

Student's last name followed by the page number as a running header

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A True Expression of Trauma:

An Examination of Absurdity and History in Samuel Beckett's *Endgame*

Changes to the original text must be written in square brackets

Indent paragraph

In the essay "Close-Ups," Adam Phillips declares that any "coherent account a person can give of their history is, by definition, a defensive account," because a "modern person distances themselves from their history through narrative coherence and plausibility" (149). It is this exact idea that "[a] good story is bad history" which Samuel Beckett responds to in *Endgame*. As Phillips explains, it is impossible to write a "coherent, intelligible narrative about events that rendered people vague, incoherent, numbed and hurried" (148). How can one write a true history of events like the Holocaust, the bombing of Hiroshima, the American slave trade, or the Irish famine without communicating the very absurdity of them? Beckett is a playwright who was motivated by some form of this question; accordingly, his works express "the senselessness of the human condition and the inadequacy of the rational approach" (*Theatre of the Absurd* 17).

In *Endgame*, Beckett does not allude to historical events; rather, he evokes the incoherence and absurdity of having experienced them purely through the formal elements of the play. These formal elements include the use of repetition, the failure of language to convey meaning, and the use of questions.

The punctuation is placed after the parentheses in short quotations.

Beckett begins *Endgame* with a repetitive speech that immediately communicates the notion of absurdity to the reader:

CLOV (*fixed gaze, tonelessly*):

Introduce quotations and integrate them into your own writing – do not leave them sitting as independent sentences.

Finished, it's finished, nearly finished, it must be nearly finished.

(Pause)

Grain upon grain, one by one, and one day, suddenly, there's

Cite long quotations with the author (if he/she is not included in the sentence before the quotation) and page number in brackets following the punctuation.

A heap, a little heap, the impossible heap. (1)

When two works by the same author are used in a paper, a shortened version of the title should be included between the author's name (which is within the text in this example) and the page number.

In these lines, the word that starts each sentence also appears in the middle and the end. Clov's multiple repetitions make his speech seem almost circular in nature and, therefore, unintelligible to the reader.... [section continues]

Beckett continues to evoke incoherence by revealing how language continually fails witnesses of catastrophic events. For example, Hamm struggles to find the words to discuss the post-apocalyptic world that he inhabits:

HAMM: Do you not think *this* has gone on long enough?

CLOV: Yes!

Quotation from a play that is longer than three lines

(Pause.)

What?

Explanation of changes made to a quotation (using italics to add emphasis is generally the only acceptable change to make without using square brackets).

HAMM: This...this...*thing*. (45, emphasis added)

Hamm's inability to identify the world he lives in as anything more than "this" or "thing" is indicative of the problem of translating the true spirit of traumatic events into words... **[section continues]**

Phillips concludes "Close-Ups" by leaving the reader with the question of "how to historicize too-closeness" (149). In *Endgame*, Beckett seems to propose that the key to telling the truth about the traumatic events we experience is to communicate the absolute absurdity of them.

He evokes the true feelings of events like the Holocaust and the Irish Famine not by attempting to situate them in a coherent and plausible narrative, but by writing a babbling, vague, disconnected, and repetitive play about people who experienced some unknown tragedy and are left unable to explain it or even name it. Ultimately, one is left to wonder whether or not *Endgame*, and not Steven Spielberg's *Schindler's List* or Roméo Dallaire's *Shake Hands with the Devil*, should be revered as the most authentic account of every atrocity in human history.

Works Cited

Beckett, Samuel. *Endgame*. New York: Grove Press, 1958.

Esslin, Martin. *Absurd Drama*. Middlesex: Penguin, 1969.

---. *The Theatre of the Absurd*. London: Eyre & Spottiswoode, 1966.

Phillips, Adam. "Close-ups." *History Workshop Journal* 57.1 (2004): 142-149.

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- **Hanging Indent:** The first line of the entry is flush with the left margin, and all subsequent lines are indented (5 to 7 spaces) to form a "hanging indent."
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Modern Language Association of America. *MLA Handbook for Writers of Research Papers*. 7th ed. New York:

MLA, 2009. Print.

Purdue OWL. "MLA Formatting and Style Guide." *The Purdue OWL*. Purdue U Writing Lab, 11 Jan. 2010.

Web. 20 Jan. 2010.

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