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## Me To Play

—On “Endgame” By Samuel Beckett

**Hamm** : I’m obliged to you, Clov. For your services.

**Clov** : (*turning, sharply*). Ah, Pardon, it’s I am obliged to you.

**Hamm** : It’s we are obliged to each other . . . Old endgames lost of old, play and lose and have done with losing . . . Clov! (*Long pause.*) No? Good. (*He takes out the handkerchief.*) Since that’s the way we’re playing it . . . (*he unfolds handkerchief*) . . . let’s play it that way . . . (*he unfolds*) . . . and speak no more about it . . . (*he finishes unfolding*) . . . speak no more.

—Beckett, S., *Endgame* (51-52).

The stage is set. There is no indication of time nor place where it happens. Four characters, or pieces, are placed in a void within a house or rather walls with two windows, or on a chessboard. Strangely enough, everyone is imperfect; Hamm, a man who cannot stand up; Clov, a man who cannot sit down; Nagg and Nell, parents of Hamm, are legless. As we can deduce from the title, *Endgame* implies an ending of a chess match. Indeed, this small drama is a chess match filled with ironies. We can find, while rereading the drama, how elaborately Beckett links the play to a chess game.

Before discussing the main point, I would like to point out the physical imperfection of Beckett’s characters in the play. One may argue that it is unnecessary to set them handicapped if the author meant to read it as chess game. However, if they could move as freely as they want or had a perfect body, it would be much harder to read this play as a chess game. Especially, for example, Nagg and Nell being legless, they only can be seen as pawns. I shall discuss this further in the paper. Also all of them being physically imperfect, obtain their significance in the drama and play their own unique roll. In other words, imperfection could be understood as Beckett’s sophisticated device which cannot be excluded from the play.

Move on to the main point, not only from the title but also from Hamm’s line “me to play” (12), it is sufficient to read this play as a chess match. Deduced from the pieces left on the

board, the play could be seen as a king and pawn endgame. Then presumably, Hamm and Clov are kings. There are extreme tensions between them, and Clov even says “If I could kill him I’d die happy” (24). Another indication of it could be found in Hamm’s line: “Don’t stay there (i.e. behind the chair), you<sup>1</sup> give me the shivers” (24).

It is also possible to tell their colours through the drama; Hamm is the *black* king and Clov is the *white* king. Then why is that? First, we can see that Hamm is *blind* by him saying “One day you’ll be blind, like me” (28) to Clov. It becomes much clearer when he exclaims “My kingdom for a nightman!” (22). Night, very frequently, associates with the colour black, and by saying *my kingdom*, he assures that he is a king on the board. On the contrary, Clov can see and perceive the situation. Except the fact that Clov lacks the information on how to combine a ladder, he is superior to Hamm who is blind. Quite often knowledge associates with *light*, which is generally white, and this supports that Clov is the white king. Some may argue it is not true, but there seems to be First-move advantage in a chess match, i.e. player holding white has slightly more advantage to win than the opponent, and we can understand this implicated in Clov’s distinctive feature; mobility. Nagg and Nell are pawns in different colours, facing each other, since they are immobile. Pawns in immobile position lack or fail to obtain significance; this is symbolised in play as putting them in bins, and even emphasised through their leglessness.

In a game of chess, especially king and pawn endgames, the king becomes the most powerful piece and often occupying the centre is quite advantageous. Hamm, who asks Clov whether “Am I right in the centre?” (23) and by ordering Clov to “Put [him] right in the centre” (24), tries to have control over the situation. It is also imaginable that Hamm is still in predominant position than Clov, and says “in *my kingdom*” (22) or “in *my house*” (28) to assure that the world within the walls belongs to him and is under his control.

As the play proceeds, Clov starts to doubt why “[he] never refuse” (31), and asks Hamm “there’s one thing I’ll never understand. (*He gets down.*) Why I always obey you. Can you explain that to me?” (48). Hamm, in this question, answers simply “You’re not able to” (32) and again reassure that he is still capable of managing the situation. In addition to this, Hamm knows “the combination of the ladder” (15) which hinders Clov from killing Hamm. However, Clov denies it by saying “soon I won’t do it any more” (32) and drops a hint that their relationship would end soon. Before looking into this in relation to the chess game, I would like to point out another line or act in addition to this. From the beginning, Clov repetitiously says “I’ll leave you<sup>2</sup>.” However, he

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<sup>1</sup> Indicating Clov.

<sup>2</sup> First on the page 15, then 17, 29, 30, 31, 34, 39, 44, 50.

seems to fail to leave Hamm. At the very end, whether Clov managed to leave Hamm is rather vague. Since when Hamm asked “If you leave me how shall I know?”, Clov answered “well you simply whistle me and if I don’t come running it means I’ve left you.” (33), and at the end when Hamm whistled and cried his name he does not seem to appear.

It is questionable since even Clov could move freely, though he cannot sit down, and seems to be in superior position than Hamm by having sights; What hinders Clov to leave Hamm? Before we think this in connection to the chess game, it is good to remind ourselves of the following: First, the lack of knowledge (i.e., combination of ladder) hinders Clov from killing him; Second, blindness is often used as a connotation of lack of prospect or knowledge. If we move this situation on the chess board, it is obvious that white is capable of winning but still black do not realise the fact that he has slim chance to win. As I mentioned above, white cannot kill black; the only way to end this dragging game is to make black realise the situation and draw the game. If white leaves the play, it means he draws the game and admits his loss.

By asking those questions, we can guess that Clov started to realise that he is superior than Hamm and do not want to lose the game. This realisation is even clearly expressed in the Clov’s line: “Putting things in order . . . I love order. It’s my dream. A world where all would be silent and still and each thing in its last place, under the last dust” (39). It is ironic that the white dominated the game, but still it is the black who can terminate the play since white wants to win the play. By the end, Hamm seems to understand the situation unconsciously and says “perhaps I could throw myself out on the floor” (45). However “[he hesitates] to . . . to end” (12) and “[he is] afraid it will [end soon]” (41). At this stand point, Hamm’s foremost question might be *to draw or not to draw, that is the question*. To draw the game implies that Hamm, at worse, committing suicide. Though he never says he is afraid of death, we can guess he might have lingering affection to his life. It is irony that Hamm, by incessantly asking Clov whether “it is not time for [his] pain-killer?<sup>3</sup>”, implies his life is full of pain, has some what desire to prolong his life. Additionally, he argues “beyond [old wall] is the . . . other hell” (23), which let us guess inside would be hell as well as outside. Long after the hesitation, Hamm, finally, by “covers his face with handkerchief, lowers his arms to armrests, remains motionless” (53), draws and terminates the game. What made Hamm to change his mind and commit suicidal decision could be explained by “there’s no more pain-killer” and the fact that “[he will] never get any more pain-killer” (46). Hope prolonged turned in vain, and he probably found out that “infinite emptiness [is] around [himself] . . . and there [he is] like a little bit of grit in the middle of the steppe” (28).

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<sup>3</sup> First on the page 14, then 16, 28, 34, 46.

Beckett himself is known to play chess regularly<sup>4</sup> and consequently it implies that he was familiar with the rules of chess. With his skilful writing, he elaborately wove chess into one of his well known drama. As I mentioned at the very beginning, this one act play, indeed, is a somewhat tragic chess match which is filled up with ironies. It is true that this play could be read in many different ways, however, substituting the drama into chess is the one of the most reasonable and easy way to comprehend the ironies of the play.

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<sup>4</sup> His was soon a known face in and around Left Bank cafés, where he strengthened his allegiance with Joyce and forged new ones with artists like Alberto Giacometti and Marcel Duchamp, with whom he regularly played chess. ("Samuel Beckett". n.d., *Wikipedia*, Retrieved December 1, 2008, from [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Samuel\\_Beckett](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Samuel_Beckett))

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