



AMERICAN UNIVERSITY OF BEIRUT

TRAGEDY BEYOND DEATH:  
THE SUFFERING OF BECKETT'S SOPHOCLEAN HEROES

by  
FARAH KHALIL TAHA

A thesis  
submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements  
for the degree of Master of Arts  
to the Department of English  
of the Faculty of Arts and Sciences  
at the American University of Beirut

Beirut, Lebanon  
May 2017

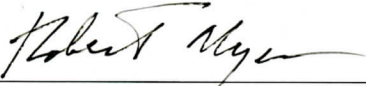
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## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I wish to thank my advisor, David Currell, for his feedback on all the drafts that have lead to this version of the thesis, and for his good counsel during all four years that I've known him. I also wish to thank my committee members, Robert Myers and Samhita Sunya, for their invaluable input on this project and kind suggestions as to how it might expand in the future.

I would like to thank my friend, Yasmine Abou Taha, for her constant encouragement throughout the various stages of researching, writing and editing this thesis, and for her resolute faith in my ability to complete it. I am also grateful to Rima Abboud, whose empathy and thought-provoking discussions have given me enough courage and determination to get through the sad days.

Most importantly, I extend my gratitude to my family: thank you Razan, Sana and Rashad, for being nutty and annoying, but still equally nice. And thank you, especially, Khalil, my father, and Randa, my mother, for your immeasurable kindness and never-ending sense of humour, which brighten my day, every day.

Though unreciprocated, I would finally like to thank my favorite cats of AUB, Brutus of Main Gate and Scar of Jafet Library, for always sticking around and being themselves (i.e. indifferent).

## AN ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS OF

Farah Khalil Taha for Master of Arts  
Major: English Literature

Title: Tragedy Beyond Death: The Suffering of Beckett's Sophoclean Heroes

Scholarly work on Samuel Beckett has seldom examined the influences of classical Greek dramas on the author's plays. In this thesis, Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* and *Endgame* are studied as belonging to the genre of tragedy, particularly as defined by Aristotle in his well-known *Poetics*. Importantly, Sophocles' *Antigone*, an exemplary model of classical Greek tragedy, is thematically compared to Beckett's two texts in an effort to elucidate the tragic components or elements that are found within the modern playwright's narratives.

The first chapter looks at Sophocles' *Antigone*. It highlights Creon and Antigone's difference in motivation, and takes a neutral tone in describing the struggle of power between these protagonists. Polyneices' burial surfaces as a critical concern in the play and thus the chapter, and so does the problem of communication between the protagonists. The chapter ends with a discussion of Aristotle's theorization of tragedy, which forms a liaison between the ancient Greek text and Beckett's modern plays. The second chapter examines Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*, and studies the play in terms of plot, character-analysis and dialogue, paralleling Aristotle's discussions of the constituents of tragedy. The most significant connection between this play and *Antigone* appears to be the factor of miscommunication, which spreads all around Vladimir, Estragon, Pozzo and Lucky. The third chapter discusses Beckett's *Endgame*, and tries to understand the setting and meaning of the odd narrative. Taking into consideration the widely accepted interpretations that the setting of the play is a bomb shelter and/or a Noah's ark, the thesis proposes an alternative explanation of the environment in which Hamm and Clov spend the end of their lives: an actual grave that entombs them. This tomb, a novel interpretation, resembles the ultimate resting place of the protagonist in Sophocles' *Antigone*, for Antigone too dies walled in an empty cave. The chapter then examines the element of suffering in these plays. Significantly, the suffering of Hamm in *Endgame* and Antigone in Sophocles' play of the same name stems from one and the same seed, the unfortunate, evil marriage of their parents, which has begotten these unhappy children. This connection forms another vital link between Beckett's modern drama and the Greek tragedy.

The relation of Beckett's dramas to classical texts of Greek tragedy remains greatly unrecognized in Beckettian studies, and further examination of the possible influences of the latter on the former could greatly enrich scholarship on the author's work. This thesis simply forms a first step in such a large endeavor.

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*In loving memory of*

*my great-uncle*

Mounir Saeed Saadeh (1922-2017)

*who immensely encouraged me in this endeavor from the very first day and curiously*

*asked about every intricate detail pertaining to my lessons and program;*

*and*

*my grandmother*

Rafica Bachir Barghout (1926-2017)

*whose sudden death has harshly proven that, truly, nothing's firm.*

*You are dearly remembered in my heart.*



*Then go and do it, if you must. It is  
Blind folly—but those who love you love you dearly.*  
-Ismene

## I. INTRODUCTION

‘Tragedy’ is a word of double meaning, usually thrown around when talking of worldly disasters and calamities that happen on a daily basis (Foley & Howard; Mandel; Poole), and also used by scholars, academics, and playwrights to describe a literary genre, one that attracts much attention and debate with regards to its definition, origin, and evolution or continuity in contemporary literature. Samuel Beckett (1906-1989), a remarkable author and playwright of the twentieth century, appears an unlikely tragedian at first glance: his writings reflect the time in which he lived and try to reveal the conflicts of that age. For the most part, critics have studied Beckett’s work against that literarily modern background while disregarding the possible influences of older classic dramas and tragedies on his texts. Yet, there are certain connections that link Beckett’s work with the oeuvres of past tragedians, especially early Greek drama. Considering that this link between the modern author’s texts and classic tragic writing has been largely unexamined in the literature available on Beckett, the present thesis aims to show that *Waiting for Godot* (1955) and *Endgame* (1957), Beckett’s most influential works, belong to the genre of tragedy and speak to a longer history of tragic writing, and does so by delving into a comparative study between these two texts and Sophocles’ *Antigone*, which represents an exemplary model of traditional Greek tragedy and has been used, along with other similar Greek dramas, by Aristotle to define tragedy and its constituent elements in its conventional form.

It is important to note, as Helene Foley and Jean Howard do, the wide difference between “tragedy as performance and tragedy as text” (620), for the performative aspects of tragedy occupy a separate space for study and commentary, one which is not

the interest of this thesis. Undoubtedly, delving into the performative aspects of written plays, for example, spectacle and design, produces different interpretations and readings of texts and, certainly, gives new meaning and understanding that might not or cannot be found in the written text alone; after all, drama is written on the page to be performed. However, considering that the origin of all performances is the very text - the script - of the play, the current thesis seeks to study the themes, language usage, and overall meaning of the chosen dramatic texts without strong emphasis on their performative aspects and components.

To fully appreciate the influence of classical Greek tragedy on Beckett's plays, Aristotle's *Poetics* must be considered, for it is pivotal for understanding the structure and form of the tragic work. Defending tragedy, Aristotle took on the project of writing *Poetics* in response to "Plato's philosophical attack on the genre" (Foley & Howard 620); in it, he states that tragedy:

is an imitation of a single, unified action that is serious, complete, probable [...] and of a certain magnitude; concerning the fall of man whose character is good (though not pre-eminently just or virtuous), appropriate, believable and consistent; whose misfortune is brought about not by vice or depravity but by some error or frailty; in language embellished with each kind of artistic ornament, the several kinds being found in separate parts of the play; *in the form of an action*, not of narrative; *with incidents arousing pity and fear*, wherewith to accomplish the catharsis of these emotions. (qtd. in Mandel 21; emphasis mine)

Discussions of "pity and fear" and "action" are highly important in *Antigone* as well as *Waiting for Godot* and *Endgame*. Sophocles' play reaches a "catharsis of these

emotions” through an employment of conventional tools and constituents of tragedy and, as Aristotle notes, “through pity and fear [...it] effects relief to these and similar emotions” (Fyfe 23) by showing its protagonists’ inevitable downfall and doom. Beckett’s texts, on the other hand, are able to evoke “pity and fear” in the audience by showing that the characters *themselves* are morbidly aware of their situation and conscious of the suffering they endure, and the portrayal of this knowledge is enough to bring out “pity” for them, and “fear” of ever becoming like them. Aristotle further notes that:

since tragedy represents action and is acted by living persons, who must of necessity have certain qualities of character and thought—for it is these which determine the quality of the action; indeed thought and character are the natural causes of any action and it is in virtue of these that all men succeed or fail—it follows then that it is the plot which represents the action. By “plot” I mean here the arrangement of incidents; “character” is that which determines the quality of the agents, and “thought” appears whenever in the dialogue they put forward an argument or deliver an opinion. (Fyfe 23-5)

In this matter, *Antigone* proves itself a paradigmatic Greek tragedy where plot, character and dialogue are apparent and easily identifiable. Antigone, heir of the Labdacus family, breaks the law due to a difference in beliefs, and is eventually punished by the state. Creon, head of the state and relative of the offender, abuses his power in order to prove his ability as a legitimate ruler. Both heroes meet a tragic end because of miscommunication and an inherent character flaw - namely, stubbornness. Both Creon and Antigone play the role of the protagonist, for they are interdependent and equally powerful within the narrative as a whole. The thought within the play flows smoothly

and the characters distinctively “put forward an argument or deliver an opinion” in such a manner that each character’s nature is proved by her or his words. How do *Waiting for Godot* and *Endgame*, which are exemplarily modern texts, still evoke Aristotle’s criteria of tragedy, even though these criteria are derived from classical works of drama? As we shall see, discussions of what constitutes “plot” (including, necessarily, “action”), “character” and “dialogue” are intensely debated by Beckettian scholars, including but not limited to James Calderwood, Ramona Cormier and Janis Pallister, Terry Eagleton, Lawrence Graver, Andrew Kennedy, and Hugh Kenner. Beckett’s plays deviate from tragedy’s norm in their progression of action, the intelligibility of the characters on stage, and the use of language and speech as signifiers of meaning, yet all of these vital organs are found and repeatedly reconfirmed throughout the acts and scenes of the texts. Repetition and ritual prove to be of utmost importance in these plays, for here “Beckett follows the precepts of Antonin Artaud, who urged that modern theater leave realism behind and look toward classical Greek theater and its origins in ritual. Sacrifice is the most dramatic of rituals” (Astro 132-3), and is implemented in both texts: in *Waiting for Godot*, the protagonists sacrifice their lives awaiting an unknown end, an endless end, and in *Endgame*, “all of humankind is offered up in empty holocaust to a God of whom Hamm says, ‘The bastard! he doesn’t exist’” (133). The characters’ sacrifices, at first invisible due to their clownish mannerisms and obsessive indulgence in trifles and knickknacks, inevitably lead to their prolonged suffering. Rebecca Bushnell emphasizes that suffering, or pathos, is fundamental to the tragic work, it being, as Aristotle states in the *Poetics*, “a destructive or painful act, such as deaths on stage, paroxysms of pain, woundings and all that sort of thing” (53). In contrast to *Antigone*, which shows tangible destruction and doom through several deaths and portrays the suffering of all characters,

the ones who die throughout and the others who survive them, Beckett's texts restrain themselves from killings and violent slaughter to emphasize the suffering present in daily living; whereas Sophocles' *Antigone* speaks of the suffering caused by others' deaths, Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* and *Endgame* portray the suffering inherent in the struggle to live and accept life, which then implies accepting death. Certainly, all Beckett's characters are doomed and naturally destroyed before they even begin playing, and it is this suffering, exacerbated by an inability to redeem them from their misery, that makes them tragic.

In this Aristotelian account, knowledge and meaning are to be derived from the tragic characters' suffering so that the audience is somehow able to "confront and depart with a changed or enlarged perspective on human suffering and the human ability to understand, control, and make predictions about the world" (Foley & Howard 621). However, the three major literary texts discussed in this thesis seem to defy this overachieving hope and, at the close of each play, the reader is left wondering: what insurmountable obstacle has caused these characters to suffer, and why did they not change their course of action before reaching their doom? Oscar Mandel tries to justify the necessity of suffering and pain by saying that:

tragedy asserts more than "that men die and are not happy"; it asserts that they die and are not happy through their own efforts. And not as a mere outcome of their efforts, but *necessarily* as a condition contained in the effort [...] Here we leave Aristotle to name the precise condition of downfall: *inevitability* impresses us as the kernel of the definition. No work can be tragic without it. Tragedy is always ironic, but it is not because an action *eventually* leads to the opposite of

its intention, but because that opposite is grafted into the action from the very beginning. (23-4)

Certainly, “inevitability” plays a role in the outcome of these tragedies, and not only in reference to ‘fate’ or ‘destiny’, but also as a result of inherent character predispositions. Such predispositions, which can also be thought of as the characters’ nature or, to some extent, ‘flaws’, are found in *Antigone* as well as *Waiting for Godot* and *Endgame*, where the characters try to engage in what they conceive to be different activities to find potentially new outcomes, but fail at every effort; just as Antigone’s and Creon’s nature prescribes their stubborn character and inability to communicate with one another, so Beckett’s Estragon, Vladimir, Hamm and Clov all excel at failing, and that predisposition, their affinity for failure and inability to succeed at acting, is in itself ‘inevitable’ (and guarantees, despite Beckett’s efforts, their success).

The present thesis is divided into three chapters, each delving into a close reading of one of the texts and discussing it in terms of themes, character-analysis, and relationship to tragedy as laid out in Aristotle’s *Poetics*. The first chapter, which deals with Sophocles’ *Antigone*, discusses the political and familial (or public versus private) spheres of life, as represented by Creon and Antigone, respectively; burial practices and the withholding of enemies’ fallen bodies during wartime in Athens in the fifth century; and the differences in motivation and character between Creon and Antigone, and Creon’s failure to rise to heroic status due to his final act of yielding to the blind seer (in contrast to Antigone, who does not yield and prefers death). The title of ‘protagonist’ within the play is also given due importance, for, in my reading, Antigone and Creon form separate centers of dramatic gravity by way of their interdependence, and so that title deservedly belongs to both of them. The second chapter discusses Beckett’s

*Waiting for Godot*. It examines the identity of Godot and the significance of Vladimir and Estragon's waiting; components of farce comedy within the play and their failure to quench and/or outweigh the suffering of the protagonists; the action and inaction of the characters; "pity and fear" in the audience and the characters, and tragedy in the play, with reference to Aristotle's criteria and the additional component of suffering. The third and final chapter deals with *Endgame*, which seemingly continues the tale of the two miserable men in *Waiting for Godot*. It discusses the family crisis unfolding in Hamm's home; possible explanations of the setting of the play; the significance of 'earth' and 'death' for the protagonists; the continued severing of language and speech used by the characters; and the overbearing suffering that they continually endure. This chapter draws greatly on *Waiting for Godot* and *Antigone*, and ties all three texts together in terms of content.

This thesis aims to examine the connections between *Antigone* and *Waiting for Godot* and *Endgame*, in an effort to show how early Greek tragedy influenced Beckett's writings. Surely, *Antigone* is not the only classical text one might look at when performing such critical comparative readings of the texts, but it does provide a starting point for such a project, considering that scholarly work has been inattentive to the possible dialogic lines between Beckett's modern drama and classical works of tragedy. The texts of Sophocles and Beckett were written millenniums apart, and, undoubtedly, the meanings of tragedy and suffering, whether in a written or everyday societal context, shifted and changed between the authors' historical moments. Nevertheless, when closely studied, several significant thematic connections between their works surface. *Waiting for Godot* compares to *Antigone* in the miscommunication that spreads in the play, miscommunication which confuses Beckett's characters and, similar to the



case of Antigone and Creon, denies them any common ground on which they might be able to solve their disputes. Critically, the strongest connections between *Antigone* and Beckett's dramas arise in the discussion of *Endgame* in the third chapter of this thesis: Hamm's entombing within his home as he dwindles and fades greatly parallels Antigone's discarding inside an empty cave in anticipation of her ultimate death, and Antigone's suffering matches Hamm's, for, in both narratives, the suffering that the characters endure is a consequence of their parents' accursed matrimony, which only begets misery and pain for these unhappy protagonists.

The thesis as a whole tries to answer the following questions: What sorts of themes does Sophocles' *Antigone* discuss, and how do they weave together the tragedy of the narrative? In what ways is Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* tragic, and why do its tragic elements override the comedy in the play? What meaning can be derived from the setting and plot of *Endgame*, and why do its characters suffer? As we shall see, *Waiting for Godot* and *Endgame* borrow the 'inevitable' suffering of the protagonists of *Antigone* and infuse their own characters with an augmented, overwhelming version of that suffering within a novel structure of shortened language and muddled meaning that fits their time and age.

## II. “[W]ITH THEM, I HAVE TO DWELL FOR EVER”: ON BURYING THE DEAD IN *ANTIGONE*

Tragedy as a genre became an eminent form of art not long before Sophocles’ time, notably because of the political shift within the polis from aristocratic rule to democratic representation. With the introduction of the new system, the citizens of Athens found themselves invested with enough power to govern their own lives, and steadily acquired more freedoms to question their rulers’ political decisions and policies, as well as the religious norms that bound their daily practices and societal rites. Sophocles delved into these topics in his writing, examining the changing power structures and huge shifts in ways of government, all of which significantly altered Athenian society.<sup>1</sup> This is certainly represented in Sophocles’ *Antigone*, which recounts the downfall and death, in physical and metaphorical terms, of its two tragic heroes, Antigone and Creon who, due to differences in “religious feeling” (Vernant & Vidal-Naquet 41) and conflicting loyalties to the family and city-state, bring about increased destruction to the house of Labdacus.<sup>2</sup> Creon, Antigone’s uncle and the nearest living male heir to the throne, assumes power as the king of Thebes and publicly proclaims to the citizens of the city-state the very first decree under his reign, “that none / Shall give [Polyneices] funeral honours or lament him, / But leave him there unburied, to be

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<sup>1</sup> “The rise of tragedy coincided historically with the Athenian democratic revolution... [a]s the notion of the citizen was forced into the centre of the conceptual universe, as the natural rights of the aristocracy to ascendancy began to be questioned, so the archaic religious imperatives were increasingly eroded and humanity took central place on the intellectual and ideological stage [...as such] Sophoclean tragedy repeatedly portray[ed] the clash between the archaic family-centred order and the secular pragmatism of the new citizen” (Hall xxv, xxvi).

<sup>2</sup> The house of Labdacus had already witnessed destruction and doom in Oedipus and Iocasta’s cursed marriage, as recounted in Sophocles’ *Oedipus Rex*.

devoured / By dogs and birds, mangled most hideously.”<sup>3</sup> This harsh edict is reached because of the traitorous actions of Polyneices, who had taken up arms with the Argives against Thebes and attacked the city, choosing to fight against his brother Eteocles, the previous ruler of Thebes (Hall xvii): “they have fallen by a double doom / Upon a single day, two brothers each / Killing the other with polluted sword” (170-2). Sister to Polyneices and Eteocles, Antigone takes issue with Creon’s proclamation and willingly opposes it, believing that the sacred laws, the “Unwritten Laws”, surpass the laws of men in value and worth: “Nor could I think that a decree of yours— / A man—could override the laws of Heaven / Unwritten and unchanging.” (453-5). These oppositions that Antigone identifies early on in the narrative, dualities between the laws of the city and the archaic rites and rituals, the public and the private, and the man and the woman, prove to be the core and essence of the tragedy.

The silent war between the domain of the state and the realm of the family is engaged at the very start of *Antigone*, which opens with the protagonist meeting her sister Ismene, her only surviving immediate family member, at the gates outside the palace of Thebes. Antigone is outraged by what she has heard concerning her brother, that, “for Polyneices, Creon has ordered / That none shall bury him or mourn for him; / He must be left to lie unwept, unburied,” and that “he who disobeys / In any detail shall be put to death / By public stoning in the streets of Thebes.” (26-8, 35-7). She immediately asks her sister to join her in the task of burying their “unwept” brother,

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<sup>3</sup> Quotations from *Antigone* are taken from Kitto’s translation. The present quotation is of lines 202-5. All subsequent citations will appear by line number in the text.

which Ismene declines to do, preferring to “yield to those who have authority” (67). Unmoved, Antigone reasserts her will to honour the dead: “Your choice is made. But I shall bury him. / And if I have to die for this pure crime, / I am content, [... for] I have to please / The dead far longer than I need to please / The living; with them, I have to dwell for ever.” (71-3, 74-6).

Antigone’s preoccupation with burying the body of her brother has been a central concern in almost all scholarly work on *Antigone*, and this preoccupation has further extended to philosophical inquiries and interpretation. One outstanding commentary comes from the writings of Hegel, who, through the example of Antigone and her concern for the body of Polyneices, examines “the existential dualities of man and society, of the living and the dead, of the immanent and the transcendent” (Steiner 32). Taking the lead from Antigone’s determined stance that the worlds of the living and the dead are markedly different, Hegel, in his *Phenomenology of Spirit*, discusses the distinction between these two realms and the differing rules and laws that govern each world. From a philosophical standpoint, Hegel asserts that the dead, by virtue of their dying and leaving the realm of the living, and by becoming non-being entities, can only exist in relation to others, “passively” for others. This is because all of the dead individual’s actions, thoughts, opinions, and such, are contained as memory and history in the minds of others (but not in the dead person him or herself), most notably those individuals who form the family. The family’s important role lies in burying the dead individual, in keeping away any dishonour that could reach his or her body, by way of wild animals that might eat away at the remaining flesh or natural elements which will take their toll on the carcass if it stays unburied above the ground. Hence, the burial of the dead forms the “final duty” of the family toward its individual members, and this

“divine law” must be respected regardless of the dead’s misdeeds, bad actions, or evilness that had constituted part or all of his or her living life.<sup>4</sup>

As such, the burial of Polyneices by Antigone represents a vastly different act than simply going against the order of the state. The act of burial signifies Antigone’s adherence to her duty as kin to Polyneices, an obligation she had revered with regards to all her deceased family members: “And yet I go / In the sure hope that you will welcome me, / Father, and you, my mother; you, my brother. / For when you died it was my hands that washed / And dressed you, laid you in your graves, and poured / The last libations.” (897-902). Unfortunately for the tragic heroes, Polyneices’ status as both brother/nephew and traitor creates a clash of loyalties, wherein the familial duty toward siblings and kin and the political duty as a citizen toward the state intertwine. Creon is uncle to Polyneices, Antigone, and Ismene (whom he also wishes to incarcerate, without cause), and ruler of Thebes.<sup>5</sup> Nevertheless, he fails to see the gravity of the right Antigone defends, that Polyneices, the “empty particular” that now passively exists, is

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<sup>4</sup> “The dead individual, by having detached and liberated his being from his action or negative unity, is an empty particular, merely existing passively for some other, at the level of every lower irrational organic agency... The family keeps away from the dead the dishonouring of him by the appetite of unconscious organic agencies and by abstract [chemical] elements. It sets its own action in place of theirs, and it weds the relative to the bosom of the earth, the elemental presence which does not pass away. Thereby the family makes of the dead a member of a communal totality [...] which is stronger than, which maintains control over the powers of the particular material elements and lower living creatures, both of which sought to have their way with the dead and to destroy him... This final duty thus constitutes the complete *divine* law or positive *ethical* act towards the particular individual” (Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, qtd. in Steiner 32-3).

<sup>5</sup> “As ruler in Thebes, Creon is anachronistically called ‘king’ or ‘lord,’ but also ‘general,’ *stratēgos*, suggesting the electoral procedures of fifth-century Athens alongside the hereditary succession of ancient kingship” (Segal 129-30). Perhaps Creon’s position as general in the military, and thus his involvement in the war against the Argives, exacerbates the stubbornness in his decision to deny burial to Polyneices, who had consciously betrayed his city-state. Furthermore, Calder suggests that “Creon is called and enters as *stratēgos* just to mitigate any charge of harshness that might otherwise attach to his edict” (393), although that “charge” is certainly understandable.

devoid of the offences he has committed in his lifetime. Creon can only recall the ill deeds of the dead traitor, how he “came from exile to lay waste his land, / To burn the temples of his native gods, / To drink his kindred blood, and to enslave / The rest” (199-202). Antigone does not seek for Polyneices to be “entombed and graced with every rite / That men can pay to those who die with honour” (196-7), as Eteocles shall be, but simply that he be placed beneath the earth (or, rather, “thinly covered / With dust”, 55-6) and allowed to join the dead.

In a reciprocal manner, Antigone fails to recognize the importance of the public decree that has been prescribed by the ruler of the city. Although she explicitly vocalizes her knowledge of the order and the consequent punishment that will result from going against it, she completely disregards the “circumstances - political, military, symbolic - in which the laws of the [state might] extend to the dead body the imperatives of honour (ceremonious interment, monumentality) or of chastisement which, ordinarily, pertain only to the living” (Steiner 34-5). At least in the beginning, Creon’s reason behind his edict is the preservation of order in the city and the protection of all citizens, which also means necessarily punishing criminals as an example for others to see. His opening address to the Theban elders reads as follows:

There is no art that teaches us to know  
The temper, mind or spirit of any man  
Until he has been proved by government  
And lawgiving.  
[...] and if any holds  
A friend of more account than his own city,  
I scorn him; for if I should see destruction  
Threatening the safety of my citizens,  
I would not hold my peace, nor would I count  
That man my friend who was my country’s foe,  
Zeus be my witness. For be sure of this:  
It is the city that protects us all;  
She bears us through the storm; only when she  
Rides safe and sound can we make loyal friends. (175-8, 181-90)

Creon sees in Polyneices that “country’s foe” who has broken all ties with Thebes when he attacked it under the Argive army. In this vein and logic, Creon’s disassociation with Polyneices as family is understandable. As king and protector of the city, a city that has recently won a lengthy civil war and claimed victory over its opponent, “the city that protects us all”, Creon is obliged to step up to the challenge and prove himself to Thebes, and, by extension, the citizens of Thebes, who remain in dire need of a unifying, capable leader after Eteocles’ death. As such, he favors his duty toward the citizens over and above his duty toward the family. Antigone and Creon are, in a way, “equally right” in their perspective (Mandel 107), and the tragedy necessarily unfolds because, as Hegel notes, “[e]ach of these two sides realizes only one of the moral powers, and has only one of these as its content [...] and the meaning of eternal justice is shown in this, that both end in injustice just because they are one-sided” (qtd. in Faas 14). But “eternal justice” seems an exaggeration on Hegel’s part, considering that the majority of the tragedy’s players die and Creon is left helplessly weeping over the dead body of his son, and that the world is overall unconcerned for and uninterested in the suffering of these particular individual characters; this worldly indifference to human suffering is later adopted by Beckett and pushed beyond its limits in *Waiting for Godot* and *Endgame*.

Antigone and Creon nevertheless represent excellent models of “one-sided” characters, and that model is replicated and enlarged in Beckett’s own isolated characters. After all, Vladimir, Estragon, Lucky, Pozzo, Hamm, Clov, Nagg and Nell all

live in their own secluded, incomprehensible bubbles, and are all bound to the strangling environments which they have accepted as “habit”.<sup>6</sup> Indeed, the human and divine worlds, or public and private matters, or “moral powers”, in Hegel’s terminology, that separately guide Creon and Antigone and validate their beliefs (his belief in written/human laws versus her belief in unwritten/godly laws), are, in the case of Beckett’s characters, enmeshed in one and the same world, the same “power”. Even though, at the beginning, Pozzo presents himself as a rich, respectable estate-owner, a being “[m]ade in God’s image!” (*WFG* 23), he later turns blind and entirely depends on his slave’s pitiful assistance for daily living. Such is also the case for Hamm, who could have (though has not) “[h]elped” countless people with supplies of food and other goods in the past, but presently lives in poverty, and relies on his adopted son, Clov, for everything.<sup>7</sup> In this manner, the public affairs of the state (particularly, in terms of wealth and material possessions) are reduced to the private domain of the family (specifically, the need for other human beings instead of mere ‘things’). As we shall see, a similar reduction from the public to the private, or a change in priorities, happens in Creon’s case as well. Moreover, Beckett’s characters appear “one-sided” in the way they exist alone even while interacting with one another, for they cannot understand the other’s point of view not because they refuse to listen, as is the case for Antigone and Creon, but because they’ve heard each other’s thoughts so often that the words no longer hold significance, and, as Clov reflects, “[t]here is nothing to say” anymore (79).

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<sup>6</sup> For brevity, in-text citations from Beckett’s *Waiting for Godot* will be shortened to *WFG* and page number. The phrase here is from page 80.

<sup>7</sup> Similarly, *Endgame* will be shortened to *EG*. The present quote appears on page 68.



Jean-Pierre Vernant and Pierre Vidal-Naquet try to explicate the tragedy in progress in *Antigone* by asserting that:

[t]he conflict between Antigone and Creon [...] is not an opposition between pure religion, represented by [Antigone], and total irreligion, represented by Creon, or between a religious spirit and a political one. Rather, it is between two different types of religious feeling: One is a family religion, [...] centered around the domestic hearth and the cult of the dead; the other is a public religion in which the tutelary gods of the city eventually become confused with the supreme values of the State [...] As the leader of the chorus points out, it is pious to honor the gods in all piety but the supreme magistrate at the head of the city is duty-bound to enforce respect for [...] the law he has promulgated. (41)

Because he is “duty-bound” by the “law he has promulgated”, Creon cannot take his word back or excuse Antigone for her actions, even if he indeed can see the fault in the law he has proclaimed (although there is no indication of such acknowledgement within the narrative). Indeed, the chorus, in trying to soothe Antigone’s pains and grievances, point out that “Such loyalty is a holy thing. / Yet none that holds authority / Can brook disobedience” (873-4), once again proving their apathetic standpoint and failing to side with either of the two protagonists, and, in a sense, truly understanding the larger issue at play within the narrative - that Creon and Antigone ultimately must try, must take action, and must interact with one another as their knowledge and ability best direct them, and through their action they must suffer where suffering is due. Importantly, “[n]either of the two religious attitudes set in conflict in *Antigone* can by itself be the right one unless it grants to the other the place that is its due, unless it recognizes the very thing that limits and competes with it” (41). The failure to recognize “the very

thing,” the motivations and rationales of the other, is a necessary flaw in the characters that allows the tragedy to take its course. But it seems that the weakness in vision is greater in Creon than in Antigone.

Newly elected as the king of Thebes, Creon’s initial speech emphasizes that the “temper, mind or spirit of any man” is revealed most truthfully and completely after “he has been proved by government / And lawgiving”. The king then sets about proving his theory, and personality, in the ways he settles matters through government. Determined to demonstrate ability and leadership, Creon oversteps his boundaries as king when he refuses to listen to anyone’s voice except his own. Antigone is the first to point out this flaw and argue with Creon over the matter:

*Antigone.* Yet what could I have done to win renown  
More glorious than giving burial  
To my own brother? These men too would say it,  
Except that terror cows them into silence.  
A king has many a privilege: the greatest,  
That he can say and do all that he will.

*Creon.* You are the only one in Thebes to think it!

*Antigone.* These think as I do—but they dare not speak. (502-9)

Creon quickly takes offense at Antigone for challenging his rule, which he himself soon enough admits has been resented by the people of Thebes. He disregards Antigone’s voice as a resident of the polis, and, significantly in this context, as an aristocrat of the upper class whose presence and word is privileged, and dismisses her because she is a woman, stating that “[t]here is no room for pride / In one who is a slave! [...] Now she would be the man, not I, if she / Defeated me and did not pay for it. [...] While I am living, no woman shall have rule.” (478-9, 484-5, 525). Creon is doubly insulted by the disregard for his authority and by Antigone’s being female, a truth that increasingly disturbs his thoughts and angers him into imposing harsher measures of punishment for her ‘disobedience’.

The legitimacy of Creon's edict is again questioned by his son, Haemon, who is betrothed to Antigone and proves to be madly in love with her, although he initially denies his interest in front of his father: "No marriage shall be thought a greater prize / For me to win than your good government." (637-8). Haemon articulates the opinion of the collective Theban citizenry, stating:

But it falls to me,  
Being your son, to note what others say,  
Or do, or censure in you, for your glance  
Intimidates the common citizen;  
He will not say, before your face, what might  
Displease you; I can listen freely, how  
The city mourns this girl. 'No other woman',  
So they are saying, 'so undeservedly  
Has been condemned for such a glorious deed.  
When her own brother had been slain in battle  
She would not let his body lie unburied  
To be devoured by dogs or birds of prey.  
Is this not worthy of a crown of gold?'—  
Such is the muttering that spreads everywhere. (687-700)

Through this message, Haemon reiterates Antigone's previous assertion that the people of the city are reluctant to admit what they think for fear that their defiance will enrage the king, which it does. Thebes as a "city mourns [Antigone]" and shakes its head pitifully over her "glorious deed", "worthy of a crown of gold." But the people allow little more than the "muttering" to "spread everywhere", which reemphasizes the error in Creon's character, for he acts as a tyrant and not a ruler, and the people feel fear instead of safety under his reign. The Athenian democratic revolution created a space in which "[d]emocracy was a man-made political order; [as such] the Athenians became increasingly aware of their own power to create their own destiny" (Hall xxv). But such power is not fully realized in Sophocles' text, especially because Creon, as ruler, continually grows upset, isolated, and insistent on exercising his power and enforcing the punishment, and completely dismisses the protests of the Thebans, which Haemon

voices. Creon remains grounded in his arguments regarding disobedience and state punishment, and his youngest son's challenging appeals truly expose the father's tendency towards tyranny:

*Creon.* What should be done! To honour disobedience?

*Haemon.* I would not have you honour criminals.

*Creon.* And is this girl then not a criminal?

*Haemon.* The city with a single voice denies it.

*Creon.* Must I give orders then by their permission?

*Haemon.* If youth is folly, this is childishness.

*Creon.* Am I to rule for them, not for myself?

*Haemon.* That is not government, but tyranny.

*Creon.* The king is lord and master of his city.

*Haemon.* Then you had better rule a desert island! (730-9)

By insolently asking "Am I to rule for them, not for myself?" Creon proves his shameless indifference to the "supreme values of the State" and shifts his focus from the body of the traitor Polyneices, the defiant act of Antigone, and the appeals of Haemon (and the people on whose behalf he speaks) onto himself. Creon's mockery of Antigone's religious rites and duties and her adherence to the unwritten laws is no longer justified because he is no longer operating on the level of the public sphere, the level of the state or the law; instead, he is fixated on his own gains, and this, the focus on his own self, power, and megalomania, lowers his status and allows Antigone to rise in heroism and sacrifice in the eyes of the Theban elders and chorus, as well as the reader. "[T]he pseudo-religion of Creon, the Head of State who reduces the divine to the dimensions of his own poor common sense so as to saddle it with his own personal hatred and ambitions" can henceforth only bring calamity to Thebes (Vernant & Vidal-Naquet 41).

Antigone and Creon are both necessary for the play's unfolding events, and both are allotted equal amounts of representation and space for taking action and justifying their stances. As a result, both of them deservedly rise to the level of 'protagonist'.

However, several critics debate whether or not Creon sufficiently presents as a ‘hero’ within *Antigone*, and whether he can be *the* protagonist of the tale, should only one exist (Calder; Hall; Hogan; Morwood). Edith Hall remarks that:

Creon’s failure to achieve heroic stature, at least in human terms, [can be seen] as a result simply of his unsteadiness in the face of opposition. For he is, above all, erratic: having decided that Ismene is as guilty as Antigone, he then changes his mind about her. He vacillates wildly about Antigone’s fate: the original edict decreed death by stoning, but at one point he is going to have her executed publicly in front of Haemon; finally he opts for entombing her alive, but eventually revokes even this decision. He is the perfect example of the type of tragic character Aristotle described as ‘consistently inconsistent’. (xviii)

The first edict that Creon pronounces, which has been presumably declared before the play’s actions begin, is in line with his duty and responsibility as newly-elected king, and seems just with regards to the laws of the land.<sup>8</sup> No one is allowed to lament or bury Polyneices, who has betrayed his city and fought against it. This is consistent with the practices of Sophocles’ own society, for Athenians sometimes refused to give burial “in Attic soil to traitors and temple robbers” (Rosivach 193). This law of non-burial, *nomos* (183), started shifting within “Greek warfare in the fifth and fourth centuries [...to] the practice of *anairesis*”, of respecting the dead of one’s enemy and allowing its burial, “whereby the losing side in a battle was able to recover its dead for burial under a truce

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<sup>8</sup> “[T]hough Creon’s edict precedes the first scene of the play, its implementation is dramatized as a reaction to the burial of [Antigone’s] brother” (Hogan 96). The edict must have been proclaimed before the start of the play because Antigone and Ismene are both aware of it at the very start of the first scene, and Antigone comes in prepared to challenge it and act as she sees fit with regards to Polyneices.

granted by the winners” (194). However, this sort of exchange was not obligatory, and the winning side in battle did not feel any particular responsibility toward the dead warriors of the fallen army. Full responsibility for collecting the fallen soldiers and ensuring their burial fell on those to whom the dead belonged, which was “a natural enough extension of the belief that the primary obligation for burial lay upon the next of kin” (195). The problem in *Antigone*, then, chiefly lies in the difficult fact that Polyneices is both a fallen soldier of the enemy and kin to the protagonists of the play, and a truce cannot be diplomatically reached between Antigone, Polyneices’ “next of kin”, and Creon, the victor in battle, because Creon, being the winner, denies the enemy the right to “collect their own dead” (195-6). In fact, this denial is indicated in Teiresias’ final angry speech condemning Creon to doom, in which he asserts that “Hatred for you is moving in those cities / Whose mangled sons had funeral-rites from dogs / Or from some bird of prey” (1080-2), and, although Hall notes that “there has been no previous suggestion that funeral rites were to be denied to any of the enemy corpses except that of Polyneices” (162), it seems that in Sophocles’ version of *Antigone* the bodies are left bare and rites of burial are refused to the entire Argive army to emphasize Creon’s harshness and brutality. Significantly, the enemy of Creon and, effectively, the state, is the Argive army, and “Creon’s only obligation in terms of *anairesis* would be to allow the Argives to recover their dead, including Polyneices [...] once they conceded defeat” (Rosivach 209), an obligation he appears to have done away with completely. Regardless of whether or not Creon had given the Argives permission to collect their dead, Antigone would not have had access to her brother’s remains since she is a Theban, and appealing to the enemy state for the body would have perhaps been a

greater trespass and crime than the unlawful burial inside Thebes, and certainly would have diminished the reader's sympathy with Antigone's character to nil.

Denial of burial was usually exploited "as a way of further punishing one's enemies after death. The intention here is not, as we are often told, to prevent the soul from finding eternal rest [...but rather] in order that their bodies [...] be torn apart by scavenger bird and beast. In these cases then exposure is simply one way of abusing the dead and cannot be separated from the broader issue of mutilation of all sorts performed to dishonor and disgrace the dead enemy" (Rosivach 196-7). But in Sophocles' time, "abusing one's former enemy was clearly no longer normal behavior" (199), and was definitely not acceptable.<sup>9</sup> As such, Creon's decision to leave the dead Polyneices above ground, particularly so that he can "be devoured / By dogs and birds, mangled most hideously", proves unnecessarily harsh, and takes the reader back to a tradition of hating the dead even after they die. His harshness is further emphasized by the fact that burial of traitors was not disallowed outside their city-states, "nor do historical cases or the extraordinary conditions of martial law [...] justify leaving the body to rot in the open" (196), although the use of such extreme measures as moving the body to another area seems to be rather uncommon (Morwood 38). It is unclear in the play where exactly the body is left to spoil, and whether it is kept within Thebes or at the city's borders; in any

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<sup>9</sup> Justification had to be made as to why it was no longer 'right' to abuse the dead and why it was obligatory to value the concept of *anairesis* in fifth century Athens. For this purpose, "eventually three major reasons [for this line of thought] evolved, that mistreatment of the dead was impious, that it was uncivilized (or, as the Greeks put it, unhellenic) and that it was pointless since the dead, being dead, no longer existed and hence could no longer be affected by the mistreatment of their bodies" (Rosivach 199). This third reason is in line with Hegel's explanation in his *Phenomenology*, discussed above.

case, it does not cross Antigone's mind to bury it elsewhere, and what concerns her first and foremost is that she complete the burial rites in order to lay Polyneices to rest.

Unlike Hall, Sophoclean critics such as William Calder find justification in Creon's actions and go to great lengths to defend his motivations and interests. Significantly, Calder starts his argument for Creon with the very title, stating that "[c]ertainly titles, whatever their source, were chosen without much thought for their relevance [...] Antigone is merely the first character who happens to speak and her name would have headed an ancient roll. The title is by no means evidence of the importance allotted Antigone by the author. The title by modern standards would be *Kreon*" (390). Mandel agrees, and points out that Creon is the "fully tragic hero [...] Indeed, it is not impossible to read the play as particularly concerned with him rather than with Antigone" (107-108). The argument here over who deserves more praise for their role, whose value, in terms of literary standing, is higher, and whether Creon or Antigone can be said to be the 'true' protagonist and hero of the play, completely misses the point of Sophocles' tragedy. The play completes itself through the interdependent existences of Antigone and Creon, for one cannot exist without the other. It is Antigone who tests Creon's character and word, and Creon's loyalty to the state that leads to her doom. As James Hogan notes, "[c]ritics [...] have imposed a choice upon themselves, feeling for one reason or another that the two antagonists cannot share the audience's sympathy; for the most part this attitude has entailed denying one of the two any sympathy at all" (94). For that matter, trying to understand the shortcomings of Creon as well as Antigone can help mitigate the wide gap between "feelings", religious or otherwise, that their disagreement has forged, and taking the perspective of the chorus,



who stand as neutral spectators to the action, returns “sympathy” to both - although this also means to neither.

Hogan, on the other hand, chooses to examine plot instead of focusing on the characters themselves. He concentrates on “crime, apprehension, and punishment” and divides the narrative into two plots, asserting that both are “characterized by emphatic personal decisions, effective action, and suffering”, which leads him to conclude that “Antigone dominates the first half [of the play], Creon the second” (95-6). Yet this perspective still entails examining two levels of the play, depicted by Hogan as separate plots, and creating a binary reading of the play when, in fact, it naturally runs its course of action as one whole. The tragedy of *Antigone* stems from this whole, the clash of two politically unequal but similarly forceful powers that can result only in the death and/or suffering of both parties. Death and suffering, as we shall see, also impact every single character in *Waiting for Godot* and *Endgame*. As Hegel notes, it is “not fate or the recovery or recognition of a terrible knowledge, but simply the irreconcilable conflict of two equal and opposed sets of values” that sets the “crisis” of the Greek tragedy in motion (qtd. in Bushnell 75).

Calder insists that Creon surely plays the protagonist because “the protagonist is the government”:

What... in purely political terms is the situation and what is the question that the situation poses? A transitional, war-time government - convinced of its own legitimacy and accepted by its citizens - passes legislation against enemies of the state. An agitator in high place without due process challenges the legitimacy of the legislation and denies the supremacy of the government [...H]ow must the

government deal with a challenge within the power élite that can be neither ignored nor quietly denied? (391)

Although the situation surely is “peculiarly unpleasant for the government” (392), it is quite debatable to what extent the basis of this political, problematic breach in loyalty within the “power élite” can be supported. In other words, has Creon truly been “accepted by [the] citizens” of Thebes? The chorus of Thebans rejoice and praise Dionysus after their victory against the Argives:

Victory, glorious Victory, smiling, welcome.  
Now, since danger is past,  
Thoughts of war shall pass from our minds.  
Come! let all thank the gods,  
Dancing before temple and shrine all through the night,  
Following thee, Theban Dionysus. (148-53)

But as soon as the news reaches Creon that the body of the traitor has been unlawfully buried, the Thebans quickly forget their “smiling” “Victory” and instead invoke the idea that the gods have done the deed, that “the hand of God” (279) has interfered with earthly matters and wishes Creon to act otherwise. In a sense, then, the chorus from the beginning question Creon’s edict and try to oppose it by turning specifically to explanations of the divine. Creon, then, is not a fully “accepted” sovereign yet, but a questionable one in need of proving himself capable of ruling and worthy of the power invested in his government. As his actions prove throughout the play, “danger” is still very much present within Thebes, especially the house of Labdacus (although Creon is related to Antigone and her siblings as brother to Iocasta, their mother, the curse of the

house follows his family too).<sup>10</sup> Throughout the play, Creon's edict, hence his "legitimacy", is questioned by the chorus of Theban elders, Antigone, Haemon, and finally Teiresias, to whom Creon yields solely. If the play does not aim at enlightening its reader on matters concerning right and wrong, earthly and divine, man and woman, protagonist and antagonist, and all such reductionist oppositions, and if it is read from a strictly political viewpoint, then Creon proves himself a real tyrant, unable to hold power with a steady temperament and too concerned with a narrow definition of the welfare of the state to act justly. His reaction to each opposing voice at Thebes is worth examining.

The first hints of Creon's inadequacy as ruler of Thebes surface in his reaction to the chorus' proposition that the gods had a hand in the first burial of Polyneices. The king sternly shuts their unanimous voice down: "Silence! or you will anger me. You are / An old man: must you be a fool as well?" (280-1). But insulting his contenders for their age seems a habit of Creon's, and is again the heart of the argument raised against his son when the latter appeals on Antigone's behalf; Creon cries, "What? men of our age go to school again / And take a lesson from a very boy?" (725-6), and becomes enraged by the youth's "disobedience" (730). There is no middle ground for Creon, no meeting of minds - the old are too old and their aging minds fail them, while the young are too young and their inexperience stalls their judgement, and so he alone is right in

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<sup>10</sup> Creon had previously lost his eldest son in order to save Thebes: "Ares was angry with the city because Cadmus had long ago killed a child of the god, the dragon from whose teeth, when sown in the earth, the Theban aristocracy had sprung. If the city were to be saved from Polyneices, one of the descendants of the 'sown men' must die in order to propitiate Ares. As a result, Creon's elder son [...] Megareus [...] had patriotically committed suicide" (Hall 162).

his word. Creon fails the state that he tries hard to protect because of this unyielding character. He himself admits that “from the first / There was a muttering against my edict, / Wagging of heads in secret, restiveness / And discontent with my authority.” (289-992), and he does little to address it or alleviate the people’s concern. Antigone is the only person, the “agitator in high place,” who voices Creon’s fears to his face. She admits her crime in a straightforward manner (443), a courageous act described as “fierce, / Defiant” by the chorus, who note early on that “she will not yield to any storm.” (471-2). Antigone defends her case, questions how Creon, “A man—could override the laws of Heaven”, and ends her testimony with a witty remark, that “if you think it folly, then perhaps / I am accused of folly by the fool.” (469-70), alluding to Creon’s rashness and temper. The muddling of foolishness and wisdom and interchange of angry insults between the protagonists (who each think they are wise, when indeed both are fools) can be compared to the insufferable banter between Estragon and Vladimir in *Waiting for Godot*, save for the gravity that Antigone and Creon’s situation demands and the tension resulting from their confrontation. (The outstanding difference, of course, rests in Estragon and Vladimir’s knowledge of their foolery, and their acceptance of the stale situation in which they live, a situation which will be extensively probed in the following chapter.) Creon finds insult not only in Antigone’s defiance, but also in her pride in what she has done:

This girl already  
Had fully learned the art of insolence  
When she transgressed the laws that I established;  
And now to that she adds a second outrage—  
To boast of what she did, and laugh at us. (479-83)

In his fury, Creon doubly accuses the sisters, choosing to believe that Ismene has also taken part in burying the hated body. Unjustly blamed, Ismene nevertheless decides to

take responsibility for the burial (536-7), but Antigone immediately denies her help - “No! Justice will not suffer that; for you / Refused, and I gave you no part in it.” (537-8). Her satisfaction in having buried the body, and as such completed her duty to the dead, shows her to be as arrogant as Creon, in that she feels superior for having excelled in her mission, just as Creon feels dominant in his authority to punish her disobedience.

Teiresias the seer proves to be the final test for Creon’s arrogance, and only he has the ability to ultimately stop the king’s madness and rage, albeit too late. The seer seeks out Creon after learning that the sacrifice he has offered to the gods at the altar has been refused, and “would not burn” (1007). He interprets this sign, as well as the “Strange and unnatural—birds screaming in rage” (1002), as a bad omen, and warns Creon as follows:

Sickness has come upon us, and the cause  
Is you: our altars and our sacred hearths  
Are all polluted by the dogs and birds  
That have been gorging on the fallen body  
Of Polyneices.  
[...] Be warned, my son. No man alive is free  
From error, but the wise and prudent man  
When he has fallen into evil courses  
Does not persist, but tries to find amendment.  
*It is the stubborn man who is the fool.*  
Yield to the dead, forbear to strike the fallen;  
To slay the slain, is that deed of valour? (1014-7, 1023-30; emphasis mine)

Teiresias here brings up the idea that “one can be said to contravene common Hellenic custom if he prevents his defeated enemies from burying their dead [...] while performing such burial on behalf of the defeated is commendable” (Rosivach 201). He urges the king to “yield to the dead” and become “the wise and prudent man” that he believes himself to be. However, Creon again proves to be “the stubborn man who is the fool” and finds Teiresias’ words deplorable. He quickly changes his mind about the seer from whom he had witnessed “much experience of [his] wisdom” (995), and accuses

him of peddling his words for gold and money, claiming that “even the cleverest men / Fall shamefully when for a little money / They use fair words to mask their villainy.” (1046-7). Creon’s failure to communicate again is manifest in his refusal to listen to any voice but his own, and his conviction that the cause of people’s opposition to his edict is money and gold obstructs him from thinking clearly.<sup>11</sup> Money similarly adds to the confusion and miscommunication in *Waiting for Godot*, specifically when Estragon tries to strike a good deal with the fallen Pozzo, who offers the protagonists monetary compensation in return for their help:

*Estragon: (aphoristic for once).* We are all born mad. Some remain so.  
*Pozzo:* Help! I’ll pay you!  
*Estragon:* How much?  
*Pozzo:* One hundred francs!  
*Estragon:* It’s not enough.  
*Vladimir:* I wouldn’t go so far as that.  
*Estragon:* You think it’s enough?  
*Vladimir:* No, I mean so far as to assert that I was weak in the head when I came into the world. But that is not the question.  
*Pozzo:* Two hundred!  
[...]  
*Pozzo:* Two hundred!  
*Vladimir:* We’re coming! (WFG 80-1)

As expected, Estragon and Vladimir fail in helping Pozzo to his feet, and the latter does not in any way compensate them for trying (nor, indeed, does it seem that he is able to even if he wanted). Estragon’s confusion here as to which topic is being addressed by his partner’s interjection is a repeated motif that runs in the entire play. Vladimir and Estragon continuously blather about past events and suddenly answer previously

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<sup>11</sup> In fact, Creon had earlier accused the guard who brought news of Polyneices’ burial of “selling [his] life for money” (322), and, strangely, blamed this material possession for his own problems: “Of all vile things / Current on earth, none is so vile as money.” (295-6).

abandoned questions during unrelated situations, which creates chaotic misunderstanding and a lot of frustration on everyone's part. Although contextually different from Creon's failure to communicate, the widespread miscommunication in *Waiting for Godot* works similarly effectively to expose the characters' thoughts and emotions.

Teiresias, disappointed and upset because of Creon's empty quibbling, brands him with the title he deserves, "tyrant", who profits from "the shameful use of power" (1056), and speaks of a hidden prophecy of destruction before storming out:

you will not live  
Through many circuits of the racing sun  
Before you give a child of your own body  
To make amends for murder, death for death;  
Because you have thrust down within the earth  
One who should walk upon it, and have lodged  
A living soul dishonourably in a tomb;  
And impiously have kept upon the earth  
Unburied and unblest one who belongs  
Neither to you nor to the upper gods  
But to the gods below, who are despoiled  
By you.  
[...] These are the arrows that I launch at you,  
Because you anger me. I shall not miss  
My aim, and you shall not escape their smart. (1064-74, 1085-7)

Creon, like the Theban elders, fears this prophecy, especially that "no single prophecy that [Teiresias] / Has made to Thebes has gone without fulfillment" (1093-4). At long last, the king understands after the seer's departure that "To yield is very hard, but to resist / And meet disaster, that is harder still." (1096-7) and is finally able to "moderate his violent tongue, and find / More understanding" (1089-90). If Creon had previously been unable to accept Haemon's advice, that "There's no disgrace, even if one is wise, / In learning more, and knowing when to yield." (710-11), he cannot but succumb to Teiresias' words within the frame of the play, because further stubbornness and

indifference to Antigone's cause would disturb the balance of the action. Had Creon not cared about the safety of his own son, the "child of [his] own body" who shall be used to "make amends for murder", specifically Antigone's murder, and had he left Antigone walled in her death chamber, it would not have been possible for "the audience [to be] 'with' Creon as he leaves; [for] in a race against time and his own folly he has become an underdog to whom our sympathy is ever more firmly extended" (Hogan 96). Interestingly enough, "*yielding* proves Creon is no Sophoclean hero" (99), since Creon sees the error in his judgement and tries, though late, to make amends for his mistakes (unlike Antigone, who "chose death" and remained "content" with her choice, 555, 73). Even more compelling is the fact that Creon tries to undo his verdict after *his* immediate family is threatened with danger, although he had still refused to yield when the city was polluted with "[s]ickness". As such, Creon, like Antigone, acts within the interests of the family and not the state. The ending of the play, then, can only be reached through this realization, that family affairs and state matters overlap and rely on one another for individuals to optimally and ideally function within the community (for an extended discussion on this, see Santirocco 194).

There remains little for Creon to learn at the close of the play. His whole family has perished, by suicide no less, and he is left weeping over the bodies of Haemon and Eurydice, his wife. "Unlike Antigone, however, Creon gets what he deserved, at least to some extent: he elicits little deep sympathy from the Theban elders who he has intimidated and bullied" (Segal 132); upon stating "[m]y life now is death. Lead me away from here," the chorus of elders can only respond, "[t]hat would be well, if anything is well. / Briefest is best when such disaster comes." (1322-4). And yet "[Creon] is given a reasonable basis for his decision, if not one as humane as



[Antigone's]. His refusal to listen to reason resembles her attitude, but gradually we see that he should yield, that his stubbornness is misguided, that male tenacity more than political principle maintains him" (Hogan 97). After Creon's return from the cavern, "the home of death" (1204) of Antigone, who hanged herself, and Haemon, who stabbed himself, the king lays his son's corpse on the ground and weeps for his loss, addressing the chorus of Thebans with his misfortune:

You behold, men of Thebes,  
The slayer, the slain; a father, a son.  
My own stubborn ways have borne bitter fruit.  
My son! Dead, my son! So soon torn from me,  
So young, so young!  
The fault only mine, not yours, O my son. (1264-9)<sup>12</sup>

But Haemon's death comes as no surprise, considering the angry, unnecessarily personal exchange of threats that had dominated the conversation between him and his father before; when Creon assures Haemon that "You shall not marry [Antigone] this side of the grave!" (750), the young man takes the promise literally and, with determination reminiscent of his betrothed, quickly decides that she "will not die alone" (751). Creon's inexplicable rage hinders him from seeing the seriousness of Haemon's words, and death falls upon his family because of ignorance and shortsightedness, and not just fate. Again, although the crisis arises from a political edict, the essence of the plot continuously proves itself to be familial and intimate in nature.

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<sup>12</sup> Haemon's choice of suicide is both interesting and comical: in what seems to be a rather impossible physical position to attain, he "lean[s] upon the blade" of his "double-hilted sword" and "[drives] it half its length into his body" (1234, 1232, 1235). One would think that perhaps his sword resembles more of a dagger for that to happen, but 1) the text mentions that Haemon swings the sword at Creon and tries to strike him, but he misses because the latter "leapt aside" (1233), which necessitates a lengthier blade for a jump to happen; and 2) Haemon is a prince, and carrying an ineffective weapon would ill suit him.

As Antigone fades from everyone's consciousness after her last pleas to the Thebans, Creon's wife, Eurydice, briefly enters the play to ask about the fate of her son.<sup>13</sup> Her words are few and she does not speak again, but instead kills herself "in grief" by "[driving] a blade into her heart" (1283). Matthew Santirocco understands the deaths in *Antigone* not as "retribution or punishment," but "as the logical consequence of the inadequate perception and pursuit of *dikē* [justice], that gap between justice as an absolute standard and man's attempt to achieve it" (193). Moreover, "Eurydice's death, like that of Haemon which it follows and by which it is caused, puts a final touch to Creon's sufferings." In a way, Teiresias' prophecy that "amends" have to be made, that the king needs to pay "death for death", surfaces again within this context, and destruction still follows Creon even beyond the initial promise of the death of a child. Eurydice's timely death does indeed aggravate Creon's pain, but it also serves another purpose at the play's ending:

[T]he episode may express the final statement about justice in the play [...] The death of a woman named "Wide-Justice" [Eury-dikē] may seem, to some readers at least, entirely fitting as a symbolic enactment of the play, an emblem of the fact that, while absolute justice exists, the conceptions of it by which men act are, finally, too narrow. (Santirocco 194)

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<sup>13</sup> Antigone's final entreaties have her invoking her position as an aristocrat: "You princes of Thebes, O look upon me / The last that remain of a line of kings!" (940-1). Arguably, Ismene, who is of equal status and also "of a line of kings", survives her, but Antigone seems to have long forgotten about her sister after shutting her out. Importantly, Antigone's name is no longer mentioned after she exits to her death chamber; she is alluded to as a "bride" by the messenger (1242), with specific attention given to her "dead body" and "white face" (1223, 1239). At the end, Creon does not bother bringing back her corpse to the palace, and the reader is (ironically) not told anything about her burial.

At the close of the play, neither Creon's nor Antigone's conception of justice proves to be the correct path toward achieving it. As a result, both protagonists suffer a high price for their stubbornness and unyielding nature: untimely death. It remains somewhat difficult, however, to fully empathize with Creon as one might with Antigone; after all, he consciously chooses to ignore the multiple signs warning him of his wrongdoing, and the suicides of Antigone, Haemon and Eurydice rest wholly on his harsh and tyrannical nature.<sup>14</sup> Hogan takes a more sympathetic approach in summing up Creon's place within the tragedy:

Creon must be taken seriously; if he is not truly 'heroic,' he is nonetheless a man whose mistake and misfortune are too close to Aristotelian norm to be dismissed. From an Aristotelian point of view [Creon's] fate represents a better paradigm for the tragic career than Antigone's. Yet he is denied dominance of the play by two factors, 1) a character which, especially early on, aims at too low a mark (his personal ambition is evident [...]), and 2) the contrast with Antigone's role as noble victim. (97)

Although Hogan's opinion rests on the assumption that Creon suits the role of tragic protagonist, in the traditional sense of the word, more so than Antigone (which in itself is a contestable claim), he makes a good point in directing attention to Aristotle in his discussion of the characters' tragic disposition. For Aristotle, a crucial aspect of any tragedy is the plot, and in his *Poetics* he emphasizes this significance as follows:

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<sup>14</sup> Santirocco informatively notes that "of the six suicides in Sophocles' seven extant plays, no fewer than three are in the *Antigone*" (193), which makes the play essentially heavy in its subject matter and difficult to fully digest, hence the varied and often intensely opposing opinions and stances taken by scholars of the play.

[t]he most important [... feature of tragedy] is the arrangement of the incidents, for tragedy is not a representation of men but of a piece of action, of life, of happiness and unhappiness, which come under the head of action, and the end aimed at is the representation not of qualities of character but of some action; *and while character makes men what they are, it is their actions and experiences that make them happy or the opposite.* They do not therefore act to represent character, but character-study is included for the sake of the action. *It follows that the incidents and the plot are the end at which tragedy aims, and in everything the end aimed at is of prime importance.* (Fyfe 25-7; emphasis mine)

In this thesis, I read Sophocles' *Antigone* as a paradigmatic Greek tragedy of exceptional quality and significance, and the reason behind its suitable fit with Aristotelian discourse is Aristotle's own reliance on Sophoclean example for the production of his theories on tragedy. On the other hand, Beckett's plays, specifically *Waiting for Godot* and *Endgame*, continue to generate debate about the genre to which they belong and criticism with regards to their meaning and purpose, in terms of both situating the characters within their narratives and situating the plays with respect to other contemporary works. To be sure, Beckett's plays present the reader with a very different kind of dramatic work than Sophocles' text, yet saying that the former are markedly separate from "tragedy" in its Aristotelian sense would underestimate the texts and somewhat devalue them. For Aristotle, "tragedy is not a representation of men *but of a piece of action, of life, of happiness and unhappiness*" (emphasis mine). To a great extent, *Waiting for Godot* and *Endgame* represent the "life" of men, what brings them "happiness and unhappiness", and if this does not pass as "a piece of action" per se (and "action" is always problematic for scholars dealing with Beckett) then it is

questionable what else could. Happiness and unhappiness are muddled in these plays, and through the confusion and indeterminacy of the characters themselves Beckett demands that readers question their own lives, question their knowledge and beliefs, even if they, like Vladimir, Estragon, Hamm and Clov, reach an inconclusive end.

As opposed to the many academics who read Beckett's plays as exclusively "post-tragic" literature (Eagleton 64), the present work aims to show that, when studied closely, the playwright's texts utilize and expand on several key elements that create tragedy in its conventional, Aristotelian sense. Moreover, when examining thematic elements in Sophocles' *Antigone*, which represents a model of classical Greek tragedy, and Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* and *Endgame*, which are categorized as modern literature, a number of strong connections arise among these otherwise vastly differing dramatic works. Confusion spreads throughout *Waiting for Godot* due to problems in communication, problems that are also prevalent in *Antigone* whether between the protagonists themselves or other members of the narrative (for example, miscommunication occurs between Antigone and Ismene, Creon and Haemon, Creon and the chorus, etc.). Family and familial relationships, which Antigone grants utmost importance, are critically scrutinized and reevaluated in *Endgame*, where familial duty is the only bond that obliges the characters to remain together. Another connection can be made between Antigone's preoccupation with burying the body of her deceased brother and covering it with earth, and the characters' unrepressed fear of death and obsession with grave-diggers in *Waiting for Godot*. The delicate discussion of earth as the final resting place further continues in Beckett's *Endgame*, where Hamm, especially, expects to end and die at any moment. Beckett's plays also deal with a division between the public and private spheres of life, though it is not as pronounced and central as it is

in *Antigone*. Lastly, the necessity of suffering ties all three of these major works of literature together and reasserts their deserved title of ‘tragedy’.

With regards to *Waiting for Godot*, the most famed critique - an attack of sorts - of the play has come from Vivian Mercier, who exasperatedly remarks that “nothing happens, twice” (Graver 58). This sort of view dwells in the mind of the theatregoer, who is likely to exit the theatre in a state of confusion and understandable perplexity, seeing as Beckett’s work forces undesired laughter on the part of the audience as well as the characters themselves even in the most miserable of situations. But a closer reading of his text opens space for further interpretation and analysis: although comic elements are certainly present and noteworthy, aspects of Aristotelian tragedy are found in the play, including plot, character and dialogue, all of which, on face value, seem to be effaced by repetition, confusion, and a marked absence of time. The next chapter turns to a discussion of Beckett’s *Waiting for Godot* and tries to explicate the tragedy intertwined within the folds of its pages.

### III. “NOTHING TO BE DONE”: TRAGIC INACTION IN *WAITING FOR GODOT*

Aristotle asserts that “the incidents and the plot are the end at which tragedy aims, and in everything the end aimed at is of prime importance” (Fyfe 25-7). If *Waiting for Godot* can indeed be labelled a tragedy, what is the central plot of the play that exudes enough tragic elements to be described as such? How do the characters, and thus the play as a whole, depict tragedy in its traditional form? And if the play can be discussed in terms of Aristotle’s definitions of tragedy, how does it arouse enough “pity and fear”, and in whom? The play can be summed up succinctly as a story of waiting or, more precisely, “what people do to pass the time while waiting” (Graver 58), for the protagonists’ sole purpose within the text is to wait for the arrival of the ambiguous Godot.<sup>15</sup> Vladimir and Estragon, the protagonists of the play, become increasingly inventive between acts one and two as they seek to find distractions with which to bide their time, time that they’re trying to get rid of and escape. They try nearly everything: eating carrots and radishes, contemplating suicide, taking off boots, inspecting their bowler hats, admiring the singular tree (and only identifiable feature in the landscape), arguing, embracing, forgetting, remembering, conversing with the lunatic Pozzo and his

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<sup>15</sup> In his *Theatre of the Absurd*, Martin Esslin states that “the subject of the play is not Godot but waiting” (qtd. in Busi 5). I tend to agree more with Graver’s conclusion, that the “central subject” (58) of the play is, more precisely, a portrayal of what the characters do *while* waiting, and not waiting in itself. Importantly, Graver asserts that “Beckett’s French title, *En Attendant Godot*, *While Waiting for Godot*, is a more precise rendering than the title that he gave to his English translation. Thoughts about the interim, the provisional, what happens ‘in the meantime’ are more relevant to the adventures of Vladimir and Estragon than notions of termination, attainment, and closure. Approached in this way, the play becomes a far richer and more suggestive work than it would be if Godot were interpreted as a single, definable entity: as God, for instance, or as a liberator from some specific tyranny or exile (the Nazi occupation of France or separation from one’s homeland)” (43-4).

slave Lucky, and even putting on a show, in mimicry of the two daily visitors, for entertainment. As predicted, Godot does not physically arrive; but it is of little matter whether or not he does arrive, for time keeps passing and the two characters, sometimes fools and at other times philosophers, live on another day. As opposed to the witticism that “nothing happens, twice”, then, the two acts witness ample movement consisting of verbal banter and physical action alike, and certain changes are manifest as the play continues.

Godot’s identity remains unknown as the play closes, with the characters left waiting for an unidentifiable figure to appear before them so that they can “be saved” (*WFG* 94).<sup>16</sup> Vladimir and Estragon are constantly confused about who, exactly, they’re waiting for, and find in any passerby a likely candidate for their search - “anyone who comes might be taken for the one who is expected” (Kennedy 19), and even Pozzo is at first mistakenly identified as Godot. At the start of the play, “Godot exists entirely as a creature perceived in all earnestness by Vladimir and Estragon” (Graver 42), who sometimes view the awaited savior as a human benefactor, and at other times, as a divine being. At the beginning of act one, Godot appears as a mortal man invested with power and of great wealth:

*Vladimir:* I’m curious to hear what he has to offer. Then we’ll take it or leave it.

*Estragon:* What exactly did we ask him for?

*Vladimir:* Were you not there?

*Estragon:* I can’t have been listening.

*Vladimir:* Oh... nothing very definite.

*Estragon:* A kind of prayer.

*Vladimir:* Precisely.

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<sup>16</sup> Beckett himself had once professed in a conversation with Alan Schneider that he knew nothing of Godot’s identity: “If I knew, I would have said so in the play” (qtd. in Busi 4).



*Estragon:* A vague supplication.  
*Vladimir:* Exactly.  
*Estragon:* And what did he reply?  
*Vladimir:* That he'd see.  
*Estragon:* That he couldn't promise anything.  
*Vladimir:* That he'd have to think it over.  
*Estragon:* In the quiet of his home.  
*Vladimir:* Consult his family.  
*Estragon:* His friends.  
*Vladimir:* His agents.  
*Estragon:* His correspondents.  
*Vladimir:* His books.  
*Estragon:* His bank account.  
*Vladimir:* Before taking a decision.  
*Estragon:* It's the normal thing.  
*Vladimir:* Is it not? (WFG 18-19)

Even with his failing memory, Estragon still retains the ability to understand that the awaited Godot is a man who demands seriousness and respect; after all, he has social ties and relations, “family”, “friends”, “agents”, “correspondents”, as well as material possessions, “books”, a “home” and a “bank account”, all of which are nonexistent in the lives of Estragon and Vladimir. Surely, then, the wealthy, absent man could help the two needy characters who have been asking for assistance, for not much more than “a kind of prayer”, “a vague supplication”. The deferral of Godot’s final decision is of course “the normal thing” expected of such a character, for he needs time to “think [things] over” before giving a definite reply. And yet this little chat between the two could very possibly be another fault of memory embellished with extra details that have never been and might never be supported by any witness, least of all Godot himself. Shortly after the discussion of Godot’s possessions and privileges, Vladimir turns again to glorifying him in a manner reminiscent of kings and gods:

*Estragon:* (*anxious*). And we? [...] Where do we come in?  
*Vladimir:* Come in?  
*Estragon:* Take your time.  
*Vladimir:* Come in? On our hands and knees.  
*Estragon:* As bad as that?

*Vladimir:* Your Worship wishes to assert his prerogatives?  
*Estragon:* We've no rights anymore?  
*Laugh of Vladimir, stifled as before, less the smile.*  
*Vladimir:* You'd make me laugh, if it wasn't prohibited.  
*Estragon:* We've lost our rights?  
*Vladimir:* (*distinctly*). We got rid of them.  
*Silence. They remain motionless, arms dangling, heads sunk, sagging at the knees.* (19)

Here, Vladimir upgrades Godot to the rank of a deity (they shall come before him on “hands and knees”). However, it is crucial to note that Godot is “not a figure for God or for immortality or, conversely, for the absence of these; he or it is a term within an imagined structure of life as we would feel or experience it if we were reduced, as Didi and Gogo are, to sheer, naked, non-contingent being” (Gilman 242). This passage also draws attention to the low social status of Estragon and Vladimir. They have gotten rid of their rights, so much so that even laughter is now “prohibited”. Importantly, as Graver notes, here “laughter becomes a mode of expression that for an unstated reason isn't permitted any more. Only smiles are allowed, and they are not the same thing, the implication being that the situation in which the two men now find themselves is too serious a matter for laughter, while smiling is too modest a response to the dilemma” (31). The stage directions that they “remain motionless, arms dangling, heads sunk, sagging at the knees” portray the two as not only failing, but also hopeless. For a few, brief seconds after the end of their self-reflection, Estragon and Vladimir are fully aware of their inability to change the status quo, to do something, to effect an alternative way of being. Beckett himself described his experience of living as being that of a “non-knower, a non-can-er (somebody who cannot)” (qtd. in McDonald 127), and seems to have translated this experience onto the page, for his protagonists are incapable of doing anything, not because they do not want to, but because they cannot.

Vladimir and Estragon's 'non-knowing' also surfaces in their confusion regarding the physical appearance of the Godot for whom they wait. At the close of the second act, Vladimir asks the messenger boy, who seemingly meets with them every night, if the unknown figure has a beard: "Fair or... (*he hesitates*)... or black?" to which the boy replies, "I think it's white, sir" (*WFG* 92). As a matter of fact, Vladimir and Estragon don't know anything about what Godot might look like, and in the beginning they mistake Pozzo for Godot. Their ignorance regarding the matter is marked by Pozzo's intrusiveness:

*Pozzo: (peremptory).* Who is Godot?

*Estragon:* Godot?

*Pozzo:* You took me for Godot.

*Estragon:* Oh no, sir, not for an instant, sir.

*Pozzo:* Who is he?

*Vladimir:* Oh, he's a... he's a kind of acquaintance.

*Estragon:* Nothing of the kind, we hardly know him.

*Vladimir:* True... we don't know him very well... but all the same...

*Estragon:* Personally I wouldn't even know him if I saw him.

*Pozzo:* You took me for him.

*Estragon: (recoiling before Pozzo).* That's to say... you understand... the dusk... the strain... waiting... I confess... I imagined... for a second... (23)

Estragon's confession that he "imagined" Pozzo to be Godot furthers the argument that Godot could be anyone, and indeed anything. Effectively, "Godot has become a concept" (Graver 43) that dwells unwaveringly in the consciousness of the protagonists, who rely on the repetition of this ritualistically failing promise to get through each day; for Vladimir and Estragon, the *promise* of Godot's arrival is the essential component of their wait, and the failure of that promise is barely important. And so they wait, endlessly, for someone or something to help them out of their inability, their "non-cancer" status, and in their wait "meaning" and "significance" unfurl and then evaporate as they continue on being. Ultimately, "[a]ll attempts to establish Godot's identity encounter Beckett's insistence that if he had known he would have said - which of

course may or may not be true. At any rate, God, Godin, the millennium, death, salvation, Judgement day - the slate of candidates is as endless as waiting” (Calderwood 36), and waiting is all that remains.

In their search for meaning, Vladimir and Estragon prove themselves to be wise fools, enjoying refined conversation and intellectual stimulation yet limited by their bodily ailments and dysfunctional lines of communication. As Wolfgang Iser notes:

Vladimir and Estragon, the main characters, both seem to be tramps; we learn right at the beginning that Estragon spent the night in a ditch. But they also seem like clowns, as many critics have pointed out, although in fact neither ‘tramp’ nor ‘clown’ is ever mentioned in the text. This clowning effect comes about through their constant failures and through their inability to learn from their failures, as evidenced by their endless repetitions. (56)

Describing Vladimir and Estragon as “clowns” is quite reasonable in this context, especially considering the comedy routines in which they immerse themselves.<sup>17</sup> However, using the word “tramp” is questionable: a ‘tramp’, in its definitional meaning, is “one who travels from place to place on foot, in search of employment, or as a vagrant” (“tramp, n.1.” *OED Online*), but Vladimir and Estragon are more likely tired and helpless, almost dead in life, than unemployed or following the lifestyle of beggars,

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<sup>17</sup> “Physical comedy [...] is found in such things as falling and stumbling, and in the voyeurism of Estragon. On a somewhat higher level, we have linguistic comedy coming from repetitions, puns, misunderstandings, scatological word play and from ceremonial and ritualistic uses of language. From vaudeville we have the linguistic routines, the hat exchange, the fallen pants, the unzipped fly, the general outlandish clothing of the characters, including their derbies [...] and *commedia dell’arte* as well as pantomime give us the stock farcical characters, certainly the clowns [...] reflected in Estragon and Vladimir” (Cormier & Pallister 97).

especially considering the lack of any tangible mechanism of survival within the play (in the sense that ‘employment’ is not an option). Estragon might have previously been a poet (“You should have been a poet”, pipes Vladimir, to which Estragon answers, “I was. (*Gesture towards his rags*). Isn’t that obvious.”, *WFG* 12), and Vladimir is mysteriously addressed as “Mister Albert” twice by the messenger boy, which rouses curiosity as to who, exactly, Vladimir really is. Still, the supply of carrots, turnips and radishes inside Didi’s pocket is almost magically replenished overnight, every night, and one might correctly assume that, contrary to his protest that “We are not beggars!” (39), he, at least, is a vagrant.

The physical constraints imposed on the characters, which are likely due to old age, bring about laughter and merriment because of the comic potential on which the two men act: Estragon struggles heavily with his boots and sore feet, and Vladimir walks and later sleeps with difficulty because he cannot fully control his bladder. While trying to take off the boot, Estragon “pulls at it with both hands, panting. He gives up, exhausted, rests, tries again. As before.”, and determinedly exclaims, “Nothing to be done” (*WFG* 9). Vladimir, in pain, walks in “with short, stiff strides, legs wide apart” (9), and Estragon later admits, sadly, that “you piss better when I’m not there” (59), which, ludicrous as it sounds, allows the characters a chance to bide their time in self-loathing practices while also reminding the reader of the protagonists’ failing mechanical, bodily functions. And yet, beyond the commonplace complaints of uncontrolled bladders and painful feet, Vladimir and Estragon weave together intellectually demanding conversations at several instances throughout the play, and Vladimir, especially, produces thought-provoking pieces of philosophical meditation without hesitation or loss of words.

In the first act of the play, Pozzo suffers a mini-breakdown and wails about the misfortune of having Lucky as a slave, for he “used to be so kind... so helpful... and entertaining... my good angel”, but “now... he’s killing me” (34), partly because he’s grown tired with old age and mostly because “it’s not his job” (26) to work as a “menial” (87). After the onset of this manic episode, Vladimir and Estragon look onto the pair of visitors as a spectacle, a performance of sorts, and decide to engage in a brief assessment of the entertainment:

*Vladimir:* Charming evening we’re having.

*Estragon:* Unforgettable.

*Vladimir:* And it’s not over.

*Estragon:* Apparently not.

*Vladimir:* It’s only beginning.

*Estragon:* It’s awful.

*Vladimir:* Worse than the pantomime.

*Estragon:* The circus.

*Vladimir:* The music-hall.

*Estragon:* The circus.

*Pozzo:* What can I have done with that briar?

*Estragon:* He’s a scream. He’s lost his dudeen.

*Laughs noisily.*

*Vladimir:* I’ll be back.

*He hastens towards the wings.*

*Estragon:* End of the corridor, on the left.

*Vladimir:* Keep my seat.

*Exit Vladimir.*

*Pozzo:* I’ve lost my Kapp and Peterson!

*Estragon:* (*convulsed with merriment*). He’ll be the death of me!

*Pozzo:* (*looking up*). You didn’t by any chance see—(*He misses Vladimir.*) Oh! He’s gone! Without saying good-bye! How could he! He might have waited!

*Estragon:* He would have burst. (34-5)

The discussion as a whole portrays a sort of self-reflection regarding the protagonists’ place onstage, and regarding theatre itself: Pozzo, who abuses his partner and gradually misplaces and loses his material possessions, including his pipe (35), vaporizer (40), and precious watch (he eventually convinces himself that he “must have left it in the manor”, 46), resembles a performer on the stage, present for others’ entertainment. His

performance is “worse than the pantomime”, “unforgettable”, and quite “awful”, but it’s sufficient to elicit noisy laughter from Estragon. Vladimir’s bladder problems are brought up again, and he runs out to the bathroom while shouting back “keep my seat”. Indeed, “he would have burst” if he hadn’t done so, with a double play on what, exactly, would have burst - his bladder or his patience with the stale show. Through such a high degree of self-awareness, which is expected of characters whose only function in life is to think about being alive, Vladimir and Estragon engage in self-criticism that tries to ease the tension (and boredom) of their being where they are.<sup>18</sup> Importantly, Vladimir manages to actually exit the stage, even though he’s the one who repeatedly insists that “we’re waiting for Godot” throughout the play and, as such, binds Estragon next to him. Taking on the role of the spectator, he no longer feels tied to the inconsequential waiting that is central to what he does. Of course, this exit is only meaningful in the context of their self-criticism, for Vladimir and Estragon are always attached to their waiting, and the pretend-play simply provides another escape to pass the time, further extending their suffering and despair.

The comic farce which requires a laugh or at least a passing chuckle deepens the sense of dread in relation to the play as a whole: in trying to laugh away the insufferable situation in which they live, Estragon and Vladimir are actually postponing their acknowledgement of the tragedy present within their days. Their “tragedy” is not

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<sup>18</sup> “Beckett’s amused disdain for the work of criticism and interpretation surfaces through his work”, Connor notes (1), and the sentiment again appears distinctly in the shouting match between Estragon and Vladimir, when Estragon excitedly declares that “[t]hat’s the idea, let’s abuse each other” and “with finality” ends Vladimir’s career by screaming “Critic!”, to which the latter “wilts, vanquished, and turns away”, since there can be no greater disparaging insult with which to accuse someone (*WFG* 75).

necessarily only tied to “pity and fear”, or “action”, or tales of “happiness and unhappiness”, as discussed in Aristotle’s *Poetics*, but also to the enveloping suffering from a world indifferent to their actions and thoughts, their knick-knacks, their ‘performances’ and, importantly, their failures. Significantly, “the laughter of the characters themselves destroys their own interpretations of precarious situations, for they seem to know that their unhappiness will only increase if they continue to seek compensatory resolutions” (Iser 67), resolutions such as unsuccessfully trying to part ways to see whether they would be “better off alone, each one for himself” (*WFG* 53), unsuccessfully trying to sleep (15, 92), and, on Estragon’s part at least, wondering, in vain, what would happen should they simply go:

*Estragon*: And if we dropped him? (*Pause.*) If we dropped him?

*Vladimir*: He’d punish us. (*Silence. He looks at the tree.*) Everything’s dead but the tree. (93)

The supposition that “he’d punish us”, which contradicts Vladimir and Estragon’s earlier belief that Godot could “save” them and suddenly changes the situation from one of hope (they were very much “curious to hear what he has to offer”) to one of fear (they could be made to suffer worse, if that is even possible), feels like a convincing enough reason for them to stay bound to their “appointment”. How Godot intends to exercise his punishment, when indeed the two protagonists cannot even recall whether or not he has shown up on any given day, remains, similar to the “Mr. Albert” title and the magically replenishing supply of radishes, a mystery. The possibility of punishment by Godot here is the first and only mention of an external threat and source of suffering for the characters; all previous complaints of physical pain, such as Gogo’s sore feet, and emotional pain, such as Didi’s loneliness, have been caused by the characters themselves, and not by anyone or anything outside their small, limited world (Pozzo can



also be included under this list). Moreover, the play closes soon after this interaction, leaving the question of whether Godot is actually capable of harming the two clown-tramps unanswered (of course, it is also arguable that Godot is already harming Vladimir and Estragon and has been punishing them all their lives, by virtue of his continued absence and their endless waiting, which has led to their physical deterioration and mental incapacitation). But the threat of outside interference with their repetitive, cyclical lives is cut short, and Vladimir swiftly shifts the focus back to his own, solitary cause of suffering by looking up at the only marker of change within his diminishing world and exclaiming: “Everything’s dead but the tree”. He reminds his companion Estragon that they are already “dead”, and, like Antigone, “Unwept, unwedded and unbefriended, / Alone, pitilessly used” (876-7), they stand their ground, suffer alone, and await the end.

In the second act of the play, Vladimir passes through moments resembling enlightenment, and speaks in well-versed phrases with an air of complete comprehension. As expected, that semblance quickly breaks down and typical confusion soon after reclaims the narrative, but this time with a nagging sense that Vladimir and even Estragon, too, are fully aware of their unfortunate state of being. In a surprising bout of energy, Vladimir urges himself and Estragon to act in aid of Pozzo, who has fallen to the ground and cannot get up:

*Vladimir:* Let us not waste our time in idle discourse! (*Pause. Vehemently.*) Let us do something, while we have the chance! It is not every day that we are needed. Not indeed that we personally are needed. Others would meet the case equally well, if not better. To all mankind they were addressed, those cries for help still ringing in our ears! But at this place, at this moment of time, all mankind is us, whether we like it or not. Let us make the most of it, before it is too late! Let us represent worthily for once the foul brood to which a cruel fate consigned us! [...] What are we doing here, *that* is the question. And we are blessed in this, that we happen to know the answer. Yes, in this immense confusion one thing alone is clear. We are waiting for Godot to come—

*Estragon: Ah! (79-80)*

Vladimir summarizes the plot of the play in his declaration that “one thing alone is clear. We are waiting for Godot to come”. His excited wonderment - “[w]hat are we doing here, *that* is the question” - poses a reformulation of Shakespeare’s famous ‘to be, or not to be’ line. Vladimir summons Hamlet to his side by borrowing from the tragic hero’s soliloquy on death, which reads:

To be, or not to be; that is the question:  
Whether ’tis nobler in the mind to suffer  
The slings and arrows of outrageous fortune,  
Or to take arms against a sea of troubles,  
And, by opposing, end them. To die, to sleep—  
No more, and by a sleep to say we end  
The heartache and the thousand natural shocks  
That flesh is heir to—’tis a consummation  
Devoutly to be wished. To die, to sleep.  
To sleep, perchance to dream. (*Hamlet* 3.1.56-65)

Erroneously interpreting Hamlet’s true intentions within the failing recesses of his mind, Vladimir ironically turns that fashionable quote of classic tragic literature - “To be, or not to be; that is the question” - on its head in his own speech. Hamlet, in his despair, questions, “in the tradition of melancholy, whether human life is worth living” (Alexander 142). He believes that death - that eternal sleep - ends “[t]he heartache and the thousand natural shocks / That flesh is heir to”, “shocks” with which both Vladimir and Estragon are all too familiar. In all earnestness, Hamlet contemplates ending his life and reaching death, “a consummation / Devoutly to be wished” by himself as well as the characters of *Waiting for Godot*. Instead of voicing his deep anguish and hopelessness from a life spent waiting in inaction (anguish which he has been contemplating and complaining about throughout the entire play, no less) and keeping in line with Hamlet’s sentiments, Vladimir sarcastically decides to ask “What are we doing here, *that* is the question” in the sole dialogue meant to encourage himself and his companion

to “do something”, “make the most of it”, seize the moment, take action and manifest change in their lives. In a narrative ultimately concerned with despair, suffering, and death, Vladimir mockingly borrows the most tragic line from a most tragic hero and inserts it into the only positive speech in the text, one that tries (and fails) to rekindle the lives of the clown-tramps with a glimmer of hope. Beckett’s allusion to Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* provides another liaison between his modern text and the tragic tradition - not only that of ancient Greek tragedy, but also of Elizabethan drama - and confirms his conscious dialogic attempts at engaging with a long and heavily-laden history of tragedy.

Through his speech Vladimir reasserts that he wants to be, wants to encourage his friend and companion Estragon to also be, and wants to affirm this being through helping another living person: Pozzo. The statement works within the narrative as a moment of profound understanding for the protagonist, who finds his place within the play, a world that can only be described as “immense confusion”. Vladimir continues his enlightened train of thought, and this time Estragon also voices a relatively solid opinion on the matter:

*Vladimir:* Or for night to fall. (*Pause.*) We have kept our appointment, and that’s an end to that. We are not saints, but we have kept our appointment. How many people can boast as much?

*Estragon:* Billions.

*Vladimir:* You think so?

*Estragon:* I don’t know.

*Vladimir:* You may be right [...] All I know is that the hours are long, under these conditions, and constrain us to beguile them with proceedings which—how shall I say—which may at first sight seem reasonable, until they become a habit. You may say it is to prevent our reason from foundering. No doubt. But has it not long been straying in the night without end of the abyssal depths? That’s what I sometimes wonder. You follow my reasoning?

*Estragon:* (*aphoristic for once*). We are all born mad. Some remain so. (*WFG 80*)

Relative to his usual trite banter and indeterminacy, Vladimir's uncharacteristically stylish use of language and reassertion that the couple of fools are simply wasting their time with small, useless matters so as "to prevent [...] reason from foundering" gives some proof that change has happened within the timeline of the play. Moreover, Estragon's near-philosophical proclamation that "We are all born mad. Some remain so" provides one more reference to the remark that he had previously been a poet, which, as everything in the play, might or might not be true. In any case, Estragon's assertion that "Billions" are able to "boast" about their keeping their "appointment" is significant in this context, for "the fact that they have kept their appointment lends both merit and desperation to their waiting [...] it is rather heroically pathetic that they wait for a future that has failed them (as they might say) if not once, always. Ultimately, keeping their appointment suggests merely their having been born along with billions of others into a world where all appointments have the character of one hand clapping" (Calderwood 33-4), which, in a sense, is action in desperation without avail. But, as Vladimir almost convinces himself, it is not the outcome of the action that matters, but the very commitment to the action - its doing - that makes a difference: "Let us do something, while we have the chance", and while we physically and mentally can.

Cormier and Pallister suggest an alternative method for discussing the identity and role of the protagonists, including Pozzo and Lucky, in the play. They assert that "the play's four characters, taken together, portray universal man as he confronts the world we live in" and that "[u]niversal man as portrayed by Beckett is a finite being" (5). Finite as they are, though, Vladimir and Estragon differ greatly from Pozzo and Lucky, the master-and-slave pair who frighten the protagonists at the beginning but later become a source of entertainment. Vladimir and Estragon "are aging and weary; they

appear to be inseparably linked as a pair, in the symbiotic love-hate relationship of a couple” (Kennedy 16-7), whereas, “[p]olitically speaking, Pozzo and Lucky represent the tyrant and the slave. Pozzo, embodying the authority associated with the head of government, is an affluent property owner. It is he who owns the land adjacent to the road where Vladimir and Estragon await Godot” (Cormier & Pallister 11). Differences between the public and the private spheres of life here emerge with this distinction between the two polar couples: Pozzo, like Creon, represents the public domain by virtue of his ownership of material property, such as the “land adjacent to the road”, a pipe, a watch, and hundreds of francs, as well as human property - namely, his slave Lucky. In contrast, Vladimir and Estragon’s partnership resembles the “instinctive family-love” that Hegel discusses in relation to *Antigone* (qtd. in Faas 14), a love which directs their needs and actions: even though Vladimir and Estragon are not “family” per se, they certainly behave in a manner reminiscent of the familial duty and “family-love” that appears to tie Antigone to her traitorous deceased brother.

Estragon and Vladimir’s relationship is marked by a sense of caring, one of mutual dependence and need: Estragon continually wonders what it would be like to part with his friend Vladimir, but cannot commit to that act and always returns. The two consistently argue and then embrace, and their gestures work as an additional method to pass the time, but something within the interaction is nevertheless quite authentic:

*Estragon:* Don’t touch me! Don’t question me! Don’t speak to me! Stay with me!

*Vladimir:* Did I ever leave you?

*Estragon:* You let me go.

*Vladimir:* [...] Will you look at me!

*Estragon raises his head. They look long at each other, then suddenly embrace, clapping each other on the back. End of embrace. Estragon, no longer supported, almost falls. (WFG 58)*

Their interdependency is sincere, for they hold equal power in their “love-hate relationship”. As much as Estragon needs Vladimir, Vladimir needs Estragon: the former feels lonely when Estragon falls asleep (*WFG* 15), and although he later admits that “I missed you... and at the same time I was happy” (59), he never conclusively departs from his partner. On the contrary, Vladimir is the one who insists on their embracing at the beginning of each act (the morning of each day), and feels hurt by Estragon’s rejection (9, 58). Pozzo and Lucky, on the other hand, share no such bond. They are neither interdependent nor do they rely on one another for sustenance. Pozzo mistreats Lucky in every possible way, so much that “[t]he verbal and physical abuse to which Pozzo subjects Lucky, a treatment that Pozzo himself recognizes as being inhuman, has resulted in Lucky’s dehumanization, in his being deprived of every scrap of dignity, even that commonly given an animal” (Cormier & Pallister 11). In Sophocles’ *Antigone*, “the tyrant and the slave” image similarly surfaces during Creon’s confrontation with Antigone, where he shouts, “There is no room for pride / In one who is a slave” (478-9) after being enraged by the woman’s unapologetic, outright confession of her crime. Creon’s demotion of Antigone to the ranks of “slave” could be interpreted in terms of gender lines, but the title also extends a sense of humiliation to the daughter of Oedipus and the Labdacus family, who have ruled Thebes for years. Ultimately, it is Polyneices who is truly “deprived of every scrap of dignity, even that commonly given an animal” through the denial of giving burial to his body, and Antigone’s contestation that “It was a brother, not a slave who died!” (517) does little to retrieve the humanity stripped off her sibling by Creon.

Pozzo’s physical mistreatment of Lucky is evident throughout *Waiting for Godot*. When asked about the contents of the bag Lucky is forced to carry, Pozzo

answers “sand” (*WFG* 89) and does not provide further explanation, lightly assuming that lugging around a suitcase full of dirt is quite a reasonable thing to do; he throws chicken bones to Lucky in place of meals (27); and he directs his slave’s movement by means of a whip. Pozzo tortures Lucky and violates him, but openly confesses that he depends on him immensely, even to the extent of knowledge: “Guess who taught me all these beautiful things. (*Pause. Pointing to Lucky.*) My Lucky! [...] But for him all my thoughts, all my feelings, would have been of common things” (33). After draining him of his intellectual energies, Pozzo exhausts Lucky’s physical body and slowly robs him of his health. Why Lucky stays with Pozzo and endures this suffering, however, remains unclear within the narrative, especially since he does not partake in the dialogue and conversations that the other three hold. As such, complete “dehumanization” and destruction of his “dignity” might be the only plausible explanations for the slave’s submission to Pozzo’s tyranny.

There is one instance in which Lucky does speak. In fact, he is ordered to do so. Throughout his lengthy speech, Lucky dithers, stumbles on his words, and still somehow manages to utter phrases containing fragmented meaning which, in retrospect, reverberates throughout the entire play. Of these, for example, Lucky mentions “a personal God quaquaquaqu with white beard quaquaquaqu outside time without extension who from the heights of divine apathia divine athambia divine aphasia loves us dearly with some exceptions for reasons unknown” (*WFG* 42-3). The “personal God” that Vladimir and Estragon are forever waiting for also has a “white beard” and is presumed to “love” everyone “dearly”, with the exception of Vladimir and Estragon, “for reasons unknown” and as a result, perhaps, of a “cruel fate” to which they have been “consigned”. The characters may likewise be said to exist “outside time” in their

endless, fruitless waiting, and most of their chaotic confusion results directly from the absence of an ability to tell time in their unknown world.<sup>19</sup> “[D]ivine apathia”, or apathy (“apatheia, n.” *OED Online*), “divine athambia”, or imperturbability (“athambia, n.” *OED Online*), and “divine aphasia”, which is defined as the “loss of speech, partial or total, or loss of power to understand written or spoken language” (“aphasia, n.” *OED Online*) suit the missing Godot very well. Vladimir, Estragon and Pozzo, in their mortal flesh, experience tentative feelings of loneliness, periodic bursts of rage, and an excruciating need to talk with one another; Vladimir, especially, cannot stand the silence while waiting, and is desperate to fill the gap with any sort of detail:

*Vladimir: Say something!*

*Estragon: I’m trying.*

*Long silence.*

*Vladimir: (in anguish). Say anything at all! (WFG 63)*

But the much awaited Godot, in his sustained absence, proves himself apathetic, controlling, and unable to communicate with his servants/workers, thus the messenger boy enters as a medium of communication: “In a quiet ritual the Boy appears, like a Messenger in Greek drama, but without any message”, yet “the news of *nothing* still sounds as if it were about *something* important” (Kennedy 19, 23). Although it only “sounds” as such, the boy’s message is extremely vital in both acts, for it is the only sign that convinces Vladimir to remain, along with Estragon, put in his place. In the second act of the play, Vladimir makes it clear that it is actually the same boy who

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<sup>19</sup> Estragon, in his confusion about their appointment with Godot, wonders what day it is: “And is it Saturday? Is it not rather Sunday? (*Pause.*) Or Monday? (*Pause.*) Or Friday?” (15). Vladimir, on the other hand, is less optimistic about the setting, and concludes that “Time has stopped” (36) as Pozzo studies his watch and decides to leave.



comes every day to deliver the same empty promise; in a fit of anger, he confronts the boy and screams, “You’re sure you saw me, you won’t come and tell me tomorrow that you never saw me!” (WFG 92), to which the boy quickly scrams and, as before, night suddenly falls on the protagonists. Similar to the way the messengers who bring the news of Polyneices’ burial and Haemon’s suicide assure the continuation of the action in *Antigone* so as to arrive at a resolution, the messenger boy in *Waiting for Godot* provides enough hope for the characters to assure the cyclical structure of the narrative, and as such its irresolution.

For Beckett, Lucky’s monologue is where “‘the threads and themes’ of the play ‘are being gathered together’” (Graver 49-50). Indeed, this assertion seems plausible when considering the speech’s length and uncut continuity, which differs from the usual dialogue of the other characters, whose lines are, for the most part, short and fragmented. Vladimir, Estragon, and Pozzo try their best to resist Lucky’s complicated, incoherent speech and, for once, succeed in their action: they “groan”, “protest violently”, and finally “throw themselves on Lucky who struggles and shouts his text” before falling silent again (WFG 42). The “threads and themes” that weave the play together show up in intricate detail at the end of Lucky’s speech, in his saying “the beard the flames the tears the stones so blue so calm alas alas on on the skull the skull the skull the skull” and “the labours abandoned left unfinished graver still abode of stones in a word I resume alas alas abandoned unfinished the skull the skull” (WFG 44-5). “[T]he beard” of which he speaks clearly brings Vladimir and Estragon if not to “tears”, then near-tears because of the endless waiting, while “the labours abandoned” and “left unfinished” can be interpreted as Lucky’s very sentences, the others’ conversations, or the play as a whole. Lucky also repeats “the skull” six times in these

few lines, indicating the significance of death within the narrative. In discussing “death” within the play, Cormier and Pallister note that:

The pivotal theme of *En attendant Godot* is death, man’s ultimate limitation.

Life, as portrayed in this play, is bleak, sterile, meaningless; and the height of its absurdity, its purposelessness, is shown implicitly by the existence of literal, physical death. The characters refuse to face this fact head-on and only rarely are glimmers of this truth found in their conversations. All of their waiting is a waiting for death. (80)

But this sort of interpretation strips the play of its central idea - namely, what people do to pass the time while waiting. The end is not their prime concern; the process of reaching the end is. Moreover, “literal, physical death” never touches anyone in the narrative; on the contrary, confirming what Vladimir wisely tells Estragon (“Everything’s dead but the tree”), the tree sprouts “four or five leaves” (*WFG* 57) by the beginning of the second act, which indicates, along with a few other signs found in the play, change and a sense of growth.<sup>20</sup> It is also worth noting that the characters *do* face the truth of their death “head-on”, as indicated especially in Pozzo’s last speech, which is recycled and restated in similar style by Vladimir toward the end of the play. As Pozzo is preparing to leave for the second time, Vladimir stops him to ask about Lucky’s condition - about when, exactly, he became dumb - to which Pozzo answers:

*(suddenly furious.)* Have you not done tormenting me with your accursed time!  
It’s abominable! When! When! One day, is that not enough for you, one day like

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<sup>20</sup> Graver notes that “Beckett has insisted that the meagre flowering was meant only to record the passage of time” (58), but in a play where every occurrence is doubted, the few leaves prove more than a measure of time.

any other day, one day he went dumb, one day I went blind, one day we'll go deaf, one day we were born, one day we shall die, the same day, the same second, is that not enough for you? (*Calmer.*) They give birth astride of a grave, the light gleams an instant, then it's night once more. (89)

In “one day”, in fact “the same day”, they become “dumb” and “blind”, and predict that they will soon turn “deaf”, yet all these descriptions already fit the characters well. After all, none of the four is able to communicate in an effective manner, listen to others or see reality as it is. In a sudden spurt of wisdom, Pozzo realizes that life and death are but one and the same, and reflects on the futility of being here, asking rhetorically, “is that not enough for you?” Vladimir’s speech at the end of the act presents an even darker perspective on the matter:

Astride of a grave and a difficult birth. Down in the hole, lingeringly, the gravedigger puts on the forceps. We have time to grow old. The air is full of our cries. (*He listens.*) But habit is a great deadener. (*He looks again at Estragon.*) At me too someone is looking, of me too someone is saying, he is sleeping, he knows nothing, let him sleep on. (*Pause.*) I can't go on! (90-1)

Vladimir never wants to “go on”, but is compelled to, and perseveres nevertheless.

Significantly, like Vladimir’s own take of the life-death conundrum, “Pozzo’s revelation that he is blind and that Lucky is dumb, and his speech on time and the simultaneity of birth and death [...] echo the tones of traditional tragedy” (Kennedy 23). But how, exactly, does *Waiting for Godot* pass as a work of tragedy?

In the English edition of the play, *Waiting for Godot* is described as “a tragicomedy in two acts” (front matter). Alan Astro explains that “this is not to imply that it is a tragedy with some comic elements or a comedy with tragic ones” (119). But even if one were to consider that both genres mesh together to create a third type of drama, the comedy in this play barely establishes itself in the different sections and acts before it shrinks and disappears completely in face of discussions of suicide, pain, death and graves. Although seemingly departing from Aristotle’s definition of what a

‘traditional’ tragic storyline should look like, *Waiting for Godot* actually exhibits many features collected under the rubric of a traditional tragedy, albeit with a certain twist. Of crucial concern is the play’s being a “representation” of “a piece of action, *of life, of happiness and unhappiness*” (emphasis mine). Most scholars argue that the play has no plot, no meaning, no action and, as a result, “no possibility of an outcome, ([...] no *dénouement*), no tragic recognition” (Cormier & Pallister 99), yet that is not the case:

endless ‘waiting’ as a type of action (so hard for the Western mind to conceptualise even when it has been experienced) should serve as a basis for interpreting the play. Thus we should avoid those eager leaps of ideological interpretation that reduce the play at a premature stage of reception:

Existentialist (Godot shows man lost in a world after the death of God); Marxist (only the alienation of a late capitalist society, coupled with the hysteria of the cold war, can have produced such a work, where man ceases to be a political animal); Freudian (Gogo represents the *id*, Didi the *ego*); Christian (the play is a parable on man’s need for salvation)... (Kennedy 23)

If read for its own sake, the play can be said to add to the extensive oeuvre of literary works that deal with the unknowable, the state of human fallibility and total ignorance of what living, what being, entails. Moreover, “[i]t is not that the play is without meaning, only that its meanings are contained by its own cyclical form. Its meaning is unending - which suggests an infinity of unfolding signification - but it is also, like Godot, ‘not yet’” (Calderwood 41-2). That is why Vladimir and Estragon find reason in doing the same drudgery every day, from taking off boots to eating carrots, contemplating suicide, and arguing, until Vladimir finally admits, “We’re waiting for Godot”, and the two ultimately realize they are stuck in an endless loop. As such, “[t]he

two tramps in *Godot* quite literally *make sense*. A sense that relentlessly keeps surprising us, catching us unaware in the midst of meaninglessness, and the point of *Waiting for Godot* is precisely that *Godot comes*, he keeps coming all the time, and, if it seems that he doesn't, it's only because we have been expecting him from the wrong quarters" (Dolar 54). Instead of being a physical entity, a tangible Godot that has "not yet" appeared amidst the characters, Godot actually represents the promise of change, which comes and goes unnoticed by Vladimir and Estragon, who can no longer function properly and accept the newness of each passing day.

Unlike *Antigone*, which evokes emotions of "pity" and "fear" in the readers as they realize that the protagonists' shortsightedness and rashness irreversibly lead to their doom (perhaps pity for Antigone, who dies unjustly, and fear for Creon, whose race against time proves unsuccessful and yields only suffering), *Waiting for Godot* tweaks the expectation of "pity" and "fear" on which conventional tragic writing usually relies. Certainly, Estragon, Vladimir, Pozzo and Lucky all evoke emotions of "pity" and "fear" in the reader - pity for their destitute situation, and fear of ever nearing the sub-human state in which they live, yet the narrative further provokes these emotions and extends them to its very characters.

Pity requires specific attention in *Waiting for Godot*. In the second act of the play, after Pozzo, who has gone blind, insists that one of the two main players help Lucky up on his feet, Estragon takes the lead and exclaims, in a moment of unbearable truth, that "I'm waiting for Godot" (*WFG* 87). Significantly, "this [...] is the first time that either man uses 'I' rather than 'We', which is more evidence of diminishing fraternity in their world" (Graver 68). Perhaps the most overwhelming of these

instances of “diminishing fraternity” takes place after Estragon fails at ‘doing the tree’ for exercise:

*Estragon does the tree, staggers.*

*Estragon:* Do you think God sees me?

*Vladimir:* You must close your eyes.

*Estragon closes his eyes, staggers worse.*

*Estragon: (stopping, brandishing his fists, at the top of his voice).* God have pity on me!

*Vladimir: (vexed).* And me?

*Estragon:* On me! On me! Pity! On me! (WFG 76-7)

Vladimir’s grievance regarding Estragon’s abandonment, and the latter’s reassertion that “Pity” need only be directed at “me”, is shortly interrupted and quickly forgotten. But the brief moment of selfishness is reminiscent of Aristotle’s declaration that, “through pity and fear [tragedy] effects relief to these and similar emotions”. For tragedy to be successful and truly “tragic”, “pity and fear”, as Aristotle explains, should be evoked in the audience members witnessing the events of the play. Estragon’s direct demand for “Pity” might here function as another reference to the theatre, a joke at tragedy’s expense, where “pity and fear” have not been sufficiently aroused by the actions of the play and so have to be openly requested by the protagonist from the audience; however, the plea itself - contrary to its hypothetical purpose - increases the pity felt for Estragon, who “staggers worse” yet remains persistent in seeking salvation, evidenced by his mentioning of God. Alternatively, the demand for pity could be directed toward the self, with the line “God have pity on me!” aiming to elicit “relief” not only in the audience members but also in the characters themselves. Since the conversation is abruptly cut off by the entrance of the blind Pozzo and the dumb Lucky, it remains unknown whether Estragon’s “brandishing his fists” and screaming for pity “at the top of his voice” does actually release the tension he holds; in either case, Vladimir certainly feels unrelieved by Estragon’s complete disregard for his lifelong

friend and partner. Similar to Estragon's pleas, Pozzo asks for "Pity!" (*WFG* 77) from the two protagonists after he crashes into the heavily-laden Lucky and they fall to the ground. As expected, Estragon and Vladimir fail at helping Pozzo to his feet and instead topple over him, mockingly pretending that they, too, cannot get up anymore. After a lengthy scene of verbally abusing the blind man and, at one point, even kicking him "in the crotch" (83), the protagonists decide to get up and extend their help - their "pity" - to Pozzo. This moment might be interpreted as a continuation of the request for pity from the audience (and here the protagonists are also Pozzo and Lucky's 'audience'), who are more likely to view it as pathetic rather than pitiful.

In his moment of crisis, Estragon still chooses to appeal to a higher power - a higher belief - in hope that it will bring him some sort of salvation. Antigone, on the other hand, abandons her gods as she is led to her death, and asks: "What ordinance of the gods have I transgressed? / Why should I look to Heaven any more / For help" (921-3). In light of the injustice dealt to her by the tyrannical Creon, it seems understandable that she would question the gods and their deeds, and doubt their ability in alleviating human suffering. Compared to Antigone, an ardent believer in the will of the gods and the need to please them, Estragon's entreaty to a "God" which, until this point, apparently did not exist in his consciousness is quite fascinating; why would God "see him", much less have "pity" on him, now at the end of the line, now, after "[f]ifty years perhaps" have passed since he's "been together all the time now" with Vladimir, presumably waiting, and aging, and still waiting (*WFG* 53)?

The term "anti-play" is sometimes used to describe *Waiting for Godot* in an effort to "underline its reduced 'dramatic' qualities: its lack of plot and logical movement (from exposition through turning-point to catastrophe), its digressions, and

so on” (Kennedy 24), yet this sort of terminology dismisses the work’s critical engagement with the structure and function of this genre of writing. Importantly, the play “uses and parodies what we expect from drama and the theatre, playing on our expectations by changing and counterpointing them. Even the two-act structure, the repetition of two cycles - which a wit called ‘nothing happens, twice’ - exploits our expectation of a ‘dramatic’ curve of action, relentless movement toward the final goal” (24). And so we, as readers, wait for some similitude of an ending to be reached, and, like Estragon and Vladimir, are disappointed again and again. This sort of un-ending finale fits Eagleton’s account of tragedy, which proposes that “[t]ragedy is not just about things ending badly”, and “[n]ot all tragedy is about breaking and renewal. It may end simply in waste or rancor, despair or defiance” (57-8). In the case of *Waiting for Godot*, suffering continues for the characters *because* the end is inconclusive, indeterminate, undefined: they will live another day, continuously in a repetitive circle whose end - if it exists - no one can predict. Undoubtedly, the tragedy is one of “despair”; even the stage directions include the adjective “despairing” when describing Estragon’s agitation from discovering the aim of their wait:

*Vladimir*: We’re waiting for Godot.

*Estragon*: Ah! (*Pause. Despairing.*) What’ll we do, what’ll we do! (*WFG* 68)

Cormier and Pallister dub this particular drama “an ultramodern tragedy” (100), but even that is questionable. What makes *Waiting for Godot* so “ultramodern”, when it relies on traditional tools of tragedy to evoke feelings of pity, fear, sadness, and all such difficult emotions in its reader and audience, and when it alludes to central moments of the tragic tradition, such as Hamlet’s “to be, or not to be”? Although it utilizes modern dramatic techniques, such as severed and fragmented language, *Waiting for Godot*



nevertheless speaks to a longer tradition of tragic writing, as evidenced by its connections to Shakespeare's *Hamlet* and Sophocles' *Antigone*.

At first glance, it seems to be "highly doubtful that *En attendant Godot* has a moral message" (Cormier & Pallister 108), but the "moral message" - if such can be ascribed to Beckett's text - in this case runs deeper than what can be simply stated or discussed: what is learned lies in what language fails to express, in what cannot be said. The protagonists of the play constantly seek silence, unbearable though it may be, and their use of language, characteristically Beckettian in its fragmented, cut off, and abandoned style, reflects their desire to end. They are unable to start or continue conversations, and frequently fall into long pauses at various sections of the acts. At one point, Estragon tires from the bickering and voices his feelings of exhaustion from their continual banter: "Let's stop talking for a minute, do you mind?" (*WFG* 15). But soon enough the conversation restarts and the two repeat their dialogic rituals again and again. Like the cyclical, unending end, the need for language, for creating words and phrases and, if lucky, complete sentences, dooms Vladimir and Estragon and holds their lives in its grip.

Similarly, the same question in search of a "moral message" can be asked when looking at Sophocles' *Antigone*. What can be learned from such a play? Certainly, the tragedy teaches a lesson about the importance of balancing the political and the individual life of people, but it does more than that. Like Beckett's characters in *Waiting for Godot*, Antigone and Creon are condemned to live - and die - without being able to predict what lies ahead in the future and, therefore, to change their course of action for their own good, and without fully understanding each other's motivations. Just as "nothing is certain" (*WFG* 53) for Estragon, so the messenger who brings the news of

Haemon's death relays that "nothing's firm, / Either for confidence or for despair; / No one can prophesy what lies in store." (1158-60), and although the mode of this 'certainty' differs between *Antigone* and *Waiting for Godot*, the two texts are able to show that events can take an unexpected turn at unexpected times - that things happen, whether we resist them or not. Now, the most critical point of comparison between the ancient Greek tragedy and the "ultramodern" work of drama boils down to the problem of communication, the inability to listen to one another, and speak one's point of view and defend it when put under the spotlight. Creon and Antigone argue from an extremely rigid perspective, and interact with the rest of the characters in a standoffish manner; their miscommunication lies in their refusal to listen to anyone. Vladimir, Estragon, Pozzo and Lucky talk without thinking (even Lucky's "think" is a deterioration of the faculty of thought), and ask questions without waiting for answers, proving that they are all living in their own secluded, isolated bubbles; their miscommunication lies in language itself, for they cannot form well-articulated, efficient phrases, sentences, or thoughts. Although they seem to be able to hold "conversations", most of these are one-sided, such that the speakers themselves question their words *immediately after saying them*. Thus, they probe everything in their world unabatedly, and staunchly believe that nothing is fixed. This lack of communication, this absolute mess of miscommunication in both works, leads to the characters' continual, unceasing suffering. And indeed, the portrayal of such suffering, so difficult to understand and discuss, increases the reader's admiration of and appreciation for the authors, who clearly recognize that "[t]ragic art involves the plotting of suffering, not simply a raw cry of pain" (Eagleton 63).

In lamenting the death of his son, Creon cries out in a moment of pure angst, “What suffering besets the whole race of men!” (1277). This tragic suffering, realized by Creon only after the discovery of the unrighteousness of his path, is discussed by Vladimir after Pozzo’s final departure: “Was I sleeping, while the others suffered? Am I sleeping now? Tomorrow, when I wake, or think I do, what shall I say of today?” (*WFG* 90). Certainly, Creon was “sleeping” while the “others suffered”, but awaked eventually to the realization that he has, singlehandedly, destroyed his whole family, whereas Vladimir and Estragon remain asleep during their *own* suffering, and barely grasp that “others” exist outside of their realm. In both cases, there is nothing to “say of today”, “one day”, “the same day”, which witnesses the separate tragedies. At the end, Creon “pray[s] for death” and wishes “for nothing else” (1334), and Estragon and Vladimir decide to go, but “do not move” (*WFG* 94). None of them can act any longer to alleviate their misery; truly, in Estragon’s own words, there is “Nothing to be done” (9, 21).

*Endgame* witnesses a continuation of Beckett’s tale of enduring suffering and despair without an antidote, and again renders its characters helpless as they navigate through the end of their lives and allow the moment to pass. Here, too, the main characters, Hamm and Clov, are old, weary men, immersed in mundane tasks and dialogue that fill in the time left between the pages of the narrative; however, *Endgame* strikes a stronger chord with regards to its tragic matter than *Waiting for Godot*, partly because the comic details, the little jokes and bursts of laughter that intermingle with Estragon and Vladimir’s chatter and despair, are much fewer in the play, and more importantly because there is no more waiting to be done. Indeed, *Endgame*, simply put, presents its characters with the end of the game, the end of the play, the end of life, so to speak (but not necessarily through death). The play itself seems to be talking back to

*Waiting for Godot* on several occasions, and through it to a longer tradition of tragic writing, for here too Beckett utilizes the techniques of tragedy analyzed by Aristotle and refers to Shakespearean tragic heroes. Nevertheless, there are many notable differences between the plays, even though the all-encompassing theme of suffering collects them together.

#### IV. “BEYOND IS THE... OTHER HELL”: SUFFERING BEFORE DEATH IN *ENDGAME*

In *Endgame*, the deadening situation of the characters is completely saturated with pain and suffering, suffering that forms the basis of the tragedy constituting their lives. The play starts at the end: “Finished, it’s finished, nearly finished, it must be nearly finished” declares Clov, who stands idly at the periphery of the stage (1). Unlike Estragon, who lives in constant search of something to do and repeatedly voices his concern that there’s “Nothing to be done”, Clov has given up entirely on the idea of passing time and awaits only the end, presumably either the end of the play or death. He is unable to tolerate living with his disabled, tyrannical father, Hamm, who has adopted Clov as a child-servant under his wing at the request of the latter’s biological father (38, 53, 60). The familial relationship that ties Hamm and Clov together strikes a balance between the love-hate bond of Vladimir and Estragon and the slave-master dynamic of Lucky and Pozzo; in fact, “Beckett claimed that he began [writing] the play with the actors Roger Blin and Jean Martin, who had played Pozzo and Lucky in *Waiting for Godot*, in mind for the parts of Hamm and Clov. At the same time, he told Jean Martin, ‘You must realize that Hamm and Clov are Didi and Gogo at a later date, at the end of their lives’” (Halpern 745). Truly, Hamm and Clov easily resemble a muddled mixture of the four characters in *Waiting for Godot*, but throughout the play prove to be more than simply the derivatives of a previous work.

Clov, the only physically-abled character in *Endgame*, remains reluctant to leave Hamm, yet he is not entirely dehumanized by the weak tyrant, and can still exert some power over the events of the play. The child-servant openly confesses his disdain for the cruel father figure:

*Hamm:* [...] Why do you stay with me?

*Clov:* Why do you keep me?

*Hamm:* There's no one else.

*Clov:* There's nowhere else.

*(Pause.)*

*Hamm:* You're leaving me all the same.

*Clov:* I'm trying.

*Hamm:* You don't love me.

*Clov:* No.

*Hamm:* You loved me once.

*Clov:* Once! (EG 6)

Hamm simply states what they already know - that Clov does not love him - without contestation or challenge, and the son bluntly reconfirms this truth with a straightforward "No". "Once" brings back the memory of a very different time, so far away that Clov is surprised by Hamm's appeal to it. Indeed, the son's indifference to the father's impassive comments, which sound like resentful questions that answer themselves, marks their difficult familial relationship from the beginning. Such indifference and yearning is absent in *Antigone*: Ismene refuses to help Antigone in her deed, yet she understands her sister's motivations and does not stand in her way, confessing that "It is / Blind folly—but those who love you love you dearly." (98-9). The "love" that Ismene holds for her sibling is also found in Antigone, for even though she shuns Ismene after learning of her refusal to help in burying the body, she does not completely empty herself of empathy or emotion, and shows her true face later when Creon confronts both sisters:

*Ismene.* What life is left to me if I lose you?

*Antigone.* Ask Creon! It was Creon that you cared for.

*Ismene.* O why taunt me, when it does not help you?

*Antigone.* If I do taunt you, it is to my pain. (548-51)

It is clear that Antigone reciprocally "love[s]" Ismene "dearly", for "taunt[ing]" her would only increase the "pain" of her suffering. Ismene feels overly compelled to save Antigone, her only living relative, to the extent that she is prepared to lie and take

responsibility for a crime she has not committed, for “when disaster comes / The reason that one has can not stand firm.” (563-4). But such “reason” *does* “stand firm” in Clov’s case. He knows that Hamm is ever so slowly dying, yet he makes a point of informing him, unceasingly, that he wants to leave, that he will eventually leave, but, similar to Godot’s arrival, “not yet”. As the two men waste away in their environment, they pass the time by playing a spiteful game in which each player tries to outdo the other’s cruelty. Hamm threatens to starve Clov (*EG* 5), reminds him of the pain in his legs (7, 35, 37), asks him about his real father of whom he knows nothing (38), and incessantly makes him recheck the unchanging living conditions outside their home (4, 13, 29-31, 63-5). In his turn, Clov consistently threatens Hamm with leaving (“I’ll leave you”, 9, 12, 37, 38, 39, 41, 58, 68), reminds him of the pain in his eyes (7, 35), deludes him into thinking he will receive his pain-killers when in fact there are none anymore (71), refuses to show him any signs of sympathy or care (6, 45-6, 67), and even hits him (77). The protagonists manifest the traits of both the master Pozzo and the slave Lucky; they are neither completely dehumanized, powerless, and dependent, nor fully capable of surviving on their own.

Hamm establishes his tyranny (which nears sadism) through his compelling need for Clov to acknowledge that he has been “made [... to] suffer too much” during his lifetime (6). “[S]hocked” by the child-servant’s initial hesitation, Hamm exclaims, “Ah you gave me a fright!” after the son finally confirms the suffering (7). Nevertheless, he fears the day when Clov will finally leave:

*Hamm:* I can’t leave you.

*Clov:* I know. And you can’t follow me.

*(Pause.)*

*Hamm:* If you leave me how shall I know?

*Clov (briskly):* Well you simply whistle me and if I don’t come running it means I’ve left you.

*(Pause.)*

*Hamm: You won't come and kiss me goodbye?*

*Clov: Oh I shouldn't think so. (45-6)*

It is almost childish that Hamm should ask for a kiss “goodbye”, as if the kiss would relieve him of his pains by giving an illusion that all previous wrongs have been remedied. Clov is acutely aware of this truth, and, once again, does not hesitate to reject his parent: “Oh I shouldn't think so”. In fact, Clov only refuses those orders in which Hamm seeks physical and/or emotional attention, and is impressively unapologetic about his behavior:

*Hamm: Kiss me.*

*(Pause.)*

*Will you not kiss me?*

*Clov: No.*

*Hamm: On the forehead.*

*Clov: I won't kiss you anywhere.*

*(Pause.)*

*Hamm (holding out his hand): Give me your hand at least.*

*(Pause.)*

*Will you not give me your hand?*

*Clov: I won't touch you. (67)*

In a way, Clov's absolute dismissal of Hamm's needs provides the greatest example of “diminishing fraternity in their world”, superseding even that of *Waiting for Godot*. Although Estragon initially refuses the advances of Vladimir, who asks his friend to “Come here till I embrace you”, he eventually obliges him, and the two “clap each other on the back” before carrying on with their daily banter (*WFG* 58). In contrast, the only material entity Hamm is allowed to hug is the wall:

*Hamm: Take me for a little turn.*

*(Clov goes behind the chair and pushes it forward.)*

*Not too fast!*

*(Clov pushes chair.)*

*Right round the world!*

*(Clov pushes chair.)*

*Hug the walls, then back to the center again.*

*(Clov pushes chair.)*



I was right in the center, wasn't I?

*Clov (pushing):* Yes.

*Hamm:* We'd need a proper wheel-chair. With big wheels. Bicycle wheels!

*(Pause.)*

Are you hugging?

*Clov (pushing):* Yes.

*Hamm (groping for wall):* It's a lie! Why do you lie to me?

*Clov (bearing closer to wall):* There! There!

*Hamm:* Stop!

*(Clov stops chair close to back wall. Hamm lays his hand against wall.)*

Old wall! (EG 25)

The scene of an old man “[i]n a dressing gown, a stiff toque on his head, [...] a whistle hanging from his neck, a rug over his knees, thick socks on his feet” (1), wearing “[b]lack glasses”, with a “[v]ery red face” (2), who cursorily mentions to his son that, ever since he became blind, his eyes have “gone all white” (4) and are worth seeing, certainly arouses “pity and fear” in readers and audiences alike when he “lays his hand” against the physical extremity of his world and exclaims, “Old wall!”, as if the “wall” was an old friend and has been waiting for him to arrive. Obviously, the wall does not answer back his calls, but (in terms of paternalistic needs, at least) neither does Clov. His tragic struggle is appropriate enough, considering that “his name is an amputated version of the most famous tragic hero of all” (McDonald 139) - “Hamlet, the most celebrated character of drama” (Cohn 228).<sup>21</sup> But “like that dramatic hero, Hamm is also a ham actor” (228), and again the play itself satirizes the theatre in this self-referential move, for Hamm indeed proves to be “an [...] over-emphatic actor, one who rants and overacts” and overall “clumsy, ineffective, [and] incompetent” (“ham, n.1 and

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<sup>21</sup> “He is [...] Hamlet, bounded in a nutshell, fancying himself king of infinite space, but troubled by bad dreams” (Kenner 42); however, Hamm, unlike Estragon, does not fall asleep or dream in this play.

adj.” *OED Online*). Hamm’s ‘incompetence’ surfaces most noticeably in his mistreatment of his parents, who receive a much harsher sentence than Clov.

Nagg and Nell, the elderly parents of Hamm, are literally kept inside trash bins within the home of the protagonists and left to die there without sufficient food or care.<sup>22</sup> Nagg is the first to emerge within the play, and wakes up to ask for his “pap”, which, as most supplies in the narrative, is “no more” (*EG* 9). Beckett once more plays on the meaning of the character’s demand - “pap” here evidently signifies the older meaning of the word, that of “semi-liquid food, such as that considered suitable for babies or invalids”, but it could also suggest that Nagg requires “something easily acquired or understood but lacking in value or substance [...] specifically, trivial or unsophisticated reading matter [...] or] undemanding (esp. commercial) entertainment” (“pap, n.2.” *OED Online*). Whether or not Hamm and Clov are able to provide Nagg’s metaphorical “pap” - another stale show, such as the one put on by Pozzo and Lucky (to the great entertainment of Vladimir and Estragon) - remains unknown, for Nagg is soon after given a “biscuit” and forced back into the bin at Hamm’s order to “[b]ottle him” (*EG* 10). Hamm’s contempt for his withering parent is as obvious as Clov’s hate for the adoptive father: he screams at Nagg and calls him “Accursed progenitor” (9) and “Accursed fornicator” (10), and describes his parents as “muck” (23). After waking him up to listen to his story, the “chronicle”, “[t]he one you’ve been telling yourself all your days” (58), according to Clov, Hamm suddenly remembers his crisis and blames Nagg for making him suffer:

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<sup>22</sup> “Hamm lets his stumps of parents completely starve, those parents who have become babies in their trashcans - the son’s triumph as a father” (Adorno 25).

*Nagg:* I'm listening.

*Hamm:* Scoundrel! Why did you engender me?

*Nagg:* I didn't know.

*Hamm:* What? What didn't you know?

*Nagg:* That it'd be you. (49)

In asking why Nagg “engender[ed]” him, Hamm addresses the fears that the whole narrative raises: why am I living? What is the point of my existence? And why didn't you stop yourself from making me suffer? Nagg's answer admits a little regret, but for the most part the father-grandfather is sincere in that he “didn't know”, that he was perhaps hoping for someone better, someone, like Antigone, “worthy of a crown of gold”.

But Antigone similarly receives her fair share of pain from her own family legacy. The chorus of Thebans warn her that “For some old sin you make atonement.” (855), and she herself grieves because of the curse inflicted on her father:

My father's sin! There is the source of all my anguish.

Harsh fate that befell my father! Harsh fate that has held

Fast in its grip the whole renowned race of Labdacus!

O the blind madness of my father's and my mother's marriage! (858-61)

One and the same “sin” ties the suffering of Antigone and Hamm, who have been born out of “blind madness” from their parents' marriages. Oedipus had not known that Iocasta, the queen of Thebes, was his true mother, and his ignorance can be somewhat excused as the workings of “Harsh fate” that holds “in its grip the whole renowned race of Labdacus”; Nagg's ignorance, on the other hand, proves harsher than “fate” could ever be, and Hamm doubly suffers because of his sad, unwanted existence and his father's malice. Nagg shows his evil nature, which is remarkably worse than Hamm's, in his final speech in the play:

It's natural. After all I'm your father. It's true if it hadn't been me it would have been someone else. But that's no excuse.

*(Pause.)*

Turkish Delight, for example, which no longer exists, we all know that, there is nothing in the world I love more. And one day I'll ask you for some, in return for a kindness, and you'll promise it to me. One must live with the times.

*(Pause.)*

Whom did you call when you were a tiny boy, and were frightened, in the dark? Your mother? No. Me. We let you cry. Then we moved you out of earshot, so that we might sleep in peace.

*(Pause.)*

I was asleep, as happy as a king, and you woke me up to have me listen to you. It wasn't indispensable, you didn't really need to have me listen to you.

*(Pause.)*

I hope the day will come when you'll really need to have me listen to you, and need to hear my voice, any voice.

*(Pause.)*

Yes, I hope I'll live till then, to hear you calling me like when you were a tiny boy, and were frightened, in the dark, and I was your only hope. (EG 56)

Nagg's hatred for his biological son comes spewing out all at once, triggered by Hamm's empty promise of providing him with a "sugar-plum" (55) for his efforts at listening.<sup>23</sup> Reminiscent of Clov's rejection of Hamm, Nagg childishly declares that he loves "nothing in the world" more than "Turkish Delight". After grudgingly acknowledging the fact that "[o]ne must live with the times" in order to get by, he remorselessly reminds Hamm of his powerlessness as a child, way back before their roles had been reversed, and how he and Nell left him to "cry" on his own and then "moved" him "out of earshot, so that we might sleep in peace", which again raises the child's question, "Why did you engender me?". Although Hamm does end the play by "calling" to his father in a similar manner to when he was "a tiny boy", "frightened, in the dark", Nagg can never again rise to be his son's "only hope" for relief, and the two are acutely aware of that fact;

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<sup>23</sup> It is strange that Nagg reacts so strongly to the failed promise, especially after he and Hamm had "laugh[ed] heartily" at the idea of Hamm swearing to give him a sugar-plum on his "honor", meaning that the son's word is completely worthless and the father knows it (50).

Nagg uses the most ancient of all parental devices, claiming that something is due him from his son for the mere fact of having begot him. Why that should ever have seemed, and still seem, something in itself to be grateful for is a question of world-consuming mystery—but Hamm ought to be the least likely candidate for its effect, wanting nothing more than to wrap up and send back the gift of life. (Cavell 61)

In turn, Hamm inherits his father’s “ancient” method “and lays on his adopted son Clov the same claim to gratitude” (61) that Nagg had borne on him. He arrogantly asserts that he had been the sole reason for Clov’s survival:

*Hamm:* It was I was a father to you.

*Clov:* Yes.

*(He looks at Hamm fixedly.)*

You were that to me.

*Hamm:* My house a home for you.

*Clov:* Yes.

*(He looks about him.)*

This was that for me.

*Hamm (proudly):* But for me,

*(gesture towards himself)*

no father. But for Hamm,

*(gesture towards surroundings)*

no home.

*(Pause.)*

*Clov:* I’ll leave you. (EG 38)

Whereas Hamm feels pride in having provided his son with a “father” and a “home”, Clov does not appreciate the kindnesses which have been bestowed upon him, and promises yet again to “leave” the old man; indeed, Hamm’s situation is the direst of the three men, for he has to simultaneously suffer the blows of a dying father and the indifference of an adopted son. His misery and pain are only deepened by the ominous conditions of their environment.

The space in which the characters live is described by Hamm as his “house”, the family’s “home”, but it also serves as a burial ground for them, their last resting place. The literature on *Endgame* presents two “standard” readings of this setting: that of a bomb shelter that has protected the characters from a hypothetical nuclear war, and a Noah’s ark on which the characters “survived a second flood” (Halpern 744). Indeed, both readings seem plausible; in the course of the play, Clov regularly announces the lack of supplies and absence of sustainable living conditions, which could be explained as the result of a nuclear explosion. The child-servant blankly states that “there’s no more nature” (*EG* 11), “pap” (9), “pain-killer” (71), “coffins” (77), “rugs” (67), or even a “pulse” (23) in Nell’s hand, and Hamm adds that they are out of “sugar-plums” (55), “navigators” (65), and “light” (63). The lack of “light” proves to be the most disastrous of the absences, with Clov noting its significance from the very beginning:

*Clov:* I’ll leave you, I have things to do.

*Hamm:* In your kitchen?

*Clov:* Yes.

*Hamm:* What, I’d like to know.

*Clov:* I look at the wall.

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

*Clov:* I see my light dying. (12)

Clov’s conviction that his “light” is “dying” could mean that his actual shadow outlined against the wall is dwindling, but more likely also signifies his weakening spirit and morale. Hamm’s rhetorical question of whether he sees “[m]ene, mene” on the wall mocks Clov’s empty action, for there can certainly be no more “sign[s] or warning[s] of impending disaster” or “obscure omen[s]” in a world edging towards extinction, and the reference to the Book of Daniel’s account of “mene mene tekel upharsin”, the “words written by a bodiless hand on the wall at Belshazzar’s feast” (“mene mene tekel, phr. and n.” *OED Online*), only increases the dread and decadence in the protagonists’

world, a world collapsing around these weary men who are highly conscious of the fact that no savior will help them in the end, and, despite Hamm's insistence that they pray for "God first", that "The bastard! He doesn't exist!" (EG 55).<sup>24</sup>

Although the nuclear war hypothesis seems possible, it becomes evident as the play continues that not all "forms of life have been wiped out", as should happen after a "giant catastrophe" such as a nuclear explosion (Astro 131). Clov finds a flea on his body, leading Hamm to exclaim in "very perturbed" demeanor: "But humanity might start from there all over again! Catch him, for the love of God!" (EG 33). Clov then finds "a rat in the kitchen", but delays going after it on account of Hamm's insistence that they "pray to God" (54). Toward the end of the play, Clov spots a "small boy" out of the window, and this time Hamm directly stops his son from going after him:

*Clov: I'll go and see.  
(He gets down, drops the telescope, goes towards door, turns.)  
I'll take the gaff.  
(He looks for the gaff, sees it, picks it up, hastens towards door.)  
Hamm: No!  
(Clov halts.)  
Clov: No? A potential procreator?  
Hamm: If he exists he'll die there or he'll come here. And if he doesn't...  
(Pause.)  
Clov: You don't believe me? You think I'm inventing?  
(Pause.)  
Hamm: It's the end, Clov, we've come to the end. I don't need you any more.  
(78-9)*

Hamm's feelings about having "humanity" "start from there all over again" seem to have changed, but he immediately shifts the focus of the discussion from himself to a

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<sup>24</sup> "[T]he Aramaic 'Mene, mene,' from the Book of Daniel, [...] trails the entire prophecy: 'God hath numbered thy kingdom, and finished it'" (Cohn 226).

probing of Clov's vision and truthfulness.<sup>25</sup> Hamm's assertion that it's "the end", that "we've come to the end", comforts him, for admitting that a "potential procreator" is on his way to the old man's home - that he might actually "come here" instead of "die there" - would necessitate a sense of hope, hope in the possibility that life will continue and that there will be others to carry on suffering, perhaps, as Estragon believes, in "Billions". Opening the possibility for such hope would contradict the cruelty previously inflicted on Clov, for, in keeping with Nagg's "most ancient of all parental devices", Hamm had "with prophetic relish" declared to Clov that "one day [...] you'll be like me, except that you won't have anyone with you, because you won't have had pity on anyone and because there won't be anyone left to have pity on" (36). The appearance of the boy potentially removes the predicted absence of "pity", and with the restoration of the feeling of "pity", Clov might be able to survive and have someone with him, as Hamm does, and as Nagg previously had, and the cycle will ultimately repeat itself.

The coming of the boy "is a moment which is considerably longer in the French, but for some reason cut down in Beckett's English version", which might lead to some truncation of meaning in the latter account of the story, yet the "coming at the end of the play, [...] which Hamm apparently takes to signal the awaited end, and upon which he dismisses Clov", fulfills the same function in both versions (Cavell 77). Like the messenger boy in *Waiting for Godot*, the "small boy" also seems to appear "like a

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<sup>25</sup> "The important fact for us is that after that earlier exchange between Hamm and Clov, it is Clov whose immediate response is to prepare to kill the newcomer, whereas Hamm, for the first time, prevents the destruction of a 'potential procreator'" (Cavell 77).



Messenger in Greek drama, but without any message”; yet, in the case of *Endgame*, language is so overly severed that dialogue is no longer required of the boy. His presence, or simply the assumption of his presence, is enough to raise hope, and, as in *Waiting for Godot*, further realization of this hope is cut short to make way for the characters’ taunting argumentation.

A second possible reading of the play presents the setting as a Noah’s ark which has safely protected the protagonists during “a second Flood”.<sup>26</sup> As Halpern notes, this interpretation “depicts a divine rather than human act of expenditure as God destroys his own creation and thereby asserts his sovereignty over it” (744), but God’s interference with the pre-destructed world of the protagonists seems farfetched, considering that neither Hamm nor Clov believes in its being, nor can that “divine” act of destruction explain why these particular individuals have been able to survive when nothing else remains. Hamm constantly orders Clov to get the “glass” and look out the windows, even when Clov assures him that “it’s clear enough as it is” and he doesn’t need the telescope to help him better his eyesight (*EG* 75). At different moments Hamm yearns for the ocean, and asks Clov to recheck its state:

*Hamm*: Look at the sea.

*Clov*: It’s the same.

*Hamm*: Look at the ocean!

[...]

*Clov*: Never seen anything like that!

*Hamm (anxious)*: What? A sail? A fin? Smoke?

*Clov (looking)*: The light is sunk.

*Hamm (relieved)*: Pah! We all knew that.

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<sup>26</sup> “The names of Nagg and Hamm transliterate Noah and Ham of Genesis; as biblical Ham was cursed by Noah for seeing him naked, Beckett’s Hamm is cursed by Nagg for refusing him the promised sugar plum” (Cohn 226).

*Clov (looking):* There was a bit left.  
*Hamm:* The base.  
*Clov (looking):* Yes.  
*Hamm:* And now?  
*Clov (looking):* All gone.  
*Hamm:* No gulls?  
*Clove (looking):* Gulls!  
*Hamm:* And the horizon? Nothing on the horizon?  
*Clov (lowering the telescope, turning towards Hamm, exasperated):* What in God's name could there be on the horizon?  
*(Pause.)*  
*Hamm:* The waves, how are the waves?  
*Clov:* The waves?  
*(He turns the telescope on the waves.)*  
*Lead.*  
*Hamm:* And the sun?  
*Clov (looking):* Zero.  
*Hamm:* But it should be sinking. Look again.  
*Clov (looking):* Damn the sun.  
*Hamm:* Is it night already then?  
*Clov (looking):* No.  
*Hamm:* Then what is it?  
*Clov (looking):* Gray.  
*(Lowering the telescope, turning towards Hamm, louder.)*  
*Gray!*  
*(Pause. Still louder.)*  
**GRRAY!**  
*(Pause. He gets down, approaches Hamm from behind, whispers in his ear.)*  
*Hamm (starting):* Gray! Did I hear you say gray?  
*Clov:* Light black. From pole to pole. (31-2)<sup>27</sup>

In Hamm's blind, alternative reality, he and Clov do indeed seem to be sailing in blue waters, with the aging man obsessively inquiring about the "gulls", "horizon", "waves", and "sun", all of which are unnaturally distorted or altogether absent in their environment. When Clov vocalizes his surprise at the sinking "light" (a joke at his own "dying" light, perhaps), Hamm anxiously fears that it might be a "sail", a "fin", or even

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<sup>27</sup> An allusion is made to Noah's ark and the "mammals" on pages 34-5, and a second, also lengthy conversation about the sea is found on pages 64-5.

“smoke”, some sign of life beyond their world. But it’s quite clear that there is no life beyond their realm, and none in theirs, either. Clov states that “[t]he light is sunk”, the waves are “[l]ead”, there is “[z]ero” sun, and, although it’s not nighttime, the surroundings are “Gray” - in fact, they are “GRRAY”, specifically a “[l]ight black” color. Clov can only describe his world from the margins, by use of masked references and vague hints that try (and fail) to form a cohesive explanation of where the two men and the grandparents reside.

Although critics have largely interpreted the setting to be a nuclear bunker or a sailing ark, another reading is also plausible: that the “house” of Hamm is actually a grave - his grave - which is shared by everyone in the narrative. Hamm casually exclaims that “[o]utside of here it’s death” (9, 70), and complains that the “whole place stinks of corpses”, after which Clov reemphasizes that the “whole universe” does, too (46). As he’s hugging the wall, Hamm ponders the possibility that “[b]eyond is the... other hell” (26); certainly, he’s already suffering in hell, in his little enclosure with the unbearable tenants, and the space outside his little home, the “other hell”, is meaningfully the world of the living. Clov pointedly mentions the corpses around them after one of Hamm’s violent outbursts:

*Hamm: [...] (Violently.)*

*All is what?*

*Clov: What all is? In a word? Is that what you want to know? Just a moment.*

*(He turns the telescope on the without, looks, lowers the telescope, turns towards Hamm.)*

*Corpsed. (29-30)*

That “all is” “[c]orpsed” fits well with Hamm’s assertion that they’re living “down in a hole” (39), and explains why Clov can report nothing other than “Zero” when asked about the “rain” (4), the earth (29), and the “sun” (31). Hamm twice commands Clov to “[l]ook at the earth” (27, 72), the actual dirt encircling them.<sup>28</sup> As Clov looks out the right window to report on the “weather” conditions (27), Hamm angrily shouts that “there’s no light there” and orders him to move to the left, where a “ray of sunshine” should be peeking (63). But “light” is absent from there as well, and the characters seem to be completely surrounded by dirt. The discussion of “earth” is similarly important in *Antigone*: the cause of Creon’s anger is that the body of Polyneices is found “thinly covered / With dust”. Antigone herself says: “I will go and heap / The earth upon the brother whom I love” (80-1), and her defiant act of hauling “earth” over the body instigates the action that leads to its tragic peak. In *Waiting for Godot*, “earth” also carries significance as Estragon falls to the ground over the bodies of Vladimir and Pozzo and exclaims with joy and relief: “Sweet mother earth!” (82). When Vladimir inquires as to whether or not he can get up, his friend dismisses him with a “[n]ot now, not now” and advises him to “sleep” (82), as if they were practicing lying down in their graves.

The significance of “earth” in Beckett and Sophocles’ texts extends to the related discussions of graves, death and burying practices. In *Endgame*, Clov engages Hamm in a little word play as he discusses the “old doctor”:

*Hamm*: [...] That old doctor, he’s dead naturally?

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<sup>28</sup> Clov exclaims “Again!” when Hamm orders him to “Look at the earth”, and the latter justifies this by stating, “Since it’s calling to you” (72), perhaps another cruel quip that Clov should die as well.

*Clov:* He wasn't old.  
*Hamm:* But he's dead?  
*Clov:* Naturally.  
*(Pause.)*  
*You ask me that? (24-5)*

Hamm's anxiety about the deaths of the people who he used to know continues to grow throughout the play, with Clov again playing on the double entendre of the 'natural' process of their leaving. Soon enough, Hamm asks Clov about "Mother Pegg", and the conversation obliges him to face his own end:

*Hamm:* Is Mother Pegg's light on?  
*Clov:* Light! How could anyone's light be on?  
*Hamm:* Extinguished!  
*Clov:* Naturally it's extinguished. If it's not on it's extinguished.  
*Hamm:* No, I mean Mother Pegg.  
*Clov:* But naturally she's extinguished!  
*(Pause.)*  
What's the matter with you today?  
*Hamm:* I'm taking my course.  
*(Pause.)*  
Is she buried?  
*Clov:* Buried! Who would have buried her?  
*Hamm:* You.  
*Clov:* Me! Haven't I enough to do without burying people?  
*Hamm:* But you'll bury me.  
*Clov:* No I won't bury you. (41-2)

Like those before him, Hamm is "taking" his "course" towards his death, just as the play is taking its course towards its end. Clov's refusal to bury his adoptive father - "No I won't bury you" - further shows the extent of his negative feelings toward the loathsome parent. Considering that the characters live in a single empty room, and Clov is the only privileged one among them who can move in and out of his kitchen, it would be questionable where, exactly, Hamm's body could be buried, especially since neither of them mentions going outside. In *Antigone*, state orders are given to leave the body of Polyneices "unburied, to be devoured / By dogs and birds, mangled most hideously.", and the entire action of the play is instigated by this decision to deny burial rites to the

dead corpse, a decision most likely meant to set an example of the high price of treason. Like Polyneices' body, Hamm's corpse will likely be left lying above the ground after Clov's departure, and although the old man is neither a traitor nor condemned by the law, he *is* hated by the only character capable of giving him burial, who, in this situation, acts as the law. However, Clov's refusal to bury Hamm is more likely motivated by his disgust for his father ("I won't touch you") than sadistically wishing further "mutilation" on his body.

In *Waiting for Godot*, Vladimir immerses himself in self-reflection after Pozzo's departure and wisely says: "Astride of a grave and a difficult birth. Down in the hole, lingeringly, the grave-digger puts on the forceps. We have time to grow old. The air is full of our cries." Vladimir's equating of the birth and the death of a human being is realized in *Endgame*, where Hamm fills the "air" with his "cries" - he cries for a coffin, "for dialogue" (*EG* 58), for his "father" (66), and for "this" (23), "this... thing" (45), his life, to "finish" (23, 68). For Hamm, "time" itself has finished and the process of "grow[ing] old" has ended. He reiterates Vladimir's speculation on the simultaneity of being born and being buried through saying "[t]he end is in the beginning and yet you go on" (69), which also reaffirms Clov's announcement at the start of the play, that "it's finished, nearly finished, it must be nearly finished". Whereas death - through suicide - spares Vladimir and Estragon and taunts them into suffering through another day of waiting, the endgame reaches Hamm in his final scene and, although his death is not witnessed onstage, he is vanquished. Vladimir and Estragon decide to hang themselves "immediately", but it becomes plainly obvious that neither of them *really* wants to die:

*Vladimir*: From a bough? (*They go towards the tree.*) I wouldn't trust it.

*Estragon*: We can always try.

*Vladimir*: Go ahead.

*Estragon*: After you.

*Vladimir*: No no, you first.  
*Estragon*: Why me?  
*Vladimir*: You're lighter than I am.  
*Estragon*: Just so! (WFG 17)

Their contemplation of death never advances to a stage of actually attempting suicide, and the fear of ending their lives leads them to finding fault in the tree and its weak boughs (and, at a later phase, in the length of Estragon's belt) instead of admitting their reluctance to commit to the act. As such, Hamm's anxiety about the "naturally" occurring deaths of the "old doctor" and "Mother Pegg" provides a critical change between the two narratives, where death evolves from a topic of light conversation to a daily lived expectation. Hamm's yearning to "finish" more closely resembles Antigone's choice to die for her crime than Vladimir and Estragon's 'failed' efforts; having confirmed that "To one who lives as I do, ringed about / With countless miseries, why, death is welcome." (463-4), Antigone completely surrenders to her punishment and accepts death, though unnatural and certainly "before" her "time" (462), as the price she has to pay. To a great extent, her death chamber parallels Hamm's enclosure within his "shelter" (EG 3):

I'll find a cave in some deserted spot,  
And there I will imprison her alive  
With so much food—no more—as will avert  
Pollution and a curse upon the city.  
[...]  
Take her away at once, and wall her up  
Inside a cavern, as I have commanded,  
And leave her there, alone, in solitude.  
Her home shall be her tomb; there she may live  
Or die, as she may choose[.] (773-6, 885-9)

As soon as she is found to be the perpetrator of the crime, Creon gives instructions to abandon Antigone and expel her from the palace. His specification that she be left in a "cave" in "some deserted spot", provided with "so much food", "no more" than needed

to keep her alive if so “she may choose”, parallels the situation of Hamm and Clov’s “home”. Like the protagonists’ shelter, Antigone’s “home” is “her tomb”, and she cannot escape it. Further instructions to “wall her up / Inside a cavern” and leave her there “alone, in solitude” illustrate the miserable living situation of *Endgame*’s protagonists; however, the fact that Antigone “may choose” whether to “live / Or die” presents a stark difference from Hamm’s story, for he cannot “choose” to live on any longer. Evidently, “[i]n addition to being a bomb shelter and Noah’s ark, then, the enclosure of *Endgame* is also an Antigone’s cave, its last inhabitant condemned to a few final, starving days of life” (Halpern 744). As such, the “enclosure” could indeed be a grave, the “tomb” where the characters rest eternally (which might explain why “coffins” are not necessary anymore).

Whether Hamm actually dies at the close of the play is debatable. “The tableau begins with Hamm covered by an old sheet; at the end, he places near his face the handkerchief, his last possession” (Adorno 21-2), and cries, “Old stancher!”, after which he orders himself to stay put - “You... remain” (*EG* 84). The command might indicate remaining onstage after the play closes, or remaining alive after the rest of the characters have left. In either case, “Beckett transforms Hamm’s last soliloquy into a performance, his desolation into something prepared by the dramatic machine [...], and the terminal business with the handkerchief into, quite literally, a curtain speech. *Endgame* ends with an unexpected lightness, a death rather mimed than experienced” (Kenner 46). The play reprises the action of the beginning at the end, and as such the circular continuity that defines *Waiting for Godot* is again utilized by Beckett as a tool for showing a lack of finality. Indeed, Steven Connor notes that:



In Beckett's works, the only way to be sure of anything is to do it again and, if necessary, once more again. But it is in the nature of compulsive repetition to be unsatisfying, since the very need to repeat signals some inadequacy, some imperfection in what is called upon to be repeated. *Waiting for Godot* and *Endgame* not only repeat themselves constantly, in words and actions, but also explore the consolations and disappointments of repetitive behaviour in the characters. Pure presence is impossible in a world in which, on the one hand, nothing can happen once and for all, and, on the other, nothing can be guaranteed as having been accurately repeated. (8)

Hamm's lonesome preparation for his presumed death after Clov's dismissal repeats the opening "tableau" of the play, thereby affirming that "nothing can happen once and for all", since there is always the possibility of the same sequence being replicated again and, "if necessary, once more again". It is possible that he does die - preferable, even, so that he and his son might be relieved of their suffering. But Hamm's death remains uncertain, just as "nothing is certain" and "nothing's firm" for Estragon and the messenger who brings the news of Haemon's death in *Antigone*.

Death is "rather mimed than experienced" in *Waiting for Godot* as well, for none of its characters literally dies in the course of the play. In fact, only one character's death is actualized (and certain) between Beckett's two texts: the death of Nell. Nell, presumably the mother of Hamm and the second parent discarded in the trash bins, is barely spoken to or addressed by the tyrannical father. She is described as having a "[v]ery white face" (*EG* 14), and Clov bleakly announces that "[s]he has no pulse" (23). She describes herself as being "perished" (16), which, if taken literally, is a confirmation of her death. (In order of utterance, Nell's physical condition is

“perished”, Nagg is “freezing” (16), Clov is “cold” (65), and Hamm is “freezing” (67), which gives Clov the most time before he finally dies.) Nell definitively tells Nagg, “I am going to leave you” (19), and, unlike Estragon, Vladimir, and Clov, keeps her promise by leaving eternally. After her lengthy absence inside the bin, Hamm commands Clov, rather strangely while in the middle of discussing his “prolonged creative effort” (61), to check up on her;

*Hamm: Go and see is she dead.*

*(Clov goes to bins, raises the lid of Nell’s, stoops, looks into it. Pause.)*

*Clov: Looks like it.*

*(He closes the lid, straightens up. Hamm raises his toque. Pause. He puts it on again.)*

*Hamm: (with his hand to his toque): And Nagg?*

*(Clov raises lid of Nagg’s bin, stoops, looks into it. Pause.)*

*Clov: Doesn’t look like it.*

*(He closes the lid, straightens up.)*

*Hamm (letting go his toque): What’s he doing?*

*(Clov raises lid of Nagg’s bin, stoops, looks into it. Pause.)*

*Clov: He’s crying.*

*(He closes lid, straightens up.)*

*Hamm: Then he’s living. (62)*

Nagg alone mourns his wife and cries for her, an act which is interpreted by Hamm as simply a sign of life.<sup>29</sup> Soon enough, however, all is forgotten and the old man resumes “[s]ucking his biscuit” (66). “Life goes on” (67), Hamm comments, and the living-dead characters continue their “playing” (77) without end. Nevertheless, Nell’s life does not pass unnoticed, for she proves herself an essential character to the entire play. While discussing the availability of biscuits, Nell wisely explains ‘happiness’ to Nagg:

*Nell (without lowering her voice): Nothing’s funnier than unhappiness, I grant you that. But—*

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<sup>29</sup> Nell had earlier tried to cry, but failed, which, according to Hamm’s logic, supports the assumption that she’s not living (“Are you crying again?” asks Nagg, to which she replies, “I was trying”, 20).

*Nagg (shocked):* Oh!

*Nell:* Yes, yes, it's the most comical thing in the world. And we laugh, we laugh, with a will, in the beginning. But it's always the same thing. Yes, it's like the funny story we have heard too often, we still find it funny, but we don't laugh any more. (18-9)

“Nothing's funnier than unhappiness”, yet there is no more laughter in Hamm and Clov's world, despite the unhappiness surrounding them all; “[h]umor itself has become foolish, ridiculous” (Adorno 24), and the players cannot “laugh any more” even though they “still find it funny”, still find the lousiness of their action and their existence, in limbo, “funny”. Nell succinctly points to the central theme of the play, an ongoing thread that also runs in *Waiting for Godot*, that “it's always the same thing”, and that “same thing”, that “habit”, according to Vladimir, truly “is a great deadener”. In both narratives, the “habit” of waiting and doing nothing increases the suffering of the characters while slowly killing them. There can be no escape, and, like Antigone, who “chose death” and soon enough received “nothing more, and nothing less” (498), as promised by Creon, Beckett's characters must live with the consequences of their choices, for “[l]ife goes on” with or without them.

The choices of the past at times haunt Clov's memory and refuse to leave him. “There's one thing I'll never understand”, he wonders - “Why I always obey you. Can you explain that to me?”. Hamm answers “No... Perhaps it's compassion”, which is a ridiculous explanation, considering his problematic relationship with his son (*EG* 76). But “habit” is not a satisfactory answer either. Although the idea of ‘choice’ seems too farfetched for these characters, it's important to try and read the play detached “from an essentially sentimental commitment to simplistic ‘destiny’” (Kenner 46), even when the idea of “destiny” or fate does serve a meager function, as is the case in *Antigone*.

Elements of comedy are almost completely absent from the play, and the few “jokes of the damaged people are themselves damaged. They no longer reach anybody; the state of decline, admittedly a part of all jokes, [...] now covers them like a rash” (Adorno 24). One example of these “damaged” jokes comes up when Clov clownishly decides to drop his telescope:

Things are livening up.  
(*He gets up on ladder, raises the telescope, lets it fall.*)  
I did it on purpose.  
(*He gets down, picks up the telescope, turns it on auditorium.*)  
I see... a multitude... in transports... of joy. (EG 29)

Clov’s deadpan statement that “I did it on purpose” hardly brings the “multitude” in the theatre space (and beyond) any feeling of “joy”, yet his request for a passing laugh resembles Estragon’s entreaty for pity, and the two fail miserably in their demands: Clov’s action arouses pity instead of laughter, while Estragon’s argument with Vladimir brings about laughter instead of pity. Moreover, the protagonists of *Endgame* are themselves deadened by their “state of decline”, and cannot muster enough energy to try to laugh anymore:

*Hamm*: The whole thing is comical, I grant you that. What about having a good guffaw the two of us together?  
*Clov (after reflection)*: I couldn’t guffaw again today.  
*Hamm (after reflection)*: Nor I. (60)

Perhaps, like Nell, Hamm and Clov laughed away the time “in the beginning”, but now that they’ve neared the end, they “don’t laugh any more”, even though the “whole thing is [still] comical”. The absence of laughter, like the lack of material supplies and absence of sustainable living conditions, increases the protagonists’ suffering in the course of the play.

Is the suffering of the characters in *Endgame* enough to categorize it as tragedy? In examining the play’s tragic elements, several factors help support such classification.

Going back to Aristotle's criteria for tragic writing, it's necessary to point to the plot, dialogue and characters of the play. According to Stanley Cavell:

the ground of the play's quality is the *ordinariness* of its events. It is true that what we are given to see are two old people sticking half up out of trash cans, and an extraordinarily garbed blind paraplegic who imposes bizarre demands on the only person who can carry them out, the only inhabitant of that world who has remaining to him the power of motion. But [...] they are simply a family.

(60-1)

They are certainly not a simple family, but the emotions contained within the little circle that forms their "home", what with their constant bickering and threats of abandonment, understandably makes them "simply a family". However, the bizarre weather conditions and the protagonists' constant fear of outside beings augment the initial plot: the narrative still revolves around a family, except that that family is also possibly living in a post-nuclear war or post-second flood world, or is possibly altogether dead. The narrative has been interpreted and analyzed through other frameworks as well, such as that of a chess game (Kenner 42-3). Indeed, the "play contains whatever ideas we discern inside it; no idea contains the play" (47).

Like *Waiting for Godot*, *Endgame* gives the impression that the components of tragedy - of drama, more precisely - are missing. Yet, as Theodor Adorno crucially notes:

Dramatic components reappear after their demise. Exposition, complication, plot, peripeteia, and catastrophe return as decomposed elements in a post-mortem examination of dramaturgy: the news that there are no more painkillers depicts catastrophe. Those components have been toppled along with that

meaning once discharged by drama; *Endgame* studies (as if in a test-tube) the drama of the age, the age that no longer tolerates what constitutes drama. (26)

But the “meaning once discharged by [the] drama” of older days is still realized through the narrative *despite* the changes in its presentation - its style, so to say - to accommodate “the drama of the age, the age that no longer tolerates what constitutes drama”.<sup>30</sup> Indeed, this “new sort” (McDonald 129) of tragedy still relies on traditional “dramatic components”, such as plot, to convey the story at hand, since there can be no other way of refiguring drama except by employing its very constituents to create different levels of meaning.

The language used in *Endgame* is similar to that in *Waiting for Godot*, and both plays witness a severing in forms of verbal communication. As Adorno notes, “*Endgame* contains rapid, monosyllabic dialogues, like the earlier question-and-answer games between the blinded king and fate’s messenger [...] Short of breath until they almost fall silent, they no longer manage the synthesis of linguistic phrases” (26-7). As such, the characters are further isolated within themselves, “stammer[ing] in protocol sentences” even when the others refuse to hear them (27). One specific scenario of the shortening of dialogue stands out in relation to *Waiting for Godot*:

*Hamm*: Have you the glass?

*Clov*: No, it’s clear enough as it is.

*Hamm*: Go and get it.

(Pause. *Clov casts up his eyes, brandishes his fists. He loses balance, clutches on to the ladder. He starts to get down, halts.*) (EG 75)

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<sup>30</sup> “It’s not the truth of these things that matters, Beckett suggests; it’s the language, the style, the rightness of the words in which the truth(less) is couched. ‘I am interested’, Beckett said, ‘in the shape of ideas even if I do not believe in them... It is the shape that matters’ (Calderwood 38).

Clov's action is identical to Estragon's, when he brandishes his fists and screams "at the top of his voice" to God: "have pity on me!" The marked difference, of course, rests in the absence of speech; there is no more screaming, no entreaty to a God, and no more "pity". In fact, "pity" is not of prime concern for the characters, suggesting that the situation in the shelter is beyond repair. And yet, despite the characters' apathetic demeanor, "pity and fear" are sufficiently aroused in the readers to make them realize the tragedy at hand. The brief scenario is somewhat comparable to the boy's coming, or at least the illusion of his coming, for there, too, speech is not required in order to represent action and assure the progression of the narrative. In these cases, language altogether is omitted to emphasize the feebleness of the protagonists' condition.

Depriving the narrative of viable dialogue and a fully comprehensible plot (for the plot is, admittedly, confusing) works effectively to create meaning and portray a tragedy in which suffering is the only answer. "What suffering besets the whole race of men!" cries Creon, while Vladimir wonders, "Was I sleeping, while the others suffered?". But *Endgame* gives little consideration to the rest of the world, to "the whole race of men", the "others", who are presumably dead after the alleged catastrophes that befell the world. "Outside of here it's death!" exclaims Hamm, and that is enough reason for him to dispose of the rest of the world, just as he disposed of his parents. He asks, "Can there be misery [...]—loftier than mine?", and quickly answers himself, "Oh I am willing to believe they suffer as much as such creatures can suffer. But does that mean their sufferings equal mine? No doubt." (*EG* 2); however, considering that he's made Clov (as well as his parents) "suffer too much" (7), it remains highly questionable to what degree he can sympathize with the "others" who share his "home". In his opinion, "suffering" does not extend to anything beyond his person, neither the people

from the past nor the ones in the future (and the entire narrative is very pessimistic about the possibility of a future). As such, the “diminishing fraternity” in Beckett’s world is reconfirmed by Hamm’s rigid belief in his individual, solitary possession of the ‘loftiest’ “misery” on earth.

“Why are we suffering?” remains an open-ended question at the close of the play. As with *Antigone* and *Waiting for Godot*, suffering in *Endgame* necessarily reaches the characters and exhausts them mercilessly, and the “why” eludes all sorts of rationalizations and analyses. As Hamm correctly notes, “[t]he thing is impossible” (*EG* 8).



## V. CONCLUSION

In *Sweet Violence: The Idea of the Tragic*, Terry Eagleton refuses to define tragedy in strictly conventional or Aristotelian terms, and asserts that: “Tragedy is not just about things ending badly [...] Tragedy can also mean that one must be hauled through hell to have any chance of freedom or fulfilment” (57). But the tragedy depicted in the texts discussed in this thesis shows that things end “badly” *because* the characters are “hauled through hell”, and though Antigone does, to a certain extent, reach “freedom and fulfilment” through her actions, it is highly improbable that Beckett’s characters accomplish a similar result. Antigone takes a brave step and chooses unlawfully to bury her brother regardless of definite future implications and retributions, and through her action displays a human will and a persistent character defying typical reason and rationality. Vladimir and Estragon try to distract themselves from their living conditions but fail at forgetting their reality, and at different points of the play the horror of survival encroaches on them and creeps in from without. Hamm and Clov cannot endure “playing” anymore, but cannot stop either, and the death that surrounds them no longer threatens them with its finality, since they yearn for the end of their lives. The problems faced by the characters in each tale are widely different and complex, yet the same sense of despair and hopelessness ties them all together and holds them in the tight grip of suffering. Bushnell says that “we seek meaning in tragedy, looking there for knowledge gained through suffering or simply the strange reassurance that what happened was necessary, that it had to be so” (53). This “inevitability” of tragedy is certainly compelling, and, when all other reason fails, enough.

The present thesis examined components of conventional tragedy found in Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* and *Endgame*, two of the author's most celebrated works, and showed how they speak to a longer tragic tradition, as evinced by their connections to Sophocles' *Antigone*, an exemplary model of classic Greek tragedy. Traditional definitions of the genre were elicited from Aristotle's *Poetics*, which itself relies on classical Greek dramas such as *Antigone* to delineate the criteria of tragedy and exemplify the necessary components that make a play tragic, and these definitions guide the discussion in all three chapters of the thesis by focusing on plot, dialogue, and character analysis. Additionally, the theme of suffering, which joins the literary texts together and reconfirms the tragedy of their narratives, is explored in each chapter.

For the most part, the literature available on Beckett has focused on studying his texts against a modern literary background, and reads his oeuvre in relation to his contemporaries. In this thesis, I read Beckett in relation to Sophocles' classic Greek *Antigone* and show that, despite their use of modern dramatic techniques to fit the author's time and age, his plays connect to an older tragic tradition in several ways. Further research on the extent of Beckett's engagement with texts of classic tragedy would enrich Beckettian studies: What other Greek texts have influenced Beckett's plays, and how does he continue the conversation with that longer history of tragedy in his work?

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