The Purgatory of the Postmodern

Character and Action in Beckett's "Godot" and "Endgame"

That God does not exist, I cannot deny.
That my whole being cries out for God,
I cannot forget.
-SARTRE

It seems that man has a rather paradoxical relationship with action. Our aphorisms include, "Actions speak louder than words" and Ben Franklin's "Well done is better than well said," but also, "Do as I say, not as I do." It seems that we would prefer to predicate who we are upon our actions, unless our actions would shame us (in which case words alone will suffice.) Fictional characters function much in the same way— characterization often takes place by means of the action or actions an individual undertakes. But what happens to character in a vacuum? What is character without action, character separate from history and future? In Beckett's "Waiting for Godot" and "Endgame," the problem of character separate from action is scrutinized. Nothing actually transpires in either play, and in some ways, it is possible to equate "Waiting for Godot" with "waiting for something" and "Endgame" with "waiting for nothing." In both plays, there is a plot, but no story. We are forced to consider whether Vladimir, Estragon, Hamm, and Clov are characters, and more importantly, what Beckett was attempting to say about *human* action through his use of the two pairs of unvarying male characters in these pieces. Though both works display static characters, Beckett treats the characters of Vladimir and Estragon in "Waiting for Godot" far more favorably than Hamm and Clov in "Endgame," because action or the lack thereof is at the root of his characterization, even in the bleakest and most stagnant of his plays.

Characters in fictional and dramatic works are often conventionalized to some extent.[1]

[1] *Wadsworth Anthology of Drama, The*. Fifth edition. Ed. William B. Worthen. Boston: Thomson Wadsworth, 2007. (787).

There are typically protagonists and antagonists present in dramatic works of any scope, as well as what Phillips and Huntley call "driver" and "passenger" characters— drivers "drive" the action of the story and are often transformed during the process, and passenger characters are more static and simply "ride" the waves made by the driver characters.[2] But just as Beckett's postmodern plays violate expectations regarding length, content, form, and style, so too do they violate typical characterization. The means of typical dramatic characterization are totally absent in these plays. We aren't able to learn about these men through their likes and dislikes, their relationships with others, their past, or their inner thoughts and feelings. And, most importantly for our purposes, we are unable to characterize them based on their actions because there are none. This is not to say that there is no movement whatsoever in plays— in fact, stage directions comprise a large part of the text of both plays. But what is lacking here is what I will call "higher," or dynamic, purposeful action. Certainly, Estragon struggles to put on his boot and Hamm demands that his stuffed dog be brought to him, but these actions do not constitute the kind of dynamic *action* we are looking for. There is no action leading to a climax, resolution, or character evolution. There is no action compelled forward by the characters (or vice versa) either.

It seems that in both plays under consideration, both men in the pair are passengers. The question of "who is the sidekick" in the duos of Didi and Gogo or Hamm and Clov is impossible to answer. Vladimir, Estragon, Hamm, and Clov are neither protagonists nor antagonists. Rather, they are all "halves," one part of a character that could be present in the play but is not. One man plus one man equals a little less than one man.[3] Rather than one whole character, we are given two fractured characters with diametric personalities and inclinations. It is well known that

[2]Phillips, Melanie and Chris Huntley. *Dramatica: a New Theory of Story.* Fourth Ed. Screenplay Systems Incorporated, 2001. (34-36).

[3] Worthen, William B. Lecture. The University of Michigan. March 12, 2008.

Beckett was captivated by the American comedy team Laurel and Hardy. The duo complimented each other perfectly in a number of ways. One was tall and thin, the other short and stocky— one was the thinker, and the other was the doer. And this dichotomy remained the same in all of the pair's misadventures.

As is the case with the pairs of characters in "Waiting for Godot" and "Endgame," it's impossible to say whether Laurel or Hardy is the "sidekick" or "passenger" character because in reality, *both* men are the sidekick. In *Beckett's Books: A Cultural History*, Matthew Feldman describes Beckett's work as "a syzygy," or an archetypal pairing of opposites symbolizing the interplay of the conscious and unconscious minds.[4] We might even say that Hamm, Clov, Didi Gogo, Laurel, and Hardy are less characters than they are archetypes of certain fragments of the human mind or human sensibility. But whether their high jinks took place in the desert or a dentist's office, Laurel and Hardy were always *doing* something. There was action to be undertaken, tasks to botch hopelessly. In the plays at hand, the duos never truly do anything, which is the crux of the problem of characterization here.

Beckett was also intrigued by the character Belacqua in Dante's *Divine Comedy*, perhaps to the point of obsession. Walter Strauss stresses that Beckett's fascination with Belacqua emphasizes the "relevance of the theme of expectancy to the modern spiritual dilemma and at the same time underscores the despair of the modern sensibility in the fact of it."[5] The paradox of this situation fits both plays, as does the stasis of this likeness to the predicament of Belacqua. But we feel the despair much more acutely in "Endgame" than in "Godot." In the latter play, the curtain falls on the two men together, an image of humanity and companionship (if not

[4] Feldman, Matthew. *Beckett's Books: A Cultural History*. Continuum International, 2006. (73).
[5] Strauss, Walter A. "Dante's Belacqua and Beckett's Tramps." *Comparative Literature*, Vol. 11, No. 3. Summer, 1959. (251). http://links.jstor.org/sici?sici=0010-4124%28195922%2911%3A3%3C250%3ADBABT%3E2.0.CO%3B2-E. Accessed 31 March, 2008.

friendship), and it seems that nothing is really at stake. Michael Robinson pointed out in his "From Purgatory to Inferno" that "Once again Belacqua provides the image, but in Beckett this stasis is unrevoked [*sic*]: grace remains mute, the tremor of release never occurs, and the liberating angel, like Godot, does not arrive."[6] But is seems as if nothing changes by his not coming. At the close of "Endgame," we feel crushed, awed. Considering that both plays have a similar structure and style, why is this? What makes "Endgame" so wrenching? What makes Hamm and Clov different as characters from Vladimir and Estragon?

Vladimir and Estragon do not really live— they merely exist. Similarly, Hamm and Clov never actually die or finish their lives— their days together merely end, as does the play. But for Didi and Gogo, Beckett seems to believe, *at least there is the waiting*:

> ESTRAGON: What do we do now?
> VLADIMIR: Wait for Godot.
> ESTRAGON: Ah![7]

And even though after a silence, this interchange is followed by Vladimir exclaiming, "This is awful!" his anguish is of no importance at this stage. The point is that the pair has something, anything to wait for. They have an answer to the question of what to do next. "Astride of a grave and a difficult birth" may describe man, but at least there is something to do between the two extremes.

"Endgame" is a far more desperate play precisely because there is no "higher" action. What is most remarkable about the piece is the text's ability to scratch and claw at the soul.[8] Hamm and Clov's "There's no one else" and "There's nowhere else"[9] as well as the individual

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[6] Robinson, Michael. "From Purgatory to Inferno: Beckett and Dante Revisited." *Journal of Beckett Studies*. No. 5. Ed. James Knowlson and John Pilling. Florida State University, Autumn 1979.
[7] Beckett, Samuel. "Waiting for Godot: A Tragicomedy in Two Acts." New York: Grove Press Books, 1954. (41).
[8] Beckett, Samuel. "Endgame: A Play in One Act and Act Without Words: A Mime for One Player." New York: Grove Press Books, 1958. (53).
[9] Endgame. (6).

speeches near the end of the play are only a few of the incredibly affecting moments in this play. Statements like these create a kind of unrelenting pressure that never ceases, not even when the curtain falls. “Use your head, can’t you, use your head, you’re on Earth, there’s no cure for that!” Hamm says, exasperated near the play’s end. The play must end because it is a play, but the misery never ends, it seems.

Whereas in “Godot,” where there is at least the possibility, however absurd, of waiting for God, of his existence, “Endgame” seems to warn against putting God before anything, even the most base, carnal desires. When the idea of prayer comes up, Nagg cries out “Me sugar-plum!” To which Hamm replies, “God first!” And then, from Hamm, we are given, “The bastard! He doesn’t exist!”[10] Beckett’s distinction does not necessarily connote a condemnation of stasis or a glorification of hope and action. He does not venerate the hopeful, waiting posture of the tramps in “Waiting for Godot” or the (ultimately meaningless) connections Nagg and Nell, Hamm and Clov, or Hamm and his dog have to each other in “Endgame.” It is the resignation that Beckett admires, and the resignation of his paired characters in “Godot” and “Endgame” permeates the text to the very end.

The final image of Hamm carefully shrouding himself beneath a handkerchief, alone in an empty room as he utters the word “remain” is strangely beautiful. But perhaps it is only beautiful because we have only seen pain, loss, and disappointment until this point, and in comparison, this moment seems stunning, gorgeous. In the same way that resignation and not hope is of primary importance in “Godot,” the fact that the beauty of the last image in “Endgame” is only discernable in comparison to abject misery, stasis, and emptiness is important. Beckett has painted two bleak portraits of postmodern purgatories that, perhaps, await us all. Without action, there can be no character and thus only resignation and stasis. The last

[10] Endgame. (55).

word of the play is Hamm's "remain,"[11] which again denotes the motionlessness of these circumstances. With that, Hamm places the handkerchief once more over his face, and the play ends, though it certainly isn't "finished," and it seems that for Beckett, nothing ever truly is.

[11] Endgame. (84)

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