



# “Outside of here, It’s Death or Hope?!”: Exploring despair and Hope in T.S. Eliot’s ‘The Waste Land’ and Samuel Beckett’s ‘Endgame’

Tanisha Shastri

MA English and Comparative Literature, Pondicherry University, Pondicherry, Puducherry, India

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**Abstract**— T.S. Eliot’s masterpiece poem, *The Waste Land*, and Samuel Beckett’s absurdist play, *Endgame* were both written in the shadow of great disasters. *The Waste Land* has tones of desolation and despair and humanity is shown at the brink of extinction. Beckett is known for his association with the Theatre of the Absurd where suffering and the meaninglessness of life were stressed on. *Endgame* presents the disillusionment of man in a decayed and meaningless modern world. Written after World War I, Eliot shows a bleak world in the wasteland of Europe. Beckett published *Endgame* fifty-five years after *The Waste Land* and had the dubious benefit of having witnessed the second World War. Living under post-atomic threat, Beckett’s vision appears conspicuously darker than Eliot’s. The purpose of this paper is to explore despair and dejection in both the works; the isolation of modern man; the meaninglessness of relationships; and the spiritual barrenness in a post-war world. At the same time, the study attempts to look for glimpses of hope and redemption in the barren lands. Through the utter despair that makes up both works, they paradoxically promote an acceptance of our fate and teach us to value life in all its imperfections.

**Keywords**— Eliot, Beckett, Waste Land, Despair, Endgame, World War, Hope, Redemption, Meaninglessness, Isolation.

## INTRODUCTION

“The end is in the beginning and yet you go on.”

-Samuel Beckett

T.S. Eliot’s *The Waste Land* and Samuel Beckett’s *Endgame* have generated a considerable amount of criticism and interpretation which began soon after their respective publications in 1922 and 1958. *The Waste Land*, in addition to being an exemplary high modernist poem, presents a landscape that remains emblematic of the human need for some redemptive quality in the universe. The grim universe cast on the stage of Beckett continues to gain power as it presents audiences with an intensified sense of their reality.

In many ways, *The Waste Land* and *Endgame* are quite similar. Each depicts what Martin Esslin in his book *The Theatre of the Absurd* refers to as a “situation of

being”. Each presents a world that has been laid to waste. *The Waste Land* precedes *Endgame* both historically and in the extremity of desolation. Eliot’s world has been physically devastated by the horrors of the first World War. Individuals are dislocated from relationship and spiritual connections. In *Endgame* Beckett presents a world that is even more deteriorated than that of *The Waste Land*. In this play, everything, including the most basic elements of life is marked by a pervasive absence of hope.

Although Eliot and Beckett present nightmarish worlds where traditional hopes are futile, both suggest the possibility that a hope may exist. *The Waste Land* becomes a sort of search for that hope with fragments of possibility interwoven throughout the poem. In Beckett, much less possibility, and much less hope is provided. The project of writing itself though should be considered the most profound hope created by either of these texts. Both

explore the devastation man has wrecked upon man in order to jolt the reader into a sense of awareness.

### THOMAS STEARNS ELIOT AND HIS MASTERPIECE

**Poetry is not a turning loose of emotion, but an escape from emotion; it is not the expression of personality, but an escape from personality. But, of course, only those who have personality and emotion know what it means to want to escape from these things.**

#### -TS.ELIOT

Between the end of the first World War and the early 1920s, several poets were attempting to capture the cultural crisis in one long creation. For Eliot, recovering in Switzerland from a nervous breakdown, the time was ripe. Out of his personal trauma came the impersonal art. He returned to England with nineteen pages of a new poem which he showed to none other than fellow American, Ezra Pound, the spark and energy behind the modernist movement. According to Pound,

**“ Eliot’s Waste Land is I think the justification of the movement, of our modern experiment, since 1900.”**

*The Waste Land* was published in 1922 at a time when the Western world was in flux following the disaster of the first World War, in which tens of millions were killed. Where was the world going? What did the future hold? What price had a life now that masses beyond count had perished so easily in the great war? And most importantly for Eliot, where was God in all this mayhem and alienation? *The Waste Land* conjures up no magical answers to these questions but instead takes us on a long journey through the wastelands of post-war Europe to a possible redemption.

#### POST-WAR EUROPE: THE REAL WASTELAND

The barren and lifeless wasteland in the poem is a metaphor for Europe after World War I. Harold Bloom, the American literary critic argues that *The Waste Land* can be read as “a testament to the disillusionment of a generation, an exposition on the manifest despair and spiritual bankruptcy of the years after World War I.”

In the first section, “the Burial of the Dead”, the speaker describes London after the great war as a broken, dry, and lifeless place full of dead bodies; it has lost its cultural and social vitality and has been reduced to a heap of fragments. During the modern age, people believed in the idea of progress and prosperity. However, they realized that their optimism and belief in peace did not protect them from the horrifying events of the war. Because they have been disappointed by the futility and impotence of the worldview

that their society relied on, people of modern Europe were confused in shock at the aftermath of the catastrophic war.

Eliot equated the condition of modern Europe to “schizophrenia”. The lack of coherence and logical pattern characteristic of such a mental state is reflected in the image of “crowds of people, walking round in a ring”(Waste Land). This portrayal suggests a sense of not only intellectual absurdity but also circularity. The incoherence in the mind of Europe began in the 17th century. Swinging from the focus on the intellect in the Enlightenment era and emotion in the Romantic era, European philosophy, and mindset resulted in extreme disillusionment in the modern era. Eliot recognized a need for a cure for this breakdown to restore the condition of Europe, and the remedy for this crisis that he subtly suggests in the poem is returning to the past, the European mindset before the modern era-to return to the greatest and most developed form of European mind shown in Pre-modern philosophy and art.

#### “WHAT BRANCHES GROW OUT OF THIS STONY RUBBISH?”- EXPLORING DESPAIR IN *THE WASTE LAND*

Ninety-eight years after its publication *The Waste Land* continues to satisfy the modernist battle cry: “Make it new”. One of the marks of this newness is typical of the modern arts in general and can be described in a word-absence. Lionell Trilling in his ‘On the Teaching of Modern Literature’(1961) locates within the modern framework an impulse to question ourselves about what is missing or absent from our lives. Modernist literature asks every question that is forbidden in a polite society. It asks us if we are content with our marriages, with our daily lives, with our professional lives; it asks us if we are content with ourselves. It is difficult to avoid some amount of self-inspection when Eliot offers to show us “fear in a handful of dust”. Modernist literature asks the society to take an objective look at its own ‘heart of darkness’. And hence, the quest is no longer one that leads to renewal or self-understanding but rather toward an understanding of the complicity of society as a whole.

The quest in *The Waste Land* is one that seeks to move from a crisis toward a recovery. The poem is also highly elegiac; the present is meaningless and the past provides the only resources possible for making meaning out of the horrors of the world around us. Eliot attempts to make meaning and create unity by concatenating fragments of the past and the present. Meaningful connections between the individual and the other, the individual and the nature, and the individual and the spiritual are absent from life. The poem mourns these losses and meditates on specific

examples of each. The poem also attempts to provide some solution to this loss. The gathering of disparate elements; allusions to a meaningful past suggest that the material for renewal surrounds us if only we have enough sense to acknowledge it.

Eliot divided his poem into five sections:

#### THE BURIAL OF THE DEAD

The *Waste Land* begins with an excerpt from Petronius Arbiter's 'Satyricon' in Latin and Greek which translates as:

**"Once I saw with my own eyes, the Sibyl at Cumae hanging in a cage, and**

**when the boys said to her, "Sibyl what do you want?", she answered, "I**

**want to die".**

Sibyl is a mythological figure who asked Apollo for as many years of life as there are "grains in a handful of sand". Unfortunately, she did not think to ask for everlasting youth. As a result, she was doomed to decay for years and years and preserved herself within a jar. Having asked for something akin to eternal life, she found that what she most wanted was death. Death alone offers escape; death alone promises the end and therefore a new beginning.. The life in the modern wasteland is a life-in-death, a living death like that of Sibyl; the horror represented is not death and destruction but rather a lingering stagnation and unending decay.

In part I of the poem, 'the Burial of the Dead', a title taken from the Anglican Book of Common Prayer, we immediately confront the wasteland. The lives presented and the images unfolded speak of the loss of possibility for renewal and hope. Even spring, the universal symbol of regeneration and rejuvenation, has become "cruel". "April is the cruelest month" as it mixes memory and desire just as the awareness of a joy we cannot share provokes pain. Memory only allows one to recall a lost past that was once meaningful, it represents bygone memories and unfulfilled desires, and desire itself is improper because it impels us toward meaningless relationships. Winter, on the other hand, is looked upon favorably as it parallels the peace of oblivion that death should provide:

**April is the cruelest month, breeding**

**Lilacs out of the dead land, mixing**

**Memory and desire, stirring**

**Dull roots with spring rain.**

**Winter kept us warm, covering**

**Earth in forgetful snow, feeding**

**A little life with dried tubers.**(Eliot 1-

7)

The common perceptions of reality have been inverted. The rest of the poem becomes exploration of this world and a search for new methods of making meaning and providing redemption in a dead land.

In this way the search becomes a kind of mythopoetic quest. In the notes to

the poem, Eliot informs the reader that "not only the title but a good deal of the incidental symbolism of the poem were suggested by Jessie L. Weston's book on the Grail legend: 'From Ritual to Romance'. Much of *the Waste Land* is based loosely on the legend of Fisher King. The Fisher King has been wounded; he is dying. In the legend the king is closely associated with the land-his prosperity becomes the land's prosperity, and his misfortune, likewise becomes the land's misfortune. Because he is wounded and dying, the land becomes sterile and dry wasteland. The purpose of the resulting quest is to heal the king, thereby renewing the land. Eliot uses Fisher King as an allegory for humanity.

Man has lost faith in God and religion and this decay of faith has resulted in the loss of vitality, both emotional and spiritual. The old civilization with its values is dead and gone, leaving only a "heap of broken images":

**A heap of broken images, where the sun beats,**

**And the dead tree gives no shelter, the cricket no relief,**

**And the dry stone no sound of water**  
(22-24)

Nothing seems to grow out of this stony wasteland. The "dead tree" represents the good individual who once functioned like a shady tree and proved beneficial to others but is now no more. The stony wilderness is symbolic of spiritual barrenness. The "Red rock" symbolizes the Christian Church. The shadow of the rock is unchanging; it is an embodiment of eternity. The shadow of mortals, however, keeps changing. In the prime of his life, the shadow of a man falls behind him as his career opens out in front. But with the passage of time, the shadow falls in front of him, in the evening of life. This shows that death is inevitable and man is essentially a heap of dust.

**There is shadow under this red rock,**  
**(Come in under the shadow of this red rock),**

**And I will show you something  
different from either**

**Your shadow at the morning striding  
behind you**

**Or your shadow at evening rising to  
meet you;(25-29)**

Ecclesiastes also reflects this truth,

**"All go to the same place; all come from dust, and to  
dust all return."**

(Ecclesiastes 3:20)

From this thicket of malaise, the poet clings to memories that would seem to suggest life in all its vibrancy and wonder: "Summer rain in Munich, coffee in a German park, a girl wearing flowers". What is crucial to the poem's sensibility, however, is the recognition that even these trips to the past, even these attempts to regain happiness, must end in failure or confusion.

Eliot refers to the story of Tristan and Isolde in the lines:

*Frisch weht der Wind*

*Der Heimat zu*

*Mein Irisch Kind,*

*Wo weilest du?(31-34)*

Which translates as "fresh blows the wind/ to the homeland/ my Irish darling/ where do u linger?" In Wagner's Opera, Isolde on her way to Ireland overhears a sailor singing this song, which brings with it ruminations of love promised and of a future of possibilities. The guilty passion that Tristan had for Isolde is not free from fear and anxiety. Love offers no joy or relaxation under the conditions of modern life. In the story, Tristan and Isolde die, however, a miracle follows their deaths: Two trees grow out of their graves and intertwine their branches so that they cannot be parted by any means. Though Eliot does not offer any hope for love in this modern world of desolation and corruption but may be he wants us to recognize the faint glimmer of hope by acknowledging the miraculous end of the story. There is another quote from 'Tristan and Isolde' in the poem which translates as "empty and desolate the sea". The sea as such illustrates our spiritual condition where we are looking for something along the horizon that never comes, just as the dying Tristan is told by the watchman that Isolde's ship is nowhere to be seen on the horizon.

The last stanza of the first section of *The Waste Land* ends in despondency and hopelessness:

**Unreal City,**

**Under the brown fog of a winter**

**dawn,**

**A crowd flowed over London**

**Bridge, so many,**

**I had not thought death had**

**undone so many.**

**Sighs, short and infrequent,**

**were exhaled,**

**And each man fixed his eyes**

**before his feet. (60-65)**

The "unreal city" refers to London. The scene of a wintry morning covered with fog is

symbolic of despair and spiritual decay. There is a reference here to Dante's *'Inferno'*.

Dante standing at the gate of hell wonders at the multitude of souls who are passing

through hell. As the crowd reaches King William Street, the church clock strikes the hour of nine. This was the time for the opening of offices and factories. The people of the wasteland just like the multitude of souls seen by Dante in hell are lifeless and burdened by a routine. They are suffering from a living death represented by their short sighs. The unreal city is cut off from both natural and spiritual sources of life and no longer has anything of its old sense of community. Dante also describes the souls as hopeless as there is no sign of salvation.

They cannot even weep. All they can do is utter sighs:

**"Here, to my hearing, there was no  
weeping, but sighs, which**

**caused the eternal air to tremble."(Dante,  
25-27)**

Tiresias, the blind prophet and the speaker of the poem appears on the stage and addresses his friend Stetson:

**"That corpse you planted last year in  
your garden,**

**"Has it begun to sprout? Will it bloom  
this year?( Eliot,71-72)**

The reference here is to the burial of Christ and the resurrection later on. If one has faith in God, resurrection is possible. In the modern wasteland, with the loss of spiritual and moral values rebirth of man is improbable. The digging of the corpse by the dog may refer to the unfriendly cults, the philosophies which are said to be beneficial to man but



are in fact, inimical to his spiritual life. For example, science and communism aim at increasing material well-being of man but do not take into account their spiritual well-being. Man is not only the body but also the soul. These philosophies neglect the soul and surely man cannot live by bread alone. The poet through Tiresias warns all residents of the modern wasteland:

**"Oh keep the Dog far hence, that's a friend to men,  
Or with his nails, he'll dig it up again!" (74-75)**

#### A GAME OF CHESS

Eliot explores the despair in the wasteland of Europe through meaningless relationships in the second section of *The Waste Land*. In a modernist society that lacks hope, many aspects of life lose their meaning and are reduced to trivial things. In *The Waste Land*, relationships between people are reduced to something that is sterile, lifeless, and dry. The various characters that appear in the poem are unable to carry a logical and coherent dialogue. As a part of the already fragmented whole, any attempt at conversations between people reflects the fragmented structure and content of the poem. The impossibility of meaningful communication corresponds to the dismal and hopeless reality of modern society. The speaker's attempt to have a conversation in 'A Game of Chess', demonstrates the impossibility of communication and thus relationship:

**"My nerves are bad tonight. Yes, bad.  
Stay with me.  
Speak to me. Why do you never speak. Speak.  
What are you thinking of? What thinking? What?  
I never know what you are thinking. Think." (111-114)**

These lines suggest a sense of chaos and potentially unequivocal expressions; the speaker is unable to communicate anything articulate and meaningful. Through this depiction of relationships, Eliot demonstrates that one of the social effects of the war is the lack of harmony and community and the ultimate isolation of the individual resulting from the sense of despair amidst the desolation of modern Europe.

There was intimacy, togetherness, and harmony in relationships of the past. The past was a time when people spent time together. However, the present relationships are described as movements in a chess game.

The partners treat each other as opponents, trying to win and dominate. I.A. Richards wrote about Eliot's "persistent concern with sex" and suggested that it was "the problem of our generation as religion was the problem of the last". Marriage has become an institution where love does not exist, children are unwanted problems and physical relations are wholly devoid of meaning. Tiresias, the speaker of the poem who has experienced life both as a man and a woman bears witness to the failure of the romantic and sexual relationships he observes in the poem. He revisits the rape of Philomela, "so rudely forced", compares humanity to a machine and describes the act of sex as meaningless and mundane. The poet employs the Philomela myth in order to show how sexual act is mean and how it devalues man and puts him in an equal position with animals. The ancient myth tells about Philomela who was raped by king Tereus and how he cut out her tongue. In spite of this, she was capable of revealing the event to her sister Procne, the king's wife. In revenge, Procne killed her son Itys and served his flesh to Tereus. The Gods turned Philomela and Procne into a nightingale and a swallow respectively.

**The change of Philomel, by the barbarous king  
So rudely forced, yet there the nightingale  
Filled all the desert with inviolable voice  
And still, she cried, and still, the world pursues,  
"Jug Jug" to dirty ears. (99-103)**

In the final stanza of 'A Game of Chess', Eliot shows the deterioration of marriage as an institution in post-war Western civilization through a dialogue between two women in a pub. One woman is recounting a conversation she had with a woman named Lil about her husband who is returning from the war. The woman is disturbed by Lil's rotting teeth and "antique" looks and thinks Lil's husband may leave her if she does not fix herself somehow. The idea that a husband may leave his wife if she is no longer attractive speaks to the changing nature of the relationship and the overall pessimism of the time. Marriage was not as much a pledge of eternal togetherness anymore and like so many aspects of post-war life, people became disenchanted by the thought of it. *The Waste Land* is about failure to achieve union-with an Absolute, an Other, the self, an object for knowledge, and with culture and tradition-and fragmentation is its ultimate condition. The idea of fragmentation not only characterizes the form of the poem but also describes the modern individual's relationship to all things-to life, truth, knowledge, society, and others.

## THE FIRE SERMON

Eliot's pessimism is most apparent in this section of the poem. We are on the bank of the Thames and Eliot cites Spenser's 'Prothalamion' with the line, "Sweet Thames, run softly, till I end my song". Eliot highlights the stark contrast between pre-war and post-war society. While Spenser's poem is of the pastoral genre, full of life, hope, and beauty of the world, Eliot's 'Fire Sermon' reads more like an obituary for society as we know it. Eliot unspools imagery that evokes modern life—"empty bottles, sandwich papers, /silk handkerchiefs, cardboard boxes, cigarette ends"—by describing what is not in the river. In other words, the Thames has become stagnant, devoid of detritus but also of life. Eliot also alludes to the nymphs Spenser acknowledges in his poem. Spenser writes,

**There, in a meadow, by the riverside,  
A flock of nymphs I chanced to espy,  
All lovely daughters of the flood**

thereby,

**With goodly greenish locks, all-loose  
untied,**

**As each had been a  
bride.(Prothalamion)**

Eliot, however, writes:

**.....The nymphs are departed.  
Sweet Thames, run softly, till I end my song.  
The river bears no empty bottles, sandwich  
papers,  
Silk handkerchiefs, cardboard boxes, cigarette  
ends  
Or other testimony of summer nights. The  
nymphs are departed. (175-179)**

The nymphs who are a symbol of peace and happiness have left, and in their place is despair and emptiness. Rats appear several times in the poem and always carry with them the specter of urban decay and death—a death which, unlike that of Christ, brings about no life.

Eliot extends the theme of the decay of relationships from the previous section to this section by recalling Buddhist teachings. The *Ādittapariyāya Sutta* is a discourse from the Pali Canon, popularly known as the **Fire Sermon**, which Eliot also employs as the title of this section. In this discourse, the Buddha preaches about achieving liberation from suffering through detachment from the five senses and mind. Buddha warns against purely physical urges as they inevitably serve as obstacles to true

faith and spiritual peace. Lust seems to portend sorrow and that sorrow, in turn, seems to be an integral feature of *The Waste Land*. Eliot presents an example of the mechanical relationship between the typist and the clerk. The typist is never named because she is ultimately a "type", a representation of something larger and widespread. The clerk's first advances are "caresses". At the same time, however, "he assaults at once", his vanity requiring no response. It is close to a scene of rape and the ambiguity makes it all the more troubling. There is neither repulsion nor any pleasure, and this absence of feeling is a measure of the sterility of the age:

**"Well now that's done: and I'm glad it's  
over."(252)**

Eliot is diagnosing London and the world with a disease of the senses, through which sex has replaced love and meaningless physical contact has subsumed real emotional connection. Ironically, the Fisher King's impotence then results from an excess of carnality. The image of the river sweating oil recalls a Biblical plague and the "burning, burning, burning, burning" at the end of 'Fire Sermon' brings hell to mind. Through it all, the river courses, carrying history along with it. All the poet can do, it seems, is weep.

## 'DEATH BY WATER' AND 'WHAT THE THUNDER SAID'

After delineating the destruction caused by the burning of carnal passions, it is only appropriate that Eliot should have brought in water as a counter element that acts as a soothing and invigorating influence both for the body and mind, flesh and spirit. But the expectation is belied. The water here is depicted as a destructive agent.

Opening the final section of his poem with reference to Jesus' arrest in the garden of Gethsemane, Eliot has his narrator obliquely state that Jesus is dead. This prompts the speaker to lament, the implementation being that with the death of Jesus, living itself has become death. The darkness of *The Waste Land* as such is associated with the spiritual desolation felt by the apostles after the murder of their messiah. No promise of resurrection is offered here or rather, the futility of resurrection is implied with the endless cosmic cycle of rebirth. Life and death are one and the same thing:

**He who was living is now dead  
We who were living are now  
dying**

**With a little patience (328-  
330)**

The agonizing thirst for water in the wasteland suggests once more that death is a release. *The Waste Land* dooms us to endless strife and the dream of an unobtainable peace serves this by making us conscious of the spiritual poverty of our condition. Knowing that we will never know peace places us in the same realm as that of Sisyphus or Tantalus.

The cataclysmic nature of the loss suffered with the death of the messiah is accompanied by natural disaster-as in the Gospel accounts themselves. This shows the fundamental unity between the spiritual and material worlds and the fact that the former ultimately has dominion over the latter. That Eliot declares the cities of earth unreal is consistent with Christian theology which defines the material world as a purely spiritual creation, as well as Buddhist ideology which defines the material world as a veil of illusions. In both cases, Enlightenment requires an apocalypse that destroys the world as we know it.

The vision of the apocalypse that Eliot presents starts with a combination of gothic and surrealist imagery centered around a desecrated church. The crowing of a rooster heralds a deluge. The thunder speaks for heaven. In the final stanzas of *The Waste Land* Eliot quotes the Sanskrit mantra, "Datta, Dayadhvam, Damyata" taken from the '*Brihadaranyaka Upanishad*'. It translates as, "give, sympathize, control", but Eliot inverts the traditional meaning in an ironic manner. 'Giving' is equated with 'surrender', meaning not generosity then but compulsion:

**Datta: what have we given?**

**My friend, blood shaking my heart**

**The awful daring of a**

**moment's surrender**

**Which an age of prudence can**

**never retract (400-404)**

The concept of 'sympathy' is undermined by the correlation of the subjective limitations of the self with the condition of being 'imprisoned'-and furthermore-the idea of a key, symbolizing freedom as something that reinforces our sense of imprisonment:

**Dayadhvam: I have heard**

**the key**

**Turn in the door once and**

**turn once only**

**We think of the key, each in**

**his prison**

**Thinking of the key, each**

**confirms a prison(411-414)**

Lastly, the idea of 'control' is deftly negated by giving us an image of someone rowing a boat in calm waters. Our sense of control is contingent on indulgent circumstances and so we have no real control:

**Damyata: The boat**

**responded**

**Gaily, to the hand expert**

**with sail and oar**

**The sea was calm, your heart**

**would have responded**

**Gaily, when invited, beating**

**obedient**

**To controlling hands(418-**

**422)**

Our sense of self then is grounded first and foremost in a state of delusion and the wasteland is the true reality underlying this. Decay is a revelation.

At the end of the poem, the poet declares the quest has not quite been successful, "These fragments I have shored against my ruins". They are not entirely worthless but they are, still and all, 'fragments', nothing solid, "stony rubbish from which nothing can grow". And there are "ruins", the poet's ruins, the edifice of himself that is no longer whole, perhaps identical to the edifice of a culture that stands only in decay. Between the poem's first mention of "broken images" and the last mention of "fragments", Eliot assembles a number of fragments and broken images which constitute the poem. *The Waste Land* presents itself as the remains of a poem rather than as a complete poem, just as the culture and the world it describes are only the remains of a culture and of a world.

#### **"LIMP LEAVES WAIT FOR RAIN": EXPLORING HOPE IN *THE WASTE LAND***

Many critics have argued that Eliot's *The Waste Land* is a poem that attempts to deal with physical destruction and human atrocities of the first world war or that he had expressed the disillusionment of a generation. The critic I.A. Richards influentially praised Eliot for describing the shared post-war as suffering from "a sense of desolation, of uncertainty, of futility, of the groundlessness of aspirations, of the vanity of endeavor, and a thirst for life-giving water which seems suddenly to have failed." Eloise Knapp Hay in his book, "T.S. Eliot's Negative Way"(1982) looks at the poem as "Eliot's first long philosophical poem, can now be read....as a poem of radical doubt and negation, urging that every human desire be stilled except the desire for self-surrender, for restraint, and for peace. Compared with the longing expressed in later

poems for the "eyes" and the "birth", the "coming" and "the lady"(in "The Hollow Men", the Ariel poems, and "Ash-Wednesday"), the hope held out in *The Waste Land* is a negative one."(para. 1) For Eliot such a characterization was too reductive. He replied, "approving critics said that I had expressed 'the disillusionment of a generation', which is nonsense. I may have expressed for them their own illusion of being disillusioned, but that did not form part of my intention".(Lewis pp.129-51).

Europe was in shambles at the time Eliot was writing. Many had died in the war, life was not being celebrated. The poem may have been about dejection or celebration as it was something everyone was in need of. Eliot wanted to show people it was possible to handle all the death they had experienced. A healing process must occur in order for people to continue on with life. In line five, Eliot writes, "Winter kept us warm, covering Earth in forgetful snow". This line implies that people had not begun to come to terms with the death they had experienced. It still comforted people to feel depressed and cold, both feelings winter brings to mind. Winter was the time right after the war, the time in people's lives when there was not much hope, yet it was a comfortable place to be in. After winter the discomfort truly begins to be noticed, the soothing feeling of depression is gone with the sharp sting of the defrost. Dull roots begin to stir in the rain, the lilacs begin to blossom, and life begins again. This is a cruel process according to Eliot. It is the healing process after the war that is painful but brings people back to a similar existence they had before the war, one with less pain and more life. The healing process has begun and things will go back to the dignified past, once the winter is gone.

In addition to the vast devastation from World War I, Eliot was also experiencing devastation in his personal life. According to Fatima Falih Ahmed and Moayad Ahmad in their scholarly article, "Rejuvenation in T.S. Eliot's *The Waste Land*", Eliot had come to a standstill in his writing career at this point. He was having a hard time thinking of things to write about and was afraid that he would never have another good idea again"(Ahmad and Ahmed,164). In a sense, writing *The Waste Land* was not only an act of catharsis for him, but because of the rebirth and awakening of ideas and passions, it also became a defining poem for his generation. Within the poem, rebirth, and resurrection do not occur with ease, they can only come from hardships, negativity, and death. The post-war world places society in an era of, "depression, loss, and untimely death." (Ahmad and Ahmed, 160). Throughout the poem, there are numerous allusions to death and destruction such as the overall waterless and rocky terrain, unable to spark growth or rebirth. However, death and life can be easily

blurred- "From death can spring life, and life, in turn, necessitates death"(Ahmad and Ahmed, 162).

As explored by Archana Parashar in her scholarly article, "Reverberations of Environmental crisis and its Relevance in Managing Sustainability: An Ecocritical Reading of T.S. Eliot's *The Waste Land*", the wasteland could be categorized as Europe and modern civilization as a whole stands for the "loss of morals, values, and degradation of the environment in the modern world". On one hand, *The Waste Land* becomes a "reflection of individual hopelessness and despair but a panoramic view of the total spiritual downfall that has overtaken the modern world...it is expressionless, aggressive, and full of escapist resentment"(Ahmad and Ahmed, 160). An example of the spiritual downfall Eliot saw in his modern world would be that of Phlebas, the Phoenician sailor. Phlebas was arrogant and conceited and he is now dead floating alone at the bottom of the sea. Eliot uses Phlebas as a parable or cautionary tale to have one recall their own mortality, stating, "consider Phlebas, who was once handsome and tall as you".(Eliot, line 321). By killing off Phlebas from his modernist sins and rebirthing him to nature, Eliot humbles the character and gives him a new beginning.

Though the theme of rebirth and resurrection can be traced throughout the five sections of the poem, the first section, 'The Burial of the Dead' begins the poem with a clear image of the theme. The month of April is usually seen as hopeful and rejuvenating, however, how Eliot forms it is an inversion of its usual connotation. Regeneration is, "painful, for it brings back reminders of a more fertile and happier past."(Parashar,168). Eliot alludes to both winter and summer in the same stanza-all of the seasons except for fall. Herein the different seasons seem to be a symbol of the human condition. Summer is the result of the pain and healing process that spring takes people through. Eliot is suggesting in his poem that the world can overcome difficulties and barrenness. Eliot does not include the season of fall because it is the result of the end of summer, the end of the happy and carefree days-it marks the beginning of a struggle, the beginning of hard times, possibly even death. Though society is in a standstill from the aftermath of world war I, Eliot does ultimately believe that there is a hope for everyone to make it through the tough times. The sense of hope Eliot emulates does not fix the modern sense of despair, but rather asks for an appeal for regeneration.

Throughout the poem, going hand in hand with the theme of rebirth and resurrection is the image of water. Water imagery appears through cleansing rain, the "sweet Thames" that runs through the immoral and modern London, and nautical imagery. As soon as water



converges as a deluge, it is a symbol of destruction drowning the earth. However, as soon as the water evaporates, it is also a symbol of destruction desiccating vitality and fertility. Water, here, shows its duality—the force of annihilation and the force of generation as a whole. Christianity baptizes followers with water as a ritual signifying the cleansing of sins. Ancient paganism immerses idols into rivers and then picks them up a few days later and the ritual is regarded as the rebirth of the deity. Both fire and water signify birth, death, and revival. Eliot applies these images repetitively to express mankind's epiphany about life and death and the aspiration to renewal.

The gathering of fragments is one of the most important elements of the play. Many critics, such as F.R. Leavis strive to find unity in the poem by reconciling the fragments. According to Leavis, in his essay, "T.S. Eliot" (1932), the disparate allusions to Dante, Shakespeare, Chaucer, Greek mythology, the Upanishads, and the Bible, give readers a sense of the poem's meaning. Hope for renewal lies in an understanding that the past is not irrecoverable; it may exist within the present. Also, through the images of fragmentation and despair, Eliot gives us glimpses of the possibility of life through death, a suggestion that in our dying we might find peace, or to use the Buddhist lexicon, in our escape from 'Samsara', from the wheel of life, from desire, thirst, and craving, we will, at last, come to true happiness—'Nirvana'. Eliot prefaces the poem with this very thought. For Sybil, as for all of us, the desire was the direct cause of her suffering. It is only through death, through her escape from the incessant rotation of life, she will ever find enlightenment. The quest in the poem is fragmented and exists on multiple plains and times. The poem itself is the quest and also part of the answer; The exploration itself of the problems is, in a sense, the glimmer of possibility as Michael Edwards in his book, 'Eliot/ Language' (1975) writes,

**The concern of art is not order but possibility, and that it contrives**

**Possibility all the way along, down to the last significant detail.**

**Writing rewrites the world in the interest of hope.** (Edwards, 28)

The Waste Land, no doubt, deals with the tragedy of the modern age, but it also shows that tragedy is at the heart of life, in all ages. What is happening in the present did also happen in the past. For this reason, it will be wrong to call the poem "a sigh for the glories of a vanished past"; Eliot has not glorified the past at the expense of the present. The sexual sins of king Fisher and his soldiers laid waste his kingdom and ancient Thebes was laid waste because its king was guilty of the sin of incest.

Philomela was raped and her tongue severed so that she may not reveal the crime. Reference to Elizabeth and Leicester in the poem shows that relationship in the past has also been equally futile and meaningless. In all these aspects, the present resembles the past. The only difference is that in the past, suffering and penance resulted in spiritual regeneration and return to health. Philomela was transformed into the bird of golden song and Fisher king was cured and his kingdom was redeemed. Thus, the poem also makes promise and prophecy. It suggests that regeneration is possible, as it has always been possible, through suffering and penance. In the last section of *The Waste Land*, the thunder is already heard and clouds are there. Thus a promise is held out of the coming of rain of divine grace, only if the man will repent and do penance as Fisher king and king Oedipus did.

"I sat upon the shore", Eliot writes, focusing on himself, "Fishing, with the arid plain behind me." "Behind me" suggests both geographical and spiritual positions. The arid plain is behind him in a way one might say an unhappy event is "behind me" after it is finished. "Shall I at least set my lands in order?" he asks then as if he were making preparations for death. Death, according to the dominant myth of the *The Waste Land*, is the precondition for life: The god dies so that the god can be reborn; the earth dies so that it can be reborn and produce a new harvest. Thus the final images that swirl through the last lines of the poem suggest destruction prior to reconstitution.

The fifth part of *The Waste Land* presents Eliot's message of salvation. The scene here dramatically shifts to India and its sacred river, the Ganges, where rain and redemption are to be found. The message of life is given in three Sanskrit words derived from the Upanishads—Datta, Dayadhvam, and Damyata, which mean give, sympathize and control respectively. In order to achieve real meaning in life, Eliot reminds his readers of the values at the core of Western religion by quoting the religious convictions of Indo-Aryan tradition. The war was caused by the lack of faith and love and by the selfishness of man. In order for life to begin again, there should be a purifying fire against low desires and lust, and this fire brings about the painful resurrection. Thus to give is to surrender the self to moral authority and duty, to lessen the claims of the self; To sympathize is to enter into a community of souls, to sympathize with the plight of others; And to control the base instincts which exist within each person. This act of faith and courage gives life to *The Waste Land*. This lifts the spirits; After the wreckage of lust and the torment of isolation, Damyata invites a happier perspective. The boat responds "Gaily to the hand expert with sail and oar", like the boat upon which Isolde hears the

sailor's song in "The Burial of the Dead". We have returned then to the beginnings of love, the promise of a joyful future.

The poem ends on a note of grace, allying Eastern and Western religious traditions to posit a more universal worldview. Eliot's poem adds up to a vision of the world as a wasteland, awaiting the arrival of the Grail that will cure it of its ills. The end of the poem seems to suggest that the Grail is still within reach.

## ELIOT TO BECKETT: FROM LACK OF HOPE TO LOSS OF HOPE

scale. If Eliot compared post-world war I Europe to a wasteland, to what then could Beckett possibly compare the world after the devastation of Auschwitz, Nagasaki, and Hiroshima? Living under post-atomic threat, Beckett's vision appears conspicuously darker than Eliot's. When Beckett published *Endgame*, some fifty-five years after *The Waste Land*, he had the dubious benefit of having witnessed the second World War. World War II eclipsed "the war to end all wars" both in the devastation of human life and in the annihilation of the land on a wide scale. Despite the differences between world war I and II, both of these works were written in the shadow of great disasters. The God Eliot hoped for has retreated even deeper into hiding in the new wasteland of Beckett; the quest for renewal and hope remains a failure.

Like Eliot, Beckett needs to write. The opening lines of *The Waste Land* address memory and desire which have been awakened by the cruel spring, taunting us with a promise of renewal. If we view memory as a recognition of that which once held meaning, and desire as a type of need, then, in a sense, in *The Waste Land* April has become the cause of writing. Unfortunately though, for the characters of *Endgame*, the possibility of seasonal change no longer even exists. The origin of the stark drama in which they are trapped arises similarly from their memories of the past. But in the case of Hamm, Clov, Nagg, and Nell, their desire is not stirred by longing for a promised renewal; these characters desire only to end, to finish.

When Hamm asks Clov to tell him about the weather, the report is much different from that provided by Eliot in the opening sequences of *The Waste Land*. Clov informs Hamm that the weather is "As usual". Over the course of the next scene, Hamm who is blind and paralyzed, and therefore completely reliant on Clov as his witness of the world, asks to be updated on the state of the earth, the sea, the waves, and the sun. Clov retrieves his telescope and before he looks out of the window, he turns it on the audience and claims that he sees "a multitude...in

transports....of joy". Then he says, "well? Don't we laugh?" They do not. The statement is not funny. Even the audience suffers the world of the characters of *Endgame*. When Clov attempts to respond honestly to Hamm's queries, he reports that the earth is "zero;" this he repeats four times, possibly suggesting each of the four directions. The ocean is described as a sunken light, the waves as lead, and the sun as zero. The color of the landscape is gray: "Light black. From pole to pole."

The landscape of *Endgame* is even more wasted than *The Waste Land*. The play's setting has been interpreted as a post-Armageddon bomb shelter, protecting the last remaining human survivors on earth. Although the world Beckett presents is much bleaker than that of Eliot, it is not altogether a different world. In *'the Writing of the Disaster'* (1980), Maurice Blanchot universalizes an image presented by both Eliot and Beckett. Blanchot describes the suffering of our time as "a wasted man, bent head, bowed shoulders, unthinking, gaze extinguished". It is difficult not to recall the "crowd that flowed over London bridge" in *The Waste Land*, "with each man's eyes fixed before his feet", or Clov's description of himself leaving at the end of the play:

**I open the door of the cell and go.  
I am so bowed I only see my feet, if  
I open my eyes, and between my legs  
a little trail of black dust. I say to  
myself that the earth is extinguished,  
though I never saw it lit.**(Beckett 27)

A world reduced to routine is also described in both texts. Eliot depicts this routine in the men who stare at their feet as they cross the London bridge while going to work. The wealthy couple's routine is also examined in "A Game of Chess":

**The hot water at ten.  
And if it rains, a closed car at four.  
And we shall play a game of chess,  
Pressing lidless eyes and waiting for a knock  
upon the door.** (Eliot 135-139)

In *Endgame*, the day presented on stage is like any other day "As long as it lasts. All lifelong the same inanities" (Beckett 45). When Clov asks, "Why this farce day after day", it is sufficient for Hamm to reply, "Routine". The characters in *Endgame* are imprisoned by despair. In the world they inhabit, hope for any traditional redemption is impossible. Even the possibility of a God does not exist. The despair itself and faith become a subject of mockery:

**Hamm: Silence! In silence! Where are your manners?**

(pause) **Off we go. (Attitudes of prayer. Silence. Abandoning his attitude, discouraged.) Well?**

**Clov(abandoning his attitude): What a hope! And you?**

**Hamm: Sweet damn all! (To Nagg.) And you?**

**Nagg: Wait! (Pause. Abandoning his attitude.) Nothing doing!**

**Hamm: The bastard!! He doesn't exist.**  
(Beckett 18)

Hamm is much like the dying Fisher King with one important difference. The traditional Fisher King figure is a scapegoat for all humanity; he suffers alone, but Hamm refuses to bear the weight of human suffering alone and drags Clov, Nell, and Nagg along with him. Eliot utilizes allusions in order to suggest the value of the past, but in *Endgame*, "the old questions...the old answers", routines and habits fail. Even though Eliot's attempts to recall the past as a way of renewing the present ultimately fail as well, he still seems to believe that the past may provide answers for the future. Beckett suggests that any past memories or allusions can only prolong the meaningless present.

One thing that the characters of both *Endgame* and *The Waste Land* share in common is the act of 'awaiting'. The Waste Land is a mythopoetic quest in which the crisis is a "death-in-life" situation, where the characters await 'recovery'. *Endgame* can be viewed in much the same way; it is a play in which the characters also experience a death-in-life situation awaiting the 'end'. Maurice Blanchot approaches the idea of waiting as a place where "dying is living". "There dying is a passivity of life-of life escaped from itself and confounded with the disaster of time without present which we endure by waiting".(Blanchot 28).

## THE THEATRE OF THE ABSURD

**"The drama doesn't move forward but is charged with electricity"**

This notion is a predominant characteristic of absurdist theatre which Martin Esslin defines in his book 'The Theatre of the Absurd'(1961). In the book, he addresses twenty playwrights and classifies them as dramatists of the absurd. Samuel Beckett enjoys the distinction of being the first dramatist Esslin discusses. The emergence of the absurdist theatre was after the decline in

the economic, cultural, and social conditions of Europe reached its peak in the 1930s and 1940s. The economic upheaval, the rise of fascism, and the totalitarian shape Soviets were taking were among the visible factors that made the world out of joint. Especially with the bombardment of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, the state of the world turned out to be absurd per se.

The absurdist theatre did not depict real-life situations, people, or events with traditional dramatic elements of the narrative. What was happening on the stage was an attempt to give an overall image of the conditions of human existence by articulating what had become inaudible. The absurdist theatre was a negation of the world which had negated human beings, hardly leaving any space for the values and beliefs which gave meaning to human existence on earth. Along with their unconventional artistic forms, it is also due to this double negation that these plays are generally seen as meaningless, desperate, and nihilistic.

## "I SEE MY LIGHT DYING"-EXPLORING DESPAIR IN ENDGAME

Samuel Beckett presents a stage on which the characters yearn for the end-for death-but also attempt to delay the inevitable. According to Esslin, this is characteristic of the Theatre of the Absurd where character motives remain incomprehensible to the audience. Clov begins the play by pronouncing the word "finished" four times, and later in the play Hamm balances these words with four "ends". At one point, Hamm expresses his desire to die and asks Clov, "Why don't you finish us?", to which Clov responds, "I could not finish you". Only death can end the game that unfolds on the stage, but for these characters, Beckett has created a world where death is impossible. "Finished" becomes both an end and a completion. When the world ends only then will it be complete. However, the play does not end satisfactorily-Clov remains and hence the end of the play is not an ending. Because the world of the play, in one sense, must be seen as an allegory for the world at large, the sense of incompleteness in *Endgame* describes a universal lack of completion. For the characters of *Endgame*, nothing exists outside the play as Hamm remarks, "outside of here it's death!"

There is no more painkiller for Hamm, no more pap for Nagg; there are no more bicycle wheels, no more sugar plums, no more coffins; there is no more nature. Actually, nature does exist but only in a ruined form. If the dramatic tension of the play revolves around awaiting death by constantly attempting to delay the inevitable, then the disappearance of the supplies that keep the characters living can only hasten death. But paradoxically, there is no more painkillers. Hamm's

question- "Is it not time for my pain-killer?", which is the most repeated line in the play, is the desire for the one true painkiller death. Each time Clov delays the inevitable by answering, "No".

The characters in *Endgame*, like Eliot's characters, have lost the ability to identify with one another. Perhaps this is what causes Nell to remark, "Nothing is funnier than unhappiness". Even the suffering of loved ones becomes humorous. This kind of cynicism which is so evident in Hamm is a desperate attempt to anticipate the cruel universe, indifferent to his wishes. This cynicism causes any mercy Hamm may have had to disappear. A world in which meaning and hope are absent has destroyed Hamm's ability to "mean something" and to be kind. He is reduced to the role he plays, a fiction without motives or mercy, so much so that he becomes a ludicrous stage villain. Hamm is capable of these acts of inhumanity because the world is empty of meaning. There is no reason to be kind. For Hamm, the illusion that God exists is impossible and there is no choice between good and evil. The consequences for each are the same. Clov, on the other hand, continuously searches for a purpose in his life. He contemplates leaving; outside may not be death. In the absence of a clear purpose, Clov invents work to do:

**Hamm: in your kitchen?**

**Clov: yes**

**Hamm: What, I would like to know?**

**Clov: I look at the wall.**

**Hamm: The wall! And what do you see on your wall? Mene, mene? Naked bodies?**

**Hamm: I see my light dying!**

**Hamm: Your light dying! Listen to that! Well, it can die just as well here, your light. Take a look at me and then come back and tell me what you think of your light. (3)**

Beckett is known to have explained to the actor playing Hamm in his production of 1967 that:

**Hamm is a king in this chess game lost from the start....he knows he is**

**making loud senseless moves...he is only trying to delay the inevitable**

**end. Each of his gestures is one of the last useless moves which put off the end.**

While Nell has accepted some level of dignity in her ashbin by accepting despair and laughing at it, Hamm only realizes his own futility. He is doomed to wait incessantly; he avoids

his situation by hopelessly sustaining the moment of despair.

Hamm knows that nothing in the world is new. Life is simply a repetition of itself. In *Endgame*, everything is a memory and everything has happened before. It is impossible for an end to exist where time is governed by principles of uncertainty. If the play visits the audience with a lack of finality, a sense that an ending is forever suspended, then the end of the play is actually a suggestion of persistence rather than completion. The concepts of uncertainty and persistence are not uncommon in Beckett's oeuvre. In *Waiting for Godot*, another of Beckett's absurdist play, the entire play is structured around the action of waiting for someone who never arrives. The second act is essentially a repetition of the first leaving the ending uncertain-the audience must assume that the characters will continue to wait. Just like the characters of *Waiting for Godot*, the characters of *Endgame* are stuck in an infinitely repeatable routine but there is always a chance that this routine might be disrupted. When Clov spots a small boy wandering the wasteland outside the shelter, the possibility of a new start for humanity is introduced. "A potential procreator", Clov defines the boy. Once the boy enters the world of the play, the possibility of a clear end to the farce is absent. Either the boy will live and potentially re-establish the human race or he will die and the awaiting game will continue.

All the characters in *Endgame* are ailing; Nagg and Nell live in ashbins; Hamm is blind and paralyzed. Physical loss, uncertainty, the absence of a future, and the absence of meaning combine to create a nearly overriding sense of inexpressible hopelessness. Paradoxically though, *Endgame* closely resembles a religious quest. This quest, however, seeks not the redemption provided by some God but the ineffable. Awaiting a redemption that can never come is pointless. The world that the characters inhabit has been devastated by a tragedy that has left nothing but ashes. The characters have nothing left to lose but an awareness of what is lost. Like Eliot in *The Waste Land*, Nagg and Hamm long for the past-they believe that it may provide meaning. In order to pass the time, to keep the past alive, they tell stories. The poignancy of the play depends on continual tension between a lost world of feeling, once known and still yearned for, and the devastated present. The audience senses the futility of the situation. There is no hope and yet the play goes on. Even the introduction of the small boy does not provide absolute hope. In a universe governed by uncertainty, it is impossible to ever be certain. Even if the boy lives, he only symbolizes hope for a future that cannot be enjoyed. The characters in *Endgame* have lost hope for a future because only the end will alleviate their pain.



At the end of the play, just before the curtain closes, the scene is quite similar to the opening scene of the play. "The end is in the beginning and yet you go on". The audience realizes that nothing has changed. Beckett has created a universe in which there seems to be no hope whatsoever. The *Endgame* the audience witnesses does not end in checkmate. The king is not toppled and the game is not over. Confronting the Theatre of the Absurd is confronting this failure. By definition, absurdist theatre does not generally provide solutions to the situation presented on stage. Esslin asserts that the audience members must question the presented reality and create their own solutions, and approach their own meanings.

If *Endgame* closes on a note of uncertainty, it is precisely because the universe is filled with uncertainty. The goal of absurdist theatre, then, is to transform that uncertainty, the despair which emanates from the darkness in which the divine is seemingly absent. Redemption might be possible in absurdist theatre but not in the traditional sense. The despair presented on stage can be negated if the characters and the audience come to an understanding of their inability to understand. In an absurd world, dignity lies in the ability to face the senselessness, "to accept it freely, without fear, without illusions-and to laugh at it".(Esslin)

#### **"IT WON'T ALL HAVE BEEN FOR NOTHING!": EXPLORING HOPE IN *ENDGAME***

One of the most compelling qualities in Beckett's works is the lack of resolutions-the open quality that leaves many readers and audiences confused about what to interpret. Though the meaning of the play might not be clearly stated, one thing is pretty obvious: Pessimism underlines every word; the characters do not cease to stress the fact that man's road of decay and suffering inevitably leads to death. Much of the nihilistic interpretation hinges upon the idea that the actions of the characters are futile in a meaningless world where in situations repeat themselves without end. However, this argument supposes that these situations will continue, as they have, forever, which is an assumption. No matter how hard we try to come up with possible resolutions and thus, possible meanings, we forget that the meaning will never come from moments we assume will happen or will not happen-such as the assumption that the play will not end and will continue forever.

Lawrence E. Harvey in his book, "Samuel Beckett: Poet and Critic"(1970) made an effort to record a few conversations he had with the writer. One specifically speaks to the despairing quality of Beckett's works:

**When asked about the sense of nothingness in his work, Beckett**

**responded that it is more a sense of "restlessness, of moving about in**

**the night". There is nonetheless the sense of having to go on.(Harvey 62)**

Beckett did not feel that his plays should be interpreted as nothingness-as he says, "a sense of restlessness, of moving about in the night". It shows that despite a seemingly hopeless fate, there is still the sense of the need to continue, to never stop. If it were truly hopeless, the characters would not continue to act or in the case of *Endgame*, Hamm would simply stop making "loud, senseless moves"; Nell and Nagg would simply stop telling stories and reminiscing about the past; Clov would leave Hamm on his own and finally leave the world of the stage for the desolated wasteland outside. But none of these happen and these are the moments when we find the persistence of hope.

In *Waiting For Godot*, the two men, Vladimir and Estragon wait for someone who never comes. They continue to hope for salvation even though they are continually disappointed. At the end of the play, they say, "Shall we go?" "Yes, let's go." (They do not move.)" Despite wanting to leave, to abandon their search, they do not move. While the chances don't seem high that Godot will appear, all we are provided with is the chance, the small hope that things will be different. Within the many open spaces that Beckett purposefully places- where answers or resolutions are not given-lay the possibility, even the remote possibility that things may change. Similarly, in *Endgame* Beckett keeps the ending open. Based on the concept that four people exist within a room when the outside world is pure desolation, we get glimpses of what could exist outside through Clov's inspections at the window. In these moments we have hope for Clov, who without hope for the outside world, has no reason to try to escape his abusive master/slave relationship with Hamm. The hope for the outside world arrives in the form of a small boy, which is what propels Clov forward in the play to finally attempt to leave the room. Though we do not actually see Clov leave, all we have is a feeling, a hope that he may go-this open possibility is what keeps hope alive. By acknowledging that it is open, we also acknowledge that hope exists in that possibility.

Beckett once intimated to Martin Esslin that his entire career was motivated by a sense of obligation to bear witness to the wretched experiences endured in the womb:

**Sam told me that he remembers being in his mother's womb at a dinner party, where, under the table, he could remember the voices talking. And when**

**I asked him once, "What motivates you to write?" he said, "The only obligation I feel is towards that poor enclosed embryo." because, he said, "That is the most terrible situation you can**

**imagine, because you know you are in distress but you don't know that there is anything**

**outside this distress or any possibility of getting out of that distress."**(Gontarski 243)

#### LAUGHTER AMID DESPAIR: BECKETT'S DARK HUMOR AS CATHARSIS

All of the action in the play takes place in a room with two windows, a door, and two garbage bins in which Nagg and Nell reside. The characters never leave the dismal set: The closest they come to the outside world is describing the view of the nothingness outside the window. The depressing atmosphere may cause the audience to question whether or not such a brief and miserable existence is better than no existence at all. At the same time, the misery is so intense that it becomes comical because the conditions of the characters are exaggerated to the point of being absurd. This dark humor makes us laugh while also inviting us to reflect on the harsh realities of our own lives, and ultimately, it releases us from anxiety fueled by fear of suffering and death.

Clov makes an absurd and comically dark statement later in the play when he says, "If I don't kill the rat, he'll die." Obviously, either way, the rat will die. This implies that killing the rat might be better than making it wait around for death. The audience may laugh at the rat's lack of options while also understanding the truth of Clov's statement-that death is inevitable. Recognizing the humor in the situation may be a way to help the audience cope with the sobering truth presented and its implications. The powerful fear of death can thus be laughed away. It creates a cathartic effect that enables the audience to cope with a difficult existential situation and to find renewed optimism and meaning in their lives.

The fear and anxiety caused by death can be prevented if one comes to accept the reality of death. In the play, after reminiscing together, Nagg and Nell try to kiss one another. Sadly, they can't reach each other, and Nell asks, "Why this farce, day after day?"(5). Nagg and Nell have reached such an old age that they can no longer share affection. Despite how sad it is, there is some joy in the fact that their desire to love is not gone. Later, Nagg and Nell laugh and reminisce about a time they crashed their tandem bike. This happy memory is immediately followed by Nagg asking Nell if she is cold and she replies, "Yes, perished..."(6). Even though she is cold, the silver lining

exists that she is able to express this to someone who loves her. She suffers alongside the same person for a whole lifetime. That alone is a comfort to be had.

Shortly after Nell's death, Hamm asks Clov to check and see if Nagg is alive. Clov discovers that Nagg is alive and he tells Hamm that he is crying. Hamm says, "Then he is living" (21). This suggests that Beckett believes that suffering is not only a part of living but a part of what makes one feel alive. Without suffering, without pain, there would be no joy or laughter to compare it to. Nell says, "Nothing is funnier than unhappiness".(7). Rather than fearing it, one can learn from it, or laugh because of how incredibly common, and therefore powerless, unhappiness actually is.

Through the utter despair that makes up *Endgame*, Beckett paradoxically promotes an acceptance of our fate and teaches us to value life in all its imperfections.

#### CONCLUSION

"I don't think of all the misery but of the beauty that still remains."

-Anne Frank

Even though Eliot endeavors to recall the past as a way of redeeming the future, he concludes his quest for redemption with a retreat into allusive fragments of myth, religion, and literature in *The Waste Land*. It is, in many ways, a poem of impermanence, of suffering, and at the core of it all, is human desire-these are the central teachings of the Buddha. Buddhism teaches us that suffering is part of life and that suffering can be transcended only by progression through the cycles of life, death, and rebirth. It is the quest motif that unifies the poem; it gives us hope, however subtle, that in death there will always be the possibility of *Shantih*-not of nothingness, not of emptiness, but of a "peace which passeth all understanding." The poem ends but the search for redemption continues.

Likewise, in the final tableau of *Endgame*, Beckett presents characters who have spent the entire day awaiting the end, yet they remain, preventing a satisfactory ending. Nothing is final and "nothing" is final. For the characters in *The Waste Land* hope for 'renewal' is uncertain, and for Hamm, Clov, Nell and Nagg, the 'end' is uncertain.

This uncertainty prevents us from continuing to harbor traditional hopes. While Eliot's poem becomes a quest for a traditional redemption that never arrives, Beckett explores the impossibility of any traditional salvation. In his presentation of the absurd, he calls for

human beings to develop a 'new' hope. In the *Myth of Sisyphus*, Albert Camus addresses this notion as:

**"Earthy hope must be killed; only then one can be saved by true hope."** (Camus 56)

Camus instructs us to dismiss traditional, "earthly" hopes for a redemptive God in order to find the "true hope", the hope that emerges during the process of trading illusion for reality. In *The Waste Land*, Eliot begins to carve out a space for this true hope by connecting nothing with nothing. The only way to let go of despair is to cease connecting the past with the present and accept life as it comes, through light and through the darkness. By the time *Endgame* is published, Beckett has built a room in this space. His characters and audience face the absence of earthly reasons to hope. It is this clarity of mind which provides for the possibility that "true hope" will soon be uncovered.

Both *Endgame* and *The Waste Land* resonate, "I suffer, therefore I am". We are at times overwhelmed by abrupt glimpses of the darkness of suffering, the cruelty of April or October, and the painful waiting for hope. We are at times, devastatingly aware that we are human, that we are dust and assailed by fear of death and uncertainty of what is beyond. But as soon as the thunder comes, it brings with it a possibility of rain. Through a healing process that may hurt, life can be restored once again. The world after the war went through years and years of suffering and healing. It was never completely restored before there was another war that left the land devastated once again. The despair occurred for a long time, but after the Second World War lilacs bloomed out of the dead land. It was a very long healing process, longer than Eliot and Beckett probably imagined, but it was necessary. The end season of summer came. April isn't "cruel" anymore and Clov has left the room to view the lilacs blossom outside in the beautiful lands. The world has not seen another major war since then which suggests that summer has arrived again.

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