

THE SELF CONFUSION IN SAMUEL BECKETT'S ENDGAME

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ABSTRACT

The importance of subject has been put into emphasis since Enlightenment and flourished in Romanticism. And the celebration of the great significance of reason and self were constantly examined along the literary development. While, with the aggravating cruelty of capitalism and the concurrence of the two world wars, people utter the voice of opposing human reason and self-doubt. Under such background, modernism focuses on the issue of self-assertion and it remains as a central theme in modernism study. Among modern theories and thoughts, Samuel Beckett's study on self deserves special attention since he doubts the possibility of self-confirmation. As an influential representative in the theater of the absurd, he creates many a drama to describe people's futility to pursue the meaning of life. This paper addresses Beckett's *Endgame* to analyze the self-confusion of the characters in the play and the reasons behind it. Also, it would elaborate what causes the desperate experience of self-doubt and ambiguity.

Key Words: Samuel Beckett, *Endgame*, Self-Confusion.

1. INTRODUCTION

The theme of self has experienced a sharp turn from Enlightenment to modernism. Influenced by Enlightenment, people celebrates human reason and self. Nevertheless, modernists, traumatized by two world wars, display a radical moral and political value degeneration by criticizing human reason and expressing self-doubt. Samuel Beckett, living in such historical period, utilizes the concept of existentialism to create the Theater of the Absurd to examine the existential bewilderment. Except for the unprecedented drama *Waiting for Godot*, *Endgame* still serves to be a great example to study the loss of the subject. The paper would mainly discuss the self-doubt by analyzing the text of *Endgame* and explore various reasons leading to it, such as language, modern and postmodern literary theories. Last, why the theme of self-doubt was so popular at that age would be discussed.

2. TEXT ANALYSIS OF THE SELF CONFUSION

Different from conventional drama, the Theater of the Absurd emphatically states the absurdity of life by means of controversial language style, structure, stage setting etc. Beckett, in order to demonstrate life devoid of value, utilizes these techniques to display human being's existential predicament. In this section, I would focus on *Endgame* to explore the self confusion of the characters.

First, to discuss the self confusion from the perspective of language, "For Beckett words form the impenetrable barrier of language which for ever keeps us from knowing who we are and what we are". [1](Rahimipoor, 821) The obscure language used in *Endgame* confuses readers by no or poor

clues of the background, the relationship, causality etc. And when we explore the identity of the protagonists, the text provides little useful information because of the vague language, especially the identity of Hamm and Clov is implicit. "From this comes the postmodernist dictum that language constructs human identity, rather than vice versa." [2] (Connor, 23) Heidegger writes: "Man acts as though he were the shaper and master of language, while in fact language remains the master of man." [3] The self confusion in *Endgame* is partially brought about by the unclear identity which is caused by vague language. For example, in a story narrated by Hamm, he mentions a man begs for food on a Christmas Eve, with whom there is a little child. The whole story ends up with the man's begging for taking in this boy. The plot is suspenseful here since it does not uncover the real identity of Clov, whether he is the little boy in the story or an actual son of Hamm. The language adopted by Beckett here is intentionally bewildering the readers and even the protagonists themselves. Like Hamm, because of his physical disability, he relies on Clov to survive, but repeatedly worrying that Clov might leave. He faces an awkward dilemma, finding himself have no right to restrain Clov from leaving if he is just an adopted son. This ambiguity applies to Clov too, taking care of Hamm's family and at the same time hesitating to escape.

As analyzed above, the illogical language in the text actually aims to show the uncertainty and self confusion of the protagonists, making them in a state of mental chaos. Self confusion caused by the unclear identity shuns them from knowing who they are and what they should do.

Actually, there is one factor, the stage settings, which downplays the effect of language in the dramas of the Theater of the Absurd, and thus creating an atmosphere of irrationality of the play. "Emphasis of the setting, its close relationship with ballet, acrobatics, and etc. which in a sense have contributed a lot to a devaluation of language." [4] (Rahimipor, 15) The stage background of the Theater of the Absurd, different from the traditional drama, increases its effect to show the subject confusion.

Justin Cash describes the stagecraft features of the Theater of the Absurd like that: "often simple and minimalist use of stagecraft; barren set pieces barely denoting a location." [5] The simple design of the stage settings makes people lack of the awareness of the time, place and even their identities. Just like in *Endgame*, a bare room with poor furnishing shows no idea whether this is a home or a shelter or something else. Outside the window, there is nothing, depriving people of knowing the historical background. Two trash bins, a doll dog, a handkerchief, a wheelchair... all these stuffs are incredibly confusing. Spectators, even the characters are unable to recognize useful information which indicates time, place and causality. "These types of settings per se have blocked the passage of time and this in turn challenges man's sense of his self and his existence in this world." [4] (Rahimipor, 15) With such unreasonable settings, it is hard not to lose oneself. "The theater of the absurd relates to a drama in which conventional norms and dramatic structure are ignored and modified to present life as irrational and insignificant." [6]

Literally, except for language and setting, there are many perspectives that can explicitly state the self ambiguity of the protagonists, among which the characters' personalities can be a good example. From the design of the personality of Hamm and Clov, it especially invokes us to step into a world of predicament and uncertainty. For example, Hamm, a disabled and desperate person longing for the end of the world, is meanwhile curious about the world outside. Even after

repetitive words of “end, finished, nearly finished”, he urges Clov to look at the earth, the sea, the ocean, the waves, the sun etc. It seems that he never loses hope, looking for something vibrant out of the dead world. This two radical emotions conflict with each other, showing the inner vagueness of Hamm himself.

The factors of language, stage settings and the design of the characters’ personalities mentioned above all contribute to demonstrate the self ambiguity of the characters. And what leads to such subject loss is what deserves much discussion.

3. REASONS OF THE SELF CONFUSION IN ENDGAME

As analyzed in the last section, the text itself explicitly and implicitly unfolds the self ambiguity of the protagonists and theories would be used in the following parts to try to reveal the reasons behind it.

Firstly, as we know, modernism, greatly influenced by enlightenment, is significantly inspired by some groundbreaking idea, among which freedom cannot be ignored. And the theories of freedom brought up by John Locke and Immanuel Kant might help explain the self confusion in this drama. They two both celebrate freedom by emphasizing the significance of it. Locke proclaims that “So far as a Man has a power to think, or not to think; to move, or not to move, according to the preference or direction of his own mind, so far is a Man Free.” For Kant, “Freedom is independence of the compulsory will of another, and in so far as it tends to exist with the freedom of all according to a universal law, it is the one sole original inborn right belonging to every man in virtue of his humanity.” [8] According to the two philosophers, freedom should be given the top priority comparing to other power and right. However, the environment and situation in the text deprives the protagonists of owing this basic human right and thus leading to inner conflict.

Endowed with the inalienable right of freedom, the characters, however, are stuck in a closed environment. Under such situation, it is very hard for them not to develop self confusion. From the beginning of the play, no clear clues are useful for us to figure out the historical or temporal background. Instead, there is only a closed room with a window to peep out. And there is unbearable stillness outside without signs of human activities. Shabby though this shelter is, escaping from it seems like an even more unwise choice. This awkward situation perhaps discourages Clov to leave the depressed asylum. Additionally, Hamm and his parents, all paralyzed on a chair or in trashbins, have no chance to experience the freedom they once owned. Contrary to their present captivity, the unforgettable days in the past haunted them. Nagg and Nell recall the stories in Lake Como, Ardenness and Hamm thinks of one Christmas Eve. The stark contrast here makes the desire to live freely like before vain. The juxtaposition of old freedom and present dilemma upsets the characters. Furthermore, being stuck in a gloom house with no idea of what happened and what is going on outside makes the situation even worse.

To make the theme of self confusion more obvious, Beckett applies the sad destiny of Sisyphus also to that of Hamm and Clov. “In his book essay, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, Camus sees Sisyphus endlessly pushing a rock to the top of a mountain, only to see it roll to the bottom again, this futile labor an analogy of man’s meaningless existence, a quality seen in various characters and plots of the theater of the absurd.” [6] In the drama, Beckett designs Hamm and Clov to experience the endless circulation just like Sisyphus does. From the very beginning and till the end, they long for

ending the meaningless and absurd life by repeatedly saying “Finished, it’s finished, nearly finished, and it must be nearly finished.” However, repetition day after day only makes them unable to own the freedom to walk out of the predicament and even they have no freedom to choose to die. The self confusion and uncertainty is what would come to mind under such circumstances.

Besides, part from lacking of the freedom, one more element that makes the protagonists feel self doubt is inability to dominate, to control things. According to Friedrich Nietzsche, he articulates in his study that “This world is the will to power—and nothing besides!” [9] Wherever there is life, there is the will, the will not to survive, but to pursue the power. [9] What is important in Nietzsche’s idea of will to power is the will, the energy. However, Hamm ironically cannot have the basic energy even to survive, letting alone to dominate over others. Another controversial fact which is worth mentioning is that Beckett himself perfectly matches the image of superman in Nietzsche’s description. Beckett, good at golf, tennis, cycling and so on, excels in physical sports. And in *Endgame*, it can be perceived that there is this kind of vigorous atmosphere. For example, it opens with chess playing and Hamm himself murmurs “keep going” this type of sentences for a lot of times. Whereas, Beckett intentionally and dramatically designs a disabled, feeble man and a lifeless world, it is self-contradictory.

Martin Heidegger, also has the same opinion on the power to dominate the environment. As he puts it, nature and human are standing in opposite situation and the process of modernization is like to conquer the world. [10] However, Hamm and the rest of the protagonists in the play, stuck in an enclosed environment, have nothing to dominate over. To summarize here, they all have the natural desire to dominate, but are sarcastically deprived of the right to do so. This self conflict is closely connected to the environment and their inner will of conquering.

Furthermore, among the four characters, Hamm is the central one that bonds the rest of them together and is regarded as the most important protagonists in the play. Through the character, we genuinely could get much inspiration of the self doubt of this play. Besides the factors explored above, the idea of morality demonstrated through the relationship among Hamm and other characters could also give as hints about the self confusion.

Kant proclaims that people’s freedom actually is closely related to one’s morality and the two completes each other. That is, why people are free is because of the obedience to law, rules and morality. And as far as Kant is concerned, people's moral behavior is basically self-discipline. That is, people’s reason provides the moral standards of good and evil through moral legislation, namely, through the construction of moral rules to form the subject's moral consciousness, and thus regulating and restricting their own moral behavior. To put it clear, according to Kant, morality entails individuals the strong sense of moral obligation. [Chen Jiaming, 10] Then, it is easy to understand even though under the depressed relationship with Clov, Nell and Nagg, Hamm still chooses to serve them food and care for them . He desires to pursue the real freedom through fulfillment of moral obligation.

However, another theorists utter different voice in terms of morality. They believe that individuals should not be confined to moral obligation. When Michel Luntley conceptualizes the modern self, in Modernity’s constitution of the self, he holds the idea that “The self is constituted by an essence that can be characterised independently of contingent historical circumstances; history, culture,

social, moral and political relationships are all extrinsic possessions of the self, not constitutive of the self.” [11] Luntley, 155) Different from the idea above, it is clearly stated that the self should be free from the influence of moral factors. In order to clarify it more reasonably, he adds that “The modernist idea that our moral and political engagements are possessions of ours and not constitutive of our selves captures an important point.” [11](Luntley, 156) Stimulated by the harsh environment and desperate situation, Hamm could understandably think of freeing himself from the moral bond with families. No extra food supply for the other three and no more endurance of the nagging of the parents, these could be possible mentalities that occurs to him.

From the two contradictory points discussed above, there is a bold assumption that under the two contrary views, Hamm, would be trapped into a dilemma whether to obey the traditional culture of morality or set himself free by shunning away from moral obligation.

4. DISCUSSION

The self-confusion and doubt is one of the most popular themes of modernism, existentialism and the works of Samuel Beckett. In *Endgame*, the atmosphere of absurdity and meaningless of life is easily perceived all over the play. The characters, audiences, the playwright himself and the age are haunted with the pessimistic atmosphere of self doubt. It is worthwhile to ask why this topic would be chosen as the one of main themes of *Endgame*. What drives Beckett to design such a absurd play should deserve a serious discussion.

It is all known that Beckett is influenced by Brecht’s alienation affect. In the play, a deliberate distance is set by playwrights to reach the inhibition of any identification between spectators and actors. Many methods could achieve such effect, such as using repetition, the breakdown of logic, minimalism and so on. Through those tactics, “For while the happenings on the stage are absurd, they yet remain recognizable as somehow related to real life with its absurdity, so that eventually the spectators are brought face to face with the irrational side of their existence.” [12](Esslin, 5) That is, to make people conjure up the absurdity of the real life caused by historical and temporal factors becomes the main task of Beckett’s design. The purposive design of self doubt achieved successfully by the misuse of language, setting and contradictory idea all aims to stimulate people to ponder upon the dilemma of the time, the meaning of life and to pursue the real self.

5. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, inspired from the Enlightenment and modernism, Samuel Beckett demonstrates the theme of self doubt in the great play *Endgame*. In the play, a lot of clues could be traced about the self skepticism of the characters, such as the obscure language, the stage settings and the personalities of the protagonists. Many factors could result in the living absurdity and the self assertion in the play. In this paper, theories from Kant and Heidegger about people’s basic right of pursuing freedom and different idea of morality obligation are adopted to discuss the dilemma of the protagonists in terms of the self doubt. And why the topic of the self uncertainty could be universally discussed by Samuel Beckett and especially why it would become the main theme of *Endgame* deserves much attention. Brecht’s alienation effect could be the possible reason to answer the ingenious design of the illogical elements in the play to achieve the effect of the self skepticism of the characters and even the audiences. In brief, the play of *Endgame* is a great stimulant to motivate people to think about the meaning of life and explore the real self.

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