considerable extent concerned with a criticismh of language. It is, above all, an attack on all relic forms of language, which have become devoid of meaning, (Esslin, 1967: 13). One should keep in mind here the fact that the rejection of language is almost always thematic rather than actual. The frequent employment of holophrastic utterances as a technique in the absurdist plays is noteworthy here.

More important in all the absurd plays, there is an insistent demand that the gestures of pantomime are the most appropriate and valuable means of expressions. This determination to abandon almost all the ingredients of the naturalistic drama bears a striking similarity to the dramatic conventions of Antonion Artaud’s ‘Theatre of Event’, or the “nonverbal theatre.” In his plays, Artaud advocates the elimination of words as the primary medium of theatrical communication, and an extensive dependence on elements such as music, dance, mimicry, gestures, voice inflexion, masks, colors, and ritualistic costume. The “Theatre of Cruelty” which Artaud originates aims at making the theatre a ceremonial act of magic purgation, liberating man’s instinctual preoccupations with crime, cruelty and eroticism, and finally demonstrates human beings’ inescapable enslavement to things and circumstances. It is called ‘theatre of cruelty’ because it utilizes all means of shock to make the spectator aware of and even participate in the fundamental cruelty of life. These features are noted in the absurdist plays wherein different sorts of brutalities, humiliations and obscenities are extensively presented; firstly, to provide shock tactics, and secondly, to reflect various aspects of man’s humiliating conditions. The plays of Harold Pinter show the latent fears, tensions and anxieties of modern isolated man who lives in a hostile world, which he can neither understand nor survive in it. Threatening cruel inscrutable forces, against which they are utterly helpless always crush Pinter’s characters.

In fact, by undermining the assumption that language is a valid instrument of communication and mediation, all the other elements of drama are by the same token reviewed; plot, characters, motivation, progression and narrative acquire a new function in the structure of the play. Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* illustrates this well. In it, death of language reflects death of character. Most of the action in this play consists of verbal and physical games, which the two tramps play repetitively, not because they have any sense of creative play but rather because they need something to pass the time and to avert their deepest feeling of absurdity about the world. As a result, the structure of the absurd plays does not admit any firm ending (of the sort common in conventional tragedy or comedy) because such ending is value – laden, in the sense that it makes some form of affirmation about the world.

The new reductive approach which the absurdists adopt towards the plot must inevitably leads to a reformulation of the concept of tragic character whose very nature has undergone drastic changes at the hands of the absurdists. In fact, the protagonists of the absurd plays lose most of the grandeur, vitality and potency of the traditional tragic hero. From the theatrical point of view; they become anti-heroes who are physically and psychologically cripples. They are endlessly incapable of doing a meaningful action. Even their attempts to end their lives are ineffectual. Immobility is a typical characteristic of Beckett's protagonists. Actually, they do sometimes move. Indeed they set out on journeys, but theirs are painful and fruitless. Moreover, they are suffering from different sorts of handicaps such as lameness, blindness and paralysis. Pinter's characters often suffer from social death. They are always seeking refuge from the outside inscrutable world in small rooms and apartments. His plays offer neither satisfactory solutions for modern man's dilemmas nor definite endings. They often end with the menacing disappearance of the protagonist at the hands of ambiguous terrifying agents of death. It is noteworthy that Beckett's handling of characterization has been a constant process of reduction which ends up with the complete evacuation of character from stage, (Khelifa, 1992: 39). The main character in *Company* (1980) is a "voice...in the dark", (Beckett, 1980: 7) which relentlessly narrates an insignificant event in a multitude of tones and tempo.

Moreover, the characters in the absurdist plays are bereft of their identities and therefore, their past cannot possibly have any motivation. They are often trapped in a sort of temporal and spatial void the outcome of which is that action is suspended and the use of devices such as repetition, recurring scenes and images, and static décor enhance the pathos of the existential stasis, (Khelifa, 1992: 41). Vladimir, Estragon, Winnie, Clov, and Hamm have no past and cannot claim any future since their present has no significance for it represents a non-referential vacuum. Because of the repetitive nature of their absurd world, the experience of spiritual awaking or regeneration typical of the tragic heroes of the classical period is denied to these characters, (Corrigan, 1963: 17). It is evident that the content of the message or whether there is any message at all in Eugene Ionesco's *The Chairs* (1962), is immaterial. What is being asserted in a dramatic metaphor is the negation of language and action altogether. A world in which language is no longer operative makes human experience itself meaningless.

It is only consistent that with this elimination of character, there should follow the elimination of the dramatic text altogether. If language is unable to express, the logical consequence would be its demise. In *Quad* and *Acts Without Words I&II* (1957), other forms of expression are investigated: choreography in the first and mime in the second and third.

This new minimalist approach towards plot construction, language and character makes it difficult to assign the dramatic genre under which the absurdist plays can be categorized; tragedy or comedy. As a matter of fact, for the absurdist, tragedy and comedy are both manifestations of man's utter despair and frustration.

The clown is a common figure in both comedy and tragedy. In their attempt to deal with an absurd world, characters in the absurd theatre become like clowns whose actions are both funny and ridiculous. Winnie in *Happy Days* is seen smiling in spite of her being constantly engulfed in sands. It is only natural, then, to describe the absurdist plays as tragicomedies because they make one at once fully aware of the absurdity of existence and at the same time of its inescapable sufferings, struggle, and failure. As Ionesco puts it, "It all comes to the same situation, and I now have reached the situation when I find it hard to distinguish one from the other", (Gassner, 1963: 13). In a "A Farewell to Something", John R. Moore observes that *Waiting* ends "not in a tragic resolution but in a comic impasse", (Gassner, 1963: 14). The characters have to eternally find out some way to cope with the essential absurdity of life. Estragon and Vladimir, two irreducible specimens of humanity, remain comically, tragically and ambiguously alive with the courage of their hallucinations. They affirm that man can still, albeit fearfully "stick his tongue out at the universe", (Gassner, 1963: 14) to express his contempt of this silly game which he is forced to play i.e. life. As a result, one may conclude that the absurd theatre is comic, in spite of the prevalence of the violent, somber, and bitter themes in its plays.

To sum up, the dramatists of the 'Absurd Theatre' emphasize the essential absurdity of all man's actions and hopes. In their plays, they try to translate the images of impotency and meaninglessness into theatrical terms. Their plays reflect the world as they envision it. Therefore, they are as meaningless and incoherent in terms of plot construction, employment of language, and characterization as this absurd world.

The other post-war dramatic movement that dominates the English stage during the 1950' and 1960' is the 'Angry Young Men.' It includes a number of British playwrights and novelists whose works demonstrate a particular bitterness in their attack on outmoded social, and political values, particular those resulting from bourgeois attitudes. In fact, Osborne succeeds in this play in capturing perfectly the mood of restlessness and the sense of loss of direction at a time when British society was entering a new phase of political, social, and economic changes. Accordingly, the play illustrates how firmly the English theatre is rooted in the tradition of social realism, which simply means a dominant preoccupation with discussing the socio-political aspects of English society.

In fact, the post-war world fell very far short of being a land fit for the returned heroes to live in. Thus, when Jimmy gives vent to his fiery outbursts and indignations, the intellectual climate was favorable for him for he expresses the feelings and sentiments of post-war angry men who feel misplaced in a world which seems to them, out of joint. Besides, the whole atmosphere of the play reveals a grim lonely individual railing and quarrelling with everything: the government, the church, the economic system, the educational system, the newspapers, and his wife.

As the play has shown, Osborne seems to be in love with the image of one man fighting single-handedly against his country or his century. However, as Ronald Hayman remarks, he is not interested in the issues that make the fight necessary, (Hayman, 1968: 8). The mood of disgust and the gestures of rejection are clear but the reasons for them are not. His heroes are always full of fighting spirit, but they are not at all sure what they are fighting for. Most

of his heroes come from the working-class but none of them are representative of it and none of them are even seen against the working-class background, (Hayman, 1968: 8).

Osborne again shows his deep obsession with the isolation and essential loneliness of the human being in *Luther*. The hero of the play is also a self-flagellating individual. He is a typical Osbornian character in his fierce desire to change the status quo. The focus of the play is on the individual who is deeply concerned with his own moral integrity and does not understand the opposition of his superiors. Luther does not want to overthrow Pope Leo, The Tenth. Rather, he simply wants, in Sir Henry Reilly's words, to "work out his salvation with diligence" (p.411), according to the high moral standards he sets for himself. However, unlike Jimmy, Luther shows no interest in the social and political implications his schismatic attitude creates because he believes that religion is an ordering factor in man's life, (Hayman, 1968: 42-52).

In *A Bond Honored*, the hero sets himself up as a solo fighter against all the values of his age. His life is dedicated to the destruction of whatever is beautiful and honorable. His life-long object is to disgrace his family and all it stands for and to show that nothing human or superhuman can stop him. Once again, we see an angry young man who spares none in his fierce attacks, (Hayman, 1968: 73-77).

From the structural point of view, the major contribution of *Look Back in Anger* lies primarily in its re-discovery of the naturalistic mode in drama. As a matter of fact, it recalls the Shavian play of ideas where the hero starts talking while the other characters either listen or step in with an interruption which will change the course of the conversation, (Metwally, 1972: 87). The new naturalism which Osborne adopts was 'new' in place, in language and in character; as Evans remarks, (Evans, 1977: 85). On this, S.Hall comments

...Osborne struck a representative note, he summed up the sense of inverted rage, the bitter raging against the cramped forms of life which stifled Jimmy Porter... what we find in *Look Back* was the language which at least at that moment contained something of our sense for life. Constantly critical, it yet called out something more than a reaction in us: it gives us lessons in life,, (Evans, 1977: 84) .

The young men are intent on speaking the language of common people that best expresses the sense of frustration and bitterness which dominates their life . More important than this, is the fact that the 'new naturalism' becomes the brazen antithesis of the old conventional heroic drama. In fact, the dramatists of the 1950's and 1960's have created an environment suitable for the flourishing of non- heroic character. The social status, personality, and intellectual capacity of this character are in most respects unexceptional, (Evans, 1977: 86). Jimmy has been regarded as the first non-hero in modern theater.

Finally, it is noteworthy that the naturalistic techniques of playwriting and stage conventions continues to dominate the English stage after the production of Osborne's play.

Samuel Beckett's *Endgame* (1958)

Endgame is a dramatic statement of human situation as Samuel Beckett envisions it in modern times. It lacks character and plot in the conventional sense because it tackles the subject-matter at a level where neither character nor plot exists, (Esslin, 1966: 58). In the play, Beckett is concerned with “probing down to a depth in which individuality and definite events no longer appear and only basic patterns emerge”, (Esslin, 1966: 58). Clov opens the play by drawing the curtains at the two windows, and removing the sheets from the ash cans and Hamm's armchair. These gestures are performed like a ritual, or a mock ritual. Hamm's first gestures are also formal -his slow lifting of the blood-stained handkerchief from his face; his meticulous wiping of his eyes, face and the dark glasses that hide his sightless eyes as well as his methodical folding of the handkerchief before placing it elegantly in the breast pocket of his dressing gown, (Cohn, 1965: 44).

The play takes place in bleak claustrophobic interior, which suggests, at various times in the action, “a corner of chess board, the inside of the skull, the interior of bomb shelter, the interior Noah's Ark, and finally a stage”, (Miller&Nelson, 1971: 85). The physical arrangement and the attitudes of the character, as well as the title of the play suggest chess men trapped in one corner of the board and playing out their final, hopeless moves. Man's life is presented as a game of chess in which man is the loser. As in Beckett's other plays, this game doesn't begin until it is about finished when the human players are about to realize that they are going to be the losers. Hamm says, “the end is in the beginning and yet you go on”, (Beckett, 1958: 44). In this game, Hamm is the king at the center and he is always anxious to hold his dominating position. In chess, the king is the piece whose capture ends of the game; therefore, he must be protected in depth. Ironically, Hamm is a mock king since, due to his blindness and paralysis; he is incapable of any extensive or major action. He seems to be eternally nailed in his armchair, which suggest a mock throne and its movement on castors suggests the terribly limited maneuvers this king can make. Moreover, Hamm refers to the small room he inhabits as his kingdom in a manner reminiscent of Richard III, (Cohn, 1976: 378). The toque he puts on his head looks like a mock-crown. It is evident that Beckett intends his play to be a comic parody of all former man's achievements.

Beckett's choice of his characters' names is significant for it reflects their basic relationship. In Beckett's own interpretation, Hamm suggests a hammer, Clov, the French word 'clou' for nail, Nagg stands for the German word 'nagel', meaning nail, and Nell in the English word 'nail'. To these may be added the off-stage mother Peg, for a 'peg' is also a nail. It is evident that the names of the character are carefully chosen for their manifold reinforcement of the basic dramatic situation.

The world outside the bare room in which the four characters dwell is dead so that concrete links with a social milieu are entirely missing. Some great catastrophe 'has killed all living beings. Hamm and Clov, Nagg and Nell believe themselves to be the sole survivors. They are the remnant of humanity after some indefinite holocaust. They have found a refuge in a room underground with two windows high up at the back for peepholes to land and to sea. They are the once powerful who, in the wake of the catastrophe, could only afford to hoard the few remaining means at the expense of the weak and helpless. Moreover, in the long course of their continual disintegration, all of them become old and decrepit. Clov is unable to sit down. Moreover, his eyesight becomes worse and worse. Hamm's parents, Nagg and Nell, have lost their legs in an accident while cycling through the Ardennes on their road to Sedan

and are now squatting on their stumps in two dust bins with sand underneath them. They are almost blind and deaf. This goes in agreement with the minimalist approach, which Beckett adopts in characterization.

The plot of *Endgame* is nakedly built on cruelty, suffering and death. The most frequent critical allegation against Hamm is that he is cruel. This cruelty, as Richard M. Goldman argues, is apparent and yet unreal, (Goldman, 1991: 37). To his continual threat that he will not give Clov more to eat, the latter cynically answers that death is a release, hence no cruelty. Indeed, one can argue that Clov is the crueler since he denies Hamm the forgiveness he frequently seeks. Hamm's cruelty could be explained in the light of Hamm's parents' initial cruelty. This might partly explain the sadistic streak in Hamm's nature, which now turns against them. They are, apart from Clov, the sole remaining objects of his aggressiveness. Hamm considers them to be the origin of his miseries. He calls them "accursed progenitor" (p.15). He won't let them sleep and has Clov wake them up from time to time. Clov has also to 'bottle' them- close the lids on their bins - and in one occasion is even ordered to throw them out: "clear away this muck! Chuck it in the sea"(Beckett, 1958: 22).

With characteristic irony, Beckett accentuates the cruel inhumanity of *Endgame* by frequent evocation of the Bible in his delineation of the characters. Hamm's name connects him with the youngest son of Noah who was cursed by his father for the disrespect he had shown him. It also connects him with the great flood, when mankind was almost extinct for its sins. Hamm is supposedly the ruin of a once powerful king under whose rule some mysterious decline was suddenly set in motion, so that the world is now coming to a sad and an inglorious end.

Beckett's black view of life is taken a good step further than in *Waiting for Godot*. The original process of life has been ironically reversed. It has almost returned to its starting point, sea and land are still divided but the tides have stopped. There is no more wind, no more waves, no more light, and no animals; nothing but gray dust. Time and nature are running out, there is no more growth and even the poor sprouting of leaves has become impossible. In their last phase of decay the characters constantly see less and hear less. They still breathe but their teeth and hair drop out (ibid: 16).

According to Clov, creation has almost arrived at zero. Once the reversal is complete, darkness, chaos, and void will be reestablished. However, there is no hint of God's spirit hovering over the depths ready for creation. When Clov looks out of the windows he sees the void outside analogues to the void, which preceded creation and declares it to be good: "nothing ...good...good ...nothing"(ibid: 49).Beckett stresses this sense of nothingness and sterility when he makes it doubtful whether Clov has really seen the small boy or the "potential procreator", as he describes him at the end of the story. Previously, Hamm imagines what will happen when Clov leaves him: "there I'll be in the old shelter, alone against the silence and ...the stillness"(ibid: 54). However, as soon as he hears of the boy, he says "it is the end", I don't need you any more"(ibid:50). Martin Esslin remarks that perhaps "Hamm doesn't believe that Clov will really be able to leave him.", (Esslin, 1966:).

The extreme simplicity of the structure of the play, unity of time, place and action, enhances the starkness of its statement. It is in itself an elemental statement of the reduced conditions of its inhabitants. The objects that connect them with the outside physical world are alarm-clock which has lost its function, a glass which is practically useless, a ladder which soon will not to be used any more, a three legged toy -dog, a wheel chair, two

dust bins and a picture. Significantly, the picture is turned to the wall-perhaps to avoid the painful memories of the past, but also so as not to identify the place. Turning a picture to a wall is a sign of mourning of special importance between Good Friday and Easter, when in Catholic tradition all images in churches are covered as a sign that God is dead but soon will rise again.

The characters are again independent pairs, Hamm and Clov, Nagg and Nell . They are a sealed off group, with a place unto themselves. They are, as John. J. Sheedy observes a “residual family” and further adds

The positive functions of the private realm, food,
love, safety- have been lost. Only the negative
characteristics remain: isolation within a group,
within a shelter which is itself isolated, (Sheedy, 1966: 316).

Their contact with their environment and their grip on reality is petering out to the same degree as their senses are waning. Hamm's blindness and paralysis, for example, are symbolic of the missing links with the outer world. His limited movement is a reflection of the narrow confines of his shrinking realm and a confirmation of his seclusion and loneliness to the extent of making him feel like "a little bit of grit in the middle of steppe... a speck in the void ...with infinite emptiness...all around"(Beckett, 1958: 28). Nagg and Nell plainly illustrate the progressive dissolution of contact. They are minor figures, motionless and helpless puppets, and are utterly at the mercy of Hamm who treats them with brutal callousness. They are reduced to infinite or senile activities and satisfactions, due to a "decreased perception and sensations ...sucking, urination, defecation", (Lyons, 1964: 206). They seem to have enjoyed life selfishly and mention 'yesterday' when life was still possible with great deal of regret and yearning. However, their time for love when Nagg knocks on Nell's bin is like a dirty smirk on sane affection. They snigger at their own misfortune, and the misfortune of mankind. "Nothing is funnier than unhappiness. I grant you that ...it is the most comical thing in the world"(Beckett, 1958: 20).

The relationship between Clov and Hamm is marked by hatred and hostility. Clov murderously hates Hamm and wants to leave him but he is compelled by a life- long habit to obey him. "Do this, do that, and I do it. I never refuse. why?(ibid: 31). So the source of the dramatic tension in the play is whether Clov will muster the power to leave Hamm. Leaving the room means death for both Hamm and Clov for the “only relationship possible for them is symbiosis”, (Goldman, 2007: 36). In fact, friendship and power have ceased to mean anything for them. Clov is the only person who can feed Hamm. At the same time, the latter's store is the last remaining source of food. But these are mere excuses. The real reason is that they need a partner to "keep the dialogue going,"(Beckett, 1958: 4) a companion in misery to gap the void surrounding them ad infinitum.

Clov has a unique position in the play. He is the playwright's handyman: stage- attendant, listener, mouthpiece, cynical observer and commentator. As such, he serves as a counterpoint to Hamm, constantly checking his obsession with past illusion. Through a painful learning process, he has come to adopt an attitude of complete indifference or as Eric Bentley writes, “a shrug of shoulders, an accommodation to things as they are”, (Bentley, 1966: 374). In his defense of his final desertion of Hamm, Clov seems to voice Beckett's basic attitude towards life; namely, that life's

satisfactions, beauty, love, friendship do not make it worthwhile when compared with its miseries: Clov reveals his essential disillusionment of the hollow slogans and dreams which humanity clings to in the past.

Clov: they said to me, that's love ...that's
friendship,...you've found it. Here is
the place , stop, raise your head and
look at all that beauty. That order!
... Come now, you're not a brutal
beast , think upon these things and you'll
see how all becomes clear...(Beckett, 1958: 50-51)

The sense of disillusionment is deepened through the obsessive recurrence of animal imagery in the play. Hamm refers to Clov as his dog, and Clov makes a toy dog for Hamm. Moreover, Clov feeds Nagg Spratt's medium animal biscuits. Clov is also made to play a dog-like role, he was 'whelped', and he obeys the whistle used by Hamm in calling him. His master, Hamm keeps him hungry, cold, standing and moving all the time, performing aimless tasks: go to the kitchen, drag the ladder around, get up, get down and fetch the telescope. These animal imageries confirm Beckett's viewpoint that modern life has degenerated man into an elemental level of existence that is of the beast.

Ruby Cohn makes an extensive comparison between *Endgame* and some of Shakespeare's tragic plays. Like Shakespeare's *Lear*, Beckett's Hamm is king on an unlocalized board, and Clov is a fool; he says, "what a fool I am"(Beckett, 1958: 39). As Shakespeare's *Lear* is madly aware that he has been a fool, so Hamm is intermittently aware that he is the fool as well as the king. His boasts recall *Lear* in power and his rage echoes a murderous *Macbeth*. Furthermore, ghosts haunt both of them. Hamm's name, as Ruby Cohn suggests, is a deliberate reduction of *Hamlet*, (Cohn, 1976: 380). Beckett's anti-hero too fears bad dreams, and he too delays: " And yet I hesitate, I hesitate to.... to end" (Beckett, 1958:12).

Beckett's handling of language in *Endgame* shows his distrust of its ability as a means of communication. In fact, there is an astonishing stinginess in the number of words Beckett allows his characters to speak in the play. Whole dialogues, are built comically around few words, as in the following example:

Clov: So you all want me to leave you.

Hamm: Naturally.

Clov : Then I'll leave you.

Hamm: You can't leave us

Clov: Then I won't leave you (pause).

Hamm : Why you don't finish us ?

Clov: I couldn't finish you.

Hamm: Then you won't finish me.

Clov: I'll leave you, I have things to do (ibid: 29).

In Hamm's words the play raises "the same old questions" and gives "the same old answers." As in *waiting for Godot*, the repetitious quality of human existence is emphasized. The reductive dramatic ingredients appear in *Endgame*. It makes use time and again of elements Beckett has employed before: the chess game, the man in the chair, the man telling himself a life time story, the master and servant equivocally related, the ritual cruelty on which no one comments because no one expects better; the splendidly shaped sentences and the silences, (Kenne, 1973: 127).

III. CONCLUSION

In Greek tragedy, the tragic situation, in which the characters find themselves, is always a situation in which man seems to be deprived of all outward help and is forced to rely entirely on himself. It is often a situation of extraordinary tension and utmost conflict. Studying the plots of a number of Greek tragedies, one can find variation of two basic tragic situations; either the case of man's miscalculation of reality which brings about the fatal outcome or the case of a man facing the necessity of choosing between two duties, both of which claim fulfillment. Furthermore, the result of the hero's choice or deed affects not only his life but also those around him. This means that his fate may throw a dark shadow on theirs as well. In this conflict, the hero is often confronted with a choice. Choice is at the heart of tragedy. This choice may be taken without much consideration; it may be taken deliberately but in ignorance of the reality of a situation, and it may be taken because it is imperative. The result of this choice is often fatal. This is what makes a Greek tragedy so awe-inspiring to watch.

In the Medieval Age, tragedy becomes a series of stories written in the medieval style of the downfalls of princes. Geoffrey Chaucer uses tragedy to signify little more than the turn of the wheel of fortune, against whose force no meaningful effort of man is possible.

The importance of the Theatre of the Absurd to the development of modern drama lies in its bold experimentation with new artistic themes and techniques. In its rejection of realism, presentation of puppet-like characters in comical situations, nonsensical use of language and use of verbal and physical shock tactics, the absurd theatre seems a natural product of the post – war period which witnesses the collapse of religious faith and the spread of spiritual emptiness in the outwardly prosperous and affluent societies of western Europe and America.

To express these terrible themes, the absurdists employ a very effective technique; namely, reduction and minimalism. The absurdist plays reflect their writers' utter indifference to the dramatic conventions of theatrical composition. Character, plot, motivation, dramatic progression and language are constantly reduced till they almost disappear. In Beckett's *Endgame*, one finds various stages of decay in the characters as well as in the world around them.

Finally, tragedy is the most revealing comment upon humanity. It seems to show us that the downfall of the human individual is perhaps inescapable. The individual inevitably has some flaw or makes some errors in judgment. The tragic hero, like any man, is a human being. He deviates from normality, or from a full knowledge of his situation, and this deviation destroys him.

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