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Moral Impotence in Muddy Existence: Analysing the Shaping of Samuel Beckett's Existentialism in *How It Is* and *Endgame*

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Citation

Hammes, D. (2024). *Moral Impotence in Muddy Existence: Analysing the Shaping of Samuel Beckett's Existentialism in *How It Is* and *Endgame**.

Version: Not Applicable (or Unknown)

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Note: To cite this publication please use the final published version (if applicable).

Moral Impotence in Muddy Existence

Analysing the Shaping of Samuel Beckett's Existentialism in *How It Is* and *Endgame*

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Literary Studies: English Literature and Culture

Date of Submission .02.2024

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Introduction:

According to Ulrika Maude, Samuel Beckett's work was read alongside existentialist philosophy, especially that of Jean-Paul Sartre, from its early reception (4). This tradition was eventually neglected, and Sartre completely "disappeared" from the field of intellectual reference (Connor 56). Despite claims, like Dermot Moran's, that "Beckett 'was not a philosopher; if he had been, he would not have needed to engage with art'" (qtd in Maude 1), Beckett's work can hardly be read without recognising the philosophical themes present within. Garin Dowd identifies in Beckett's oeuvre traces of the writings of Plotinus, Descartes, Kant, Leibniz, Geulincx, Spinoza and Berkeley (20). Matthew Feldman considers Beckett "to be among the most philosophical of modernists" (335), noting Beckett's engagement with the works of Giordano Bruno, Giambattista Vico and Arthur Schopenhauer. Concerning its early pairing with Sartre, however, Feldman writes that "variously seeing in Beckett's works evidence of existentialism, absurdism or nihilism ... early philosophical readings may now appear somewhat dated" (333). Recent scholarship no longer approaches Beckett's texts from the perspective of existential philosophies, and mention of the absurdist philosophy of Albert Camus is even more scarce. John Calder writes that "no one can accuse [Beckett] of total nihilism, although attempts to link him the existentialism of Sartre and the negativism of Heidegger are interesting" (43). Again, Camus is excluded from the discussion of Beckett even in the context of existential philosophical studies.

Instead of looking at Beckett through the lens of any specific philosophical theory, Feldman suggests that "Beckett's work may be seen as co-evolving with, or even anticipating, some of the major themes in contemporary philosophy (such as phenomenology or even Derrida's poststructuralist philosophy)" (338). This paper considers Beckett's work to be evolving also alongside the major developments made by the French existentialist thinkers Jean-Paul Sartre, Simone de Beauvoir and Albert Camus. It is the aim of this paper to revisit two of Beckett's major works, *How It Is* (1964) and *Endgame* (1957), to not only read them through the lens of existential philosophy, but to analyse how existential themes expressed through the use of modernist literary techniques formed the final shape

of the two texts and to determine to what degree Beckett's views on existential ideas align and differ from those of Sartre, Camus and de Beauvoir, who were all Beckett's contemporaries. Beebe cites existentialism as "the dominant belief of writers and artist throughout the Modernist period" (1070). While not every writer of the period may have engaged with existential philosophy, Beebe calls it a "significant aspect of the *background* of Modernism" (1070). Beebe moreover argues that existentialism's insistence on the primacy of subjectivity in acknowledging individual responsibility and freedom helps understand why modernist writers often "offer private visions of life which are only incidentally interpretations of life in general" (1070).

It is for that reason that the first chapter of this paper is dedicated to situating Beckett in the context of the modernist movement in Europe, as well as the developments of French existential philosophy made by Camus, Sartre and de Beauvoir, who developed the concepts of absurdity, nausea and ambiguity, respectively. This chapter first traces the major historical events that prompted the crisis of representation that the modernist movement was concerned with according to Pericles Lewis. It then gives an account of the literary techniques that modernist writers developed, which culminated in James Joyce's *Ulysses* (1922). The chapter stresses the importance of Beckett's personal contact with Joyce, before the former would break with Joyce on a personal as well as on a creative level, directing his artistic endeavour into the diametrically opposite direction of Joyce's. The chapter then gives a brief introduction to the concepts of nausea, absurdity, and ambiguity, before ending in a short commentary on Beckett's idiosyncratic way of adopting the above-mentioned techniques and concepts for his own artistic creations.

Chapter two considers *How It Is* as an absurd novel in which the world of mud does not allow the protagonist to lead a meaningful life, but instead affects his body and consciousness with its viscosity. The chapter begins with a textual introduction that highlights the unique shape of the prose, its absence of punctuation, grammar and truncated word groups that replace full-length sentences. The prose is likened to bowel movements and a thickened-out representation of consciousness as it is described by Sartre in an extended use of the viscous as a metaphor for disgust-reactions to existence. The primary narrative voice of the novel is shrouded in doubt, as it is unclear if it belongs to the

protagonist or an other, unidentifiable entity. The novel uses Beckett's impoverishment technique to arrive at an authentic, yet abject representation of consciousness and human essence. It also stresses the impotence of the narrator, who is unable to find or create meaning in the world of mud. Therefore, he initially takes the leap of faith towards believing in divine justice, before admitting to himself that he has been living inauthentically. With nothing left to believe in and no way of meaningful action, he ultimately chooses to die. Chapter two argues for an absurd reading of *How It Is*, in which Beckett explores existential themes, but twists them into a pessimistic expression of human existence, in which humans are free to determine their own purpose and identity, but inevitably fail to connect with others or create meaningful life-narratives for themselves.

The third chapter begins with a textual introduction to *Endgame*, followed by an analysis of the play's implementation of absurd dramatic devices in the context of Martin Esslin's "Theatre of the Absurd". *Endgame* expresses an anti-literary stance through its elements of "pure", abstract theatre and verbal nonsense, attacking language by pointing to its arbitrary human inception and its failure to enable effective and meaningful communication through repetitive, one-directional exchanges. *Endgame* also dramatizes the futility of dwelling in nostalgia, stressing individual freedom and advocating for a constant renewal of the self that will lead to a more authentic way of life, focused on the present. The chapter moreover compares *Endgame* to Sartre's existential play *Huis Clos* (1944). The two plays are structured around a single act, set in one room, and engage with the theme of the "look" of the other. *Endgame* also engages with the concepts of ambiguity and bad faith, expressed through the hesitant, conflicting actions of both Hamm and Clov. Like *How It Is*, *Endgame* is pessimistic about the human ability to create meaning for itself, even going so far as to endorse suicide and condemn procreation. Life is a burden that is more easily carried when one abandons all hope of finding meaning outside one's own mind and living without desire.

Chapter 1: Beckett's Writing in Modernist and Existential Contexts

This chapter introduces the major artistic and philosophical currents that affected Samuel Beckett's writing through his own reading and his acquaintance with James Joyce. Beckett lived in Paris from 1928 until he died in 1989, a period during which Paris was a hotspot for experimental modernist writers from both France and abroad, such as Joyce, Ezra Pound, F. Scott Fitzgerald and Marcel Proust, and lieu of the major developments of existentialist ideas in France.

1.1 Beckett and Modernism

According to Pericles Lewis, the modernist movement grew from a twofold crisis of representation: "a crisis in what could be represented and a crisis in how it should be represented, or in other words a crisis in both the content and the form of artistic representation" (2). Traditional artistic representation seemed no longer adequate, because the wave of historical, economical, scientific and psychoanalytical developments that swept through Europe during the nineteenth century changed people's lives enormously. While Ricardo J. Quinones situates the period of literary modernist developments from around 1900 to 1940, he also acknowledges that these temporal barriers are not immovable (17). Lewis cites the industrial revolution (11), technological innovations (such as electric light, the telephone, the cinema, the automobile), liberal and democratic government (12), the American, French, and later the Russian Revolutions and the First World War (16) among the main political events that fuelled the crisis of representation. Moreover, Charles Darwin's theory of evolution created a direction of intellectual developments led by Karl Marx, Friedrich Nietzsche, and Sigmund Freud, who all "emphasized the idea that humans are primarily biological beings and are not fully aware of all the motives behind their own actions" (Lewis 19). Literature adapted to these changes, exploring how people would not only see the world differently, but also their own subjectivity as humans, in the context of the new scientific, psychological and sociological theories concerning humanity's relation to the natural world and itself.

Many writers of the period developed a new set of experimental techniques that would later become characteristic of what we now refer to as modernist writing. These are some of the techniques that were experimented with: the breaking down of temporal linearity, as seen in Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* (1899); unreliable narration, as in Italo Svevo's *La Coscienza di Zeno* (1923, English translation first published in 1930 as *Confessions of Zeno*); the stream of consciousness narrative technique which was popularised by Virginia Woolf in *Mrs. Dalloway* (1925). James Joyce's *Ulysses* can be regarded as the culmination of the experimental spirit, as it "demonstrates most of the notable characteristics of the modern novel" (Lewis 153). Peter Childs calls *Ulysses* an "eccentric mosaic of techniques which no nineteenth-century realist writer would recognise as a novel" (206) and sees it as a "compendium of Modernist innovations, including stream of consciousness, representation of the flow of experience, images of the disintegrating self, a concern with the artist's aesthetic, a sense of history as tyranny, a fracturing of language" (206). Additionally, Childs writes that "the narrative frequently takes on the manner and often the language of the characters without actually using the first-person or transcribing their speech or thoughts" (204). *How It Is* launches similar attacks on narration. The reader is already made uncertain of whether the narrative voice belongs to the protagonist crawling in the mud, or whether it belongs to an unknown entity quoting a different voice or written notes. Then, the narrative voice additionally focalises through tertiary characters that appear in the novel without clear indicator of such a change. The above-named techniques were methods for the modernist writers to make their texts more complex, multi-faceted and thus more properly representative of the complexity of human collective and individual lived experience in the modern world.

Samuel Beckett was born in 1906 in Dublin, Ireland, in the middle of the period of literary and artistic development known as modernism. He first moved to Paris in 1928, where he studied at the École Normale Supérieure. During his first sojourn in Paris, he met James Joyce through a close friend. At the time of their meeting, Joyce was already a renowned writer whom Beckett admired greatly (Bair 66). Joyce is considered among the most significant modernist artists by Pericles Lewis (5), a position he earned through the critical success of *Ulysses*. Ronan McDonald writes of their

agreement on social and aesthetic issues: “Both came from middle-class families, both spurned the narrow cultural nationalism of the Irish Revival and both were passionately committed to the modernist and experimental literature of continental Europe” (10). The relationship between Beckett and Joyce deepened to a moment, approximately 1929, when Beckett would act as Joyce’s scribe for *Work in Progress*, Joyce’s final work that he would never finish, but which would eventually be published as *Finnegan’s Wake* (1939). It may have seemed likely for Beckett to follow in Joyce’s literary footsteps considering their aesthetic and personal affinity, but this was not the case. By contrast, Beckett decided to develop his artistic endeavours into a diametrically opposite direction, as he told James Knowlson, who published a collection of interviews and conversations with Beckett:

I realised that Joyce had gone as far as one could in the direction of knowing more, in control of one’s material. He was always *adding* to it; you only have to look at his proofs to see that. I realised that my own way was in impoverishment, in lack of knowledge and in taking away, subtracting rather than adding. (47)

Beckett’s choice to develop his writing into the opposite direction of Joyce’s was not only a way for him to free himself of Joyce’s creative influence on his writing, but Beckett chose the way of impoverishment also because “for Beckett, Joyce presents human experience as too rationally explicable, too readily reducible to the logical imperative of cause and effect.” (77), as Doug Battersby suggests. Beckett did not believe that pure, authentic consciousness could be represented or explained by rational means, and that, as he puts it in an interview with Martin Esslin, “I take away all the accidentals because I want to bedrock of the essentials, the archetypal” (qtd in Knowlson 47-9). Beckett developed his own technique of impoverishment because it seemed to him a more effective way to unravel and represent human consciousness within the modern age in its most essential and authentic state than the way of the modernist writers. These differences are an important part of the reason why Beckett is often excluded from the modernist movement. His title as a late modernist instead is due to the fact that, despite his rejection of some of the techniques that characterise the modernist movement, his goal to continuously and relentlessly question and attack the efficacy of

language until its potential to represent real things is revealed, remains aligned with the goals of the modernist movement (Battersby 80).

While the modernist and late modernist writers were probing into the potential of language as a tool to represent reality, the mid-twentieth century existential thinkers Jean-Paul Sartre, Albert Camus and Simone de Beauvoir were developing philosophical ideas that expressed a shared interest with the modernist authors in subjectivity, authenticity and the indeterminacy of meaning.

1.2 Existentialism and the Absurd: Sartre, Camus and de Beauvoir

The word “absurd” is a term that is colloquially used to refer to things of which meaning is either absent or obscured. In a philosophical context however, it describes a specific feeling of disconnect between an individual and the world around them. Sartre explored this feeling of disconnect extensively in his first novel *Nausea* (French *La Nausée* 1938). *Nausea* is a diary-style novel which recounts the experiences and emotions of Antoine Roquentin as he lives an isolated life in the fictional town Bouville. He grows more and more out of touch with the world around him and experiences a sensation of nausea whenever he interacts with it. Acknowledging the sensation of nausea means to engage with one’s own present existence. In *Being and Nothingness: An Essay on Phenomenological Ontology* (1943), Sartre develops an existential philosophical system based on phenomenology. In *Beckett and Phenomenology* (2009), Ulrika Maude and Matthew Feldman explain phenomenology as follows:

Phenomenology, in its most basic sense, is the field of philosophy dedicated to the study of ‘phenomena’ as they appear to the experiencing consciousness. The word ‘phenomena’, in turn, refers to appearances as opposed to ‘reality’. Central to the field of phenomenology is the experiencing subject. (2)

Sartre grounds his existential philosophy in a phenomenological understanding of the world and subjective consciousness. Maude and Feldman moreover note the affinity in preoccupation with consciousness between phenomenology and modernist literature (3). Beckett shows the same

interest, using his way of impoverishment to arrive at an authentic literary representation of individual human consciousness. Sartre's phenomenology, specifically his metaphors of the fluid and the viscous as they relate to consciousness, will thus serve as a foundation for analysing the way in which Beckett represents muddled consciousness in *How It Is*.

Camus' preoccupation lies with the feeling of the absurd, which springs from a disjunction between the human desire for unity and meaning and a world that is inherently indifferent to human existence: "what is absurd is the confrontation of the irrational and the wild longing for clarity whose call echoes in the human heart. The absurd depends as much on man as on the world. For the moment it is all that links them together" (17). In *The Myth of Sisyphus* (1942), Camus posits as the most important of all philosophical questions that of suicide. Since humanity lives in a world does not reflect its desires, but is indifferent to humans, is life worth living at all? The answer that he arrives at by the end of his treatise is "yes." While humanity is cursed from the first moment with death and labour, Camus focuses his attention not on Sisyphus pushing the boulder up the hill, but in the moment of respite when he walks down after reaching the top. Camus writes that "the sorrow was in the beginning" (88), but that with time, humans adapt to their condition and are able to find happiness among the endless toiling. Despite living in an irrational world, humans are still free to act and create their own fates within the limitations of the absurd. Camus finishes his treatise with the famous proposition that "The struggle itself towards the heights is enough to fill a man's heart. One must imagine Sisyphus happy." (89). Camus imagines that during the moments of respite, Sisyphus is a free man who can clear his mind of his labour to muse on his condition, and eventually even find moments of happiness during this brief, but reoccurring moment of freedom. The following two chapters will discuss in more detail how the fictional worlds and characters of *How It Is* and *Endgame* represent Camus' theory of the absurd conflict, as well as the ways in which the characters struggle against the absurd, but eventually fail.

De Beauvoir is the third important existentialist thinker for this study who lived and wrote in mid-twentieth century France. In *The Ethics of Ambiguity* (1947), de Beauvoir developed her own theory on the ambiguous nature of human existence that she differentiates from Sartre's concept of

“nausea” and Camus’ concept of the “absurd”. According to de Beauvoir: “The notion of ambiguity must not be confused with that of absurdity. To declare that existence is absurd is to deny that it can ever be given a meaning; to say that it is ambiguous is to assert that its meaning is never fixed, that it must be constantly won” (63). Her *Ethics* states that humans are forever torn between two conflicting aspects of their being, their freedom and their facticity. The goal of living authentically is reached by rejecting neither aspect of one’s being, but by acknowledging one’s freedom and using it to transcend the current factual state of being. De Beauvoir’s concept of ambiguity is also closely related to Sartre’s concept of “bad faith”, which describes an inauthentic way of life in which individuals deny certain aspects of their being. Both ambiguity and bad faith will be discussed in more detail in the following chapters when considering the motivations behind the actions of Clov and the protagonist of *How It Is*.

Beckett’s broader engagement with these writers’ work becomes evident from his literary recommendations to others; they figure in S. E. Gontarski account of Beckett’s reading in his recent collection of essays *Beckett Matters* (2017). Gontarski explains that

Beckett continued to play the role of Modernist tutor, recommending as ‘books you could read’ a list that lays out a certain tradition in contemporary French literature, including Sartre’s *La Nausée*, ... and Camus’s *L’Etranger* (Letters 2 493). The suggestions themselves detail Beckett’s debt to his age (9)

Gontarski comments on Beckett’s reading interests that they indicate Beckett’s longing for an “elsewhere” (9). While Beckett was naturally influenced by his reading, he chose his reading interests because he felt that they shared an affinity with his own literary interests and were taking him to that “elsewhere.”

Of Beckett’s oeuvre, Gontarski writes that it “was the product of an artist who underwent serial re-conceptions, transformations and reinventions over his long writing career, and so his work is not easily classifiable, characterised as it is by change, movement, denials, rejections and negations” (2). This description of Beckett’s oeuvre is extremely poignant as it is consistent with Sartre’s views

on the meaning of life, as quoted by Gontarski from Adam Buben's *Existentialism and the Desirability of Immortality* (2022): "death is never that which gives life its meanings; it is, on the contrary, that which on principle removes all meaning from life. If we must die, then our life has no meaning because its problems receive no solution and because the very meaning of the problems remains undetermined" (93). The variety in style and content throughout his works is a mirror of Beckett's own continuously evolving search for meaning. Still, Beckett's oeuvre was idiosyncratic to the point that scholars such as Ronan McDonald would condense his legacy in the adjective "Beckettian" (1). His authenticity lies in his refusal to work within existing genres. Instead, he turned to various literary conventions, adopting them as flexible tools to create his own unique works of art. Yet in that sense, like every writer, even Beckett was inevitably a product of his time as he read the literature of his contemporaries and his literary predecessors and utilised some of the tools he gained from their instruction to his own ends. In the preface to his influential study *The Theatre of the Absurd* (1961), Martin Esslin notes that "Artists who follow their intuition are usually unaware of what their works may have in common with the general approach or atmosphere of their period" (xvi). The following chapters will show just to what extent the modernist tradition as well as existentialist ideas contributed to the shaping of Beckett's *How It Is* and *Endgame*, and how Beckett's impoverishment technique is a kindred spirit to the concepts of nausea and absurdity. By breaking down more complex images and language into smaller, more essential parts of the whole, Beckett tries to reach a more authentic, truer representation of what reality might be.

Chapter 2: Confronting Life in the Existential Mud of *How It Is*

This chapter will analyse how the textual shape of *How It Is* collaborates with its content to create an undecorated and grotesque image of the human condition. This chapter will then analyse the novel's narrative as it is told by the protagonist and reveal underlying concepts of existential philosophy such as absurdity, authenticity, the philosophical suicide, free agency, the viscous and suicide.

Experimenting with phenomenological Existentialism in *How It Is*, Beckett portrays consciousness and the body's materiality in a primordial state, emphasizing their viscous nature and their incompetency to create lasting meaning which leads the protagonist to abandon life altogether.

Beckett thus explores his own branch of existential philosophy, which devalues human agency while suggesting the impossibility of meaningful living.

2.1 Textual Introduction

How It Is was Beckett's last novel. It followed in the wake of what critics often refer to as Beckett's trilogy of novels. Each novel from the trilogy was first published in French (under the names *Molloy* (1951), *Malone Meurt* (1951) and *L'Innomable* (1953), respectively) and later translated into English by Beckett as *Molloy* (1955), *Malone Dies* (1956) and *The Unnamable* (1958). The trilogy is known as such because, for scholars, it represents a break from Beckett's previous style of writing. A significant change in narrative technique occurs, from third-person omniscient narrator, in *Murphy* (1938), *Watt* (1953), *Mercier and Camier* (1970), to the first-person interior monologue in *Molloy*'s famous opening line: "I am in my mother's room" (3). The birth of this interior narrative voice allowed Beckett's prose to become more abstract, more subjective, which in turn allowed the author to explore territories of subjectivity that a third-person narrative style cannot reach because it lacks direct authenticity in the representation of interior thought. The turn to interiority and subjectivity aligns with "Sartre's insistence that existential philosophy 'must begin from the

subjective’” (Smith 28), as existential philosophy focuses on the ways an individual can lead an authentic meaningful life independent from often oppressive external value-systems.

How It Is is a complex, experimental novel in terms of both content and form. It tells of a blind man lying face-down in the mud, unaware of anything, except for hearing an inner voice, whose words he mutters to the mud, “how it was I quote before Pim with Pim after Pim how it is three parts I say it as I hear it” (411). From this position he crawls forward slowly and laboriously until he encounters Pim, who is in a similar situation to himself. The protagonist then physically abuses Pim for his own satisfaction until the latter eventually frees himself and abandons him. The protagonist is unnamed, but I will from here on out refer to him as Bom, following the example of his future torturer: “the one I’m waiting for oh not that I believe in him I say it as I hear it he can give me another it will be my first Bom he can call me Bom for more commodity” (452). The novel is divided into three parts “for the sake of clarity” (425), as Bom suggests: part one tells of Bom as he compulsively crawls in the mud before meeting Pim, part two of his time together with Pim and part three of his abandonment after Pim leaves him. Over the course of the novel, Bom tries to conceive of a meaning to his existence, inventing additional characters who play specific roles in the picture he paints of his situation, but which he must eventually discard to face himself alone in the mud.

In *Samuel Beckett’s How It Is: Philosophy in Translation* (2018), Anthony Cordingley sheds light on the darkness in *How It Is*, taking a variety of philosophical approaches to the text’s meaning:

A critical commonplace maintains that *How It Is* almost exclusively reflects its procedures of articulation or composition, thereby divorcing the narrative voice from a signifying narrative.

My seven chapters are devoted to specific areas within the history of philosophy that have shaped its subject matter. (1)

Cordingley mainly turns to questions of space, time and the cosmological order of *How It Is* as explored by pre-Socratic and Platonic dialectic philosophy, as well as the educational method of the *paideia*, an ancient Greek educational system aimed at moulding young boys into model citizens by

way of teaching them a broad variety of subjects in the arts, sciences and social values, including physical exercise.

Cordingley also explores the topic of asceticism, Christian salvation and the parody thereof through Beckett's usage and mockery of Blaise Pascal and his work. Finally, he looks to the early modern Christian philosophers and mathematicians Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz and Baruch Spinoza to explore Beckett's use of mathematical theory and language in *How It Is*.

Overall, Cordingley establishes a web of intertextuality between *How It Is* and the works of the above-named philosophers to read the novel as the metatextual epic of a hero travelling a disorienting underworld of fragmented storytelling and seeking divine restoration to his former self.

This paper will add to the philosophical critical approaches to *How It Is* that of Beckett's contemporary existentialist thinkers Albert Camus and Jean-Paul Sartre, with the main focus being on the idea of the absurd. There are many benefits to reading the novel as an absurd and phenomenological work through its content and form. The notion of the absurd in particular is frequently connected to Beckett's works, especially his dramatic works, which were featured prominently in Martin Esslin's seminal study *The Theatre of the Absurd*. The concept "Theatre of the Absurd" is an umbrella term coined by Esslin to include playwrights who independently created theatre that contains existential themes in its content while being shaped absurdly, or irrationally. They are plays without a clear plot that aims to expose to the bones the absurd truth of the human condition, that existence precedes essence, that meaning does not exist outside of human agency and that humans are condemned to be free in an irrational world. According to Esslin, the plays of the "Theatre of the Absurd" differ from those of the existentialist playwrights, because the existentialist playwrights express those themes through a logically progressing plot that is often grounded in reality (6). While not a play, *How It Is* contains aspects of absurdist drama as it does not follow a logically progressing plot, nor is it presented in a conventional novelistic literary form.

2.2 The Intermingling of Narrative Voices

In *How It Is*, the absurd content is expressed through a suitable experimental form, the most radical aspect of which is the absence of all punctuation and grammar. Grammar is a linguistic tool developed to make the communication of thoughts and ideas between individuals easier and clearer (Swan 151). Beckett rejects the proper grammatical forms in *How It Is* to undress this kind of language. He seeks to represent the incessant interior voice in a natural, naked state. Referring to this kind of presentation of the voice as authentic might be careless, seeing as the thoughts that reach the reader in the final text of *How It Is* are multiple times removed from the original, authentic thoughts proper to the protagonist of the novel. Beckett makes use of a complex net of narrative voices in the novel, so that the reader feels uncertainty as to whose voice they might be reading at any moment. However, regardless of who the original voice may belong to, the absence of grammar helps represent that voice in a more primal state, better representative of authentic, un-stylized thoughts. Beckett is approaching that level of authentic subjectivity that existentialism uses as a starting point.

The opening paragraph of the novel reads as follows: “how it was I quote before Pim with Pim after Pim how it is three parts I say it as I hear it” (411). Already the reader is informed that the narrator does not necessarily share his own story or views, but seemingly quotes those of another subject, who is dictating them. But as the reader continues, they quickly learn the words’ origin: “scraps of an ancient voice in me not mine” (411). The narrator does not claim this voice as his own, but it exists independently within him. The narrator then introduces one or two additional characters, whose task it is to record the words the narrator murmurs lying in the mud: “someone listening another noting or the same” (411). The narrator is not sure whether the tasks of listening and noting are being accomplished by one or more individuals. What is important about this statement is the suggested idea that the reader is currently reading the record of the narrator’s murmuring. The reader is thus already two to three times removed from the original voice: it is first filtered through the narrator hearing and quoting the voice, then through the individual listening to the narrator’s murmurings, who is later named Kram, and who communicates the words to the scribe, named Krim. Or if Kram and Krim are the same, then our reading would be twice removed from the original voice.

The barriers between the individual characters and voices become muddled when Krim and Kram's voices are narrated without clear indication of the change in narrated voice. Only through the fact that they have slightly dissimilar "speaking habits" from Bom and that their topics of discussion are expressed from a different point of view from that of Bom's inner voice does the reader notice that a change has taken place. So for example a dialogue between Krim and Kram is introduced in the style of a dramatic script, which is difficult to recognise without the necessary punctuation: "Krim I cannot credit it let us take their temperature Kram no need the skin is rosy Krim rosy are you mad Kram they are warm and rosy there it is we are nothing and we are rosy good moments not a doubt." (479) Within the same paragraph and without clear indication, the dialogue is ended and from "there it is we are nothing and we are rosy" the voice of Bom is again narrated. The narrated voice is not consistently the same and the reader is constantly challenged to guess whose voice is narrated at any moment.

On an extratextual level, the levels of removal increase an additional two times, seeing as *How It Is* is one of the texts that Beckett originally wrote in French, titled *Comment C'Est* (1961). When asked about the reason why Beckett wrote so many of his works in French, he would answer that in French it is easier to write without style (Esslin 18-9). Beckett wanted as much as possible to remove any biases of language from his work. But is that not a contradiction? How could one attempt to get to any truth or source while at the same time hiding the source between multiple layers of translation and interpretation? The answer to this question lies in the process, not the result. One does not attain the truth by reaching a secret meaning behind the object of analysis, which in this case is Beckett's writing. As Sartre lays out, in *Being and Nothingness*, the truth is not some secret essence that is separate from the object, but rather it is something that is worked out through the experience of the object from as many angles as possible (2). There may be an infinity of angles, so that Beckett could have filtered the original content of the voice in *How It Is* through an infinite number of characters, and each version would have added to the image of the whole.

2.3 Language at the Pace of Digestion

The process of writing *How It Is* was as slow and difficult as Bom's journey towards Pim himself. Bair describes it as follows: "He expected it to be short, and more difficult and impersonal than anything he had written thus far. With each word he felt he crawled an inch nearer to something many miles away" (430). It was not finishing the novel that was on Beckett's mind, but the act of writing it. The same can be said of Beckett's whole oeuvre. He felt the need to keep on writing until he died, in 1989. *How It Is* is meant to be read at the same pace as it was written, since much of the artistic experience in doing so is gained from the pacing. The text itself consistently hints at this with the reoccurring phrase "vast tracts of time." This phrase, in addition to the passage in part three "of this old tale quaqu on all sides then in me bits and scraps try and hear a few scraps two or three each time per day and night string them together make phrases more phrases" (488), hints at the fact that on the temporal scale within the novel, all three parts are composed by the narrator over a duration beyond what seems reasonably imaginable. It follows quite naturally that the reader must slow down their reading to some degree as well. Any reader of *How It Is* will quickly realise that pacing too quickly through the paragraphs will lead to increased confusion and incomprehension of the text.

In *On the Genealogy of Morals* (1887), Friedrich Nietzsche argues that the mistake of reading too quickly is committed frequently by the modern man: "To be sure, one thing is necessary above all if one is to practice reading as an *art* in this way, something that has been unlearned most thoroughly nowadays ... something for which one has almost to be a cow and in any case not a 'modern man': *rumination*" (23). While Nietzsche recommended a bovine approach to reading primarily to the readers of his own work, it is an approach that is necessary, or at least helpful, for the reading of much modernist writing. James Joyce, for example, said of *Ulysses*: "I've put in so many enigmas and puzzles that it will keep the professors busy for centuries arguing over what I meant, and that's the only way of insuring one's immortality" (qtd in Lewis 18). To be able to make sense of a modernist text, according to Joyce, requires that one spends much time reading and thinking about it, and that is also true of *How It Is*. Nietzsche's metaphor of the bovine rumination in particular is a fitting one for *How It Is*. Bom's crawling and the words that he hears from his inner voice occur at a pace that is

comparable to the movement of food through the digestive tract. Slow, at irregular intervals, towards some end that is not yet known. Bom himself makes this comparison in the novel: “with that of a slowness difficult to conceive the procession we are talking of a procession advancing in jerks or spasms like shit in the guts till one wonders days of great gaiety if we shall not end one after another or two by two by being shat into the open air the light of day the regimen of grace” (503). Bom’s analogy differs from Nietzsche’s because it expects the movement to lead somewhere, to an end. Bom wrongly assumes that him and the procession are part of a divine plan, that they are all headed towards a meaningful conclusion of their current lives: “the open air the light of day the regimen of grace.” Bom does not realise that the meaning he expects to find lies within the journey, the regimen itself. Every action he takes, every movement he makes is that end in itself, just like the absorption of nutrients through the intestinal wall is the aim of digestion, and not the moment of excretion.

Another aspect of Beckett’s works that correlates with the modernist movement is the mention of taboo topics. Rachel Potter points out that “There were a number of high-profile literary trials in the UK and the United States, most notably the suppression of D. H. Lawrence’s *The Rainbow* (London, 1915), James Joyce’s *Ulysses* (New York, 1921), and Radclyffe Hall’s *The Well of Loneliness* (London, 1928)” (1). The rise in censorship directly conflicted with “Literary shifts towards more direct representations of the human body [initiated by] modernists and avant-garde writers, with their more deliberate flouting of moral conventions and developing aestheticized explorations of the obscene” (3). Beckett does not shy away from the mention of scat or vomit in *How It Is*. Not only are vomit and faecal matter mentioned, but one of the passages suggests that the mud itself is composed in its entirety of the discharges of himself and the potential billions of other inhabitants of this world he lives in:

quick a supposition if this so-called mud were nothing more than all our shit yes all if there are not billions of us at the moment and why not the moment there are two there were yes billions of us crawling and shitting in their shit hugging like a treasure in their arms the wherewithal to crawl and shit a little more now my nails (446)

In this passage, Beckett paints an abjectly absurd image of human life. He distils life to no more than two fundamental activities: crawling and shitting. In doing so, he follows what Potter describes as the modernist interest in “the physical waste and materialistic detritus of modern life” (128). He strips from life all the biases and meanings that humans attribute to various ideas like virtue, love, God, etc. The two fundamental activities he cites are ones that humans engage in both in their earliest age as infants as well as in old age, when the limbs once again weaken like those of Bom. Anything humans choose to do beyond the most basic movement is completely meaningless. The only thing that does have a real purpose is the “treasure” that Bom carries with him: the sack filled with food tins. Yet even the consumption of food only serves the purpose of lengthening the period during which a human can do those same two activities: to crawl and shit. That said, the passage holds little meaning beyond its shock value and a brief inquiry into the essence of humanity as formulated by Bom.

In an interview conducted with Esslin, Beckett comments on his impoverishment technique: “I take away all the accidentals because I want to get to the bedrock of the essentials, the archetypal” (ptd in Knowlson 47-9). In *How It Is*, too, Beckett strips Bom down to an image of a man in his most essential state. To Beckett, the archetypal human is defined by only two basic needs: moving forward and excreting on the way, leaving behind only waste. Any additions to character beyond these two aspects would be the results of free human agency, like Bom’s belief in divine justice, or his deliberately cruel treatment of Pim. *How It Is* presents the barest possible image of a human embodiment and subjectivity to make clear the distinction between basic human facticity of being and the results of human action and freedom, which are the two aspects that make up a human. De Beauvoir focuses on the inherent ambiguity between these two aspects, writing that man is at once “a sovereign and unique subject amidst a universe of objects” while also being “In turn an object for others” (7). Sartre also viewed human being as a duality: “the double property of the human being, who is at once a *facticity* and a *transcendence*” (qtd in Kirkpatrick 107). Beckett adopts this dual system, presenting his characters in a most factual, objective state to better observe their subjectivity and the actions that lead to their transcendence without encumbering the image with unnecessary additions, or “accidentals”.

Bodily waste and the grotesque serve as a reminder of humanity's nature. Instead of the romantic ideal, modernist literature reminds the reader of the abject nature of their existence. At the same time, Sarah J. Ablett (referring to Sigmund Freud in her study *Dramatic Disgust: Aesthetic Theory and Practice from Sophocles to Sarah Kane* (2020)) explains that: "There he argues that death was not only the logical consequence of life, but also reminiscent of its origin: '[E]verything living dies from causes within itself, and returns to the inorganic, [wherefore] we can only say "The goal of all life is death." ' ' (59.) The abject, such as bodily fluids and excrement remind of death and the decaying nature of our bodies. The experience of the disgusting thus also manifests the feeling of the absurd. Despite the idealistic dreams that humans form of their own lives, the grotesque negates beauty and reminds the reader of the fleeting nature of human life. The human body is absurd because its natural decay conflicts with the innate desire to survive.

2.4 The Mud and its Properties

The mud itself, beyond its portrayal as faeces, alludes to other kinds of substances. One of them is the slime of creation from the Book of Genesis. The novel refers to the mud using particular wording: "warmth of primeval mud impenetrable dark" (414). The adjective "primeval" refers to the earliest time of something, in this case the earliest time of the world during its creation when "the Lord God formed man of the slime of the earth" (Genesis 2:7). While the various translations of the Bible use different words for the material man was made of, the Douay-Rheims version of the Bible uses the word "slime." If one were to give a religious reading of the novel, one could interpret Bom's life as being in purgatory. The idea that his current life is in fact an after-life is supported by the plurality of lives that Bom attributes to himself. The first one is the "life the other above in the light said to have been mine on and off no going back up there" (412). The second is his present life, the "life in the dark the mud" (463). After dying in his first life, Bom wakes up in purgatory until he is ready to die a second time and move on at the end of the novel. Alternatively, Bom also has the option of vertical movement, either sinking to the bottom of the mud or "ascending heaven at last" (486). Yet Bom lives by the third option, which is to remain level with the mud, "half in the mud half out" (486).

Instead of sinking to the bottom of the mud or attempting ascension he keeps crawling, keeps struggling simply to stay afloat. While Bom believes himself to be part of a divine system, he has little hope for salvation. Instead of trying to attain heaven, he accepts the conditions he lives under in the mud, despite the loneliness and the impotence that reign there. He does not live authentically, depriving himself of reaching the full potential that he believes himself to be capable of. Bom lives in what Sartre calls bad faith. “The basic concept of bad faith involves ‘the double property of the human being, who is at once a facticity and a transcendence’” (Kirkpatrick 107). Facticity relates to the contingent, yet true facts about our being, such as age, sex, time and location, while transcendence is made up of the choices we make to reach certain goals and values that we set for ourselves in order to surpass our current facticity. This could be something as simple as lifting weights in order to increase the power of our muscles. This duality implies that a person can never truly be what they are, but part of their being is dependent on agency, an action aimed at becoming something else. To live in bad faith means to be dishonest with oneself as well as an other to which one is presenting oneself in regard of both of these properties, facticity and transcendence (Kirkpatrick 108). In Bom’s case, he believes that he is able to transcend his current life to reach heaven, yet he takes no action to achieve that goal. He resigns himself to remaining in his current state of limbo, half in and half out of the mud. He is thus not living authentically in the face of himself, nor in the face of the God that he has created for himself and who would grant his ascension.

By placing Bom into the mud of creation, the substance that his own body was shaped of, the boundaries of Bom’s body become blurred. Where does his body end and the potentiality of it begin? Bom’s perception of his own body does nothing to reaffirm this boundary. He loses track of what his hands are doing, he is never in full control of his body’s movements or even aware of its whereabouts: “it’s the scene of the sack the two hands part its mouth ... the left darts in ... it strays among the tins without meddling with how many announces a round dozen ... the hands what are the hands at when at rest difficult to see” (432-3). The body is the medium that enables us to act upon the world. Losing control of it equals to losing the ability have meaningful interactions with our environment. In *Beckett and Embodiment: Body, Space, Agency* (2021), Amada M. Dennis emphasizes that “The ‘primeval’

mud never dries; it remains, in a sense, plastic” (140). Dennis argues for a constant potential of creation of meaning through the body’s action on the mud, but the fact that it never dries also implies that any creation is only temporary and will eventually return to being formless mud. Not only is Bom physically incapable of expressing himself meaningfully because of a lack of control over his own body, but any success in this endeavour would prove but an ephemeral creation. It would be a truly endless Sisyphean procedure of creation and destruction to live meaningfully in a world such as Bom’s.

The second substance that the mud can be compared to is Sartre’s metaphor of the viscosity of the existential condition. In *Dramatic Disgust*, Ablett explores Sartre’s study of the viscous as a metaphor for existence itself: “Sartre thus approaches disgust-reactions towards existence through an extended metaphor of slime. In a nutshell his claim is that, just like slime, the existential condition clings to humans, but can never be completely brought under control” (60). Sartre attributes to the viscous both attractive and repulsive qualities, “A sugary viscosity is the ideal of the viscous; it symbolizes the for-itself’s sugary death (the wasp that sinks into the jam and drowns there)” (789). One is tempted to engage with the viscous because it presents a tactile fascination, and its softness promises a submission in which we can feel dominant. Yet during our interaction with the viscous, Sartre claims there takes place a shift in the power-dynamic; “Only, just at the moment when I believe I can possess it, by means of a curious reversal I am possessed by it. ... I separate my hands, and I want to let go of the viscous, but it sticks to me, drinking me up and sucking me in” (788). The being for-itself, which refers to consciousness, subjectivity, is generally in control of the being in-itself, which is the unconscious, passive being of objects. Yet once the for-itself engages with the viscous, its stickiness removes the for-itself’s ability to disengage with it. It takes away its total agency. Sartre goes even further in his development and imagines that during a complete submergence in the viscous “I feel that I will lose myself in it, i.e., become diluted into the viscous, precisely because the viscous is in the process of becoming solid” (790). Submergence in the viscous eliminates the defined sensation of the own body as it seems to liquefy and merge with the viscous. During this process of

dilution, bodily agency is lost, the body becomes part of its environment, unable to make any changes unto it.

The ambiguous nature of Sartre's viscous also applies to the mud in *How It Is*. Mud, like slime and honey, is neither fully solid or fluid, but viscous. It also has both the disgusting and attractive aspects of Sartre's viscous. Bom defecates and vomits into the mud and these disgusting bodily discharges mix with the mud that surrounds him. But at the same time, the mud is soft and as warm as Bom's body temperature. The mud is also an image for the womb, which gives a feeling of comfort to Bom as he describes himself as "warm and rosy always inclined that way ever since the womb" (479), as long as one is willing to read the word "inclined" with the notion of favour. The reference to the womb goes further in that when an infant is born, viscous elements from the womb stick to its skin as the mud sticks to Bom. In the same vein, humans are born with the human condition stuck to them. Moreover, Bom relies on the mud to hydrate himself. He occasionally opens his mouth to let his tongue loll in the mud in order to drink from its moisture, sucking on the mud as the mud sucks on him. Bom is helplessly dependent on the mud. He cannot escape it nor shape or change it in any meaningful manner. It leaves him passive, diluted, barely floating on its surface and ready to be swallowed up by it at any moment. Bom's consumption of the slime is also of spiritual value: "the face in the mud the mouth open the mud in the mouth thirst abating humanity regained" (427). Bom believes the slime to contain human essence that he can extract to replenish his own stock. Both the religious interpretation of the slime as well as the metaphor to existence are composites of Bom's humanity and belief.

Beyond its physical qualities, Sartre applies the characteristics of the viscous to the being for-itself, to consciousness itself. Sartre's description of the thickening out of ideas perfectly describes the prose form of *How It Is*:

for any consciousness it is horrible in itself to become viscous. That is because the being of something viscous is a soft adherence and, through the suction action of all its parts, each part is in cunning solidarity and complicity with all the others; each of these parts makes a vague and soft attempt to individuate itself, an attempt that is followed by the individual's collapse

back, its emptied flattening, as it is sucked from all sides by the substance. A consciousness that became viscous, would therefore be transformed by the thickening-out of its ideas. From the moment we arise in the world, such a consciousness haunts us, wanting to launch itself into the future, toward a project of itself and finding itself, in the very moment at which it is aware of achieving this, cunningly and invisibly held back by the suction of the past and forced to witness its slow dilution into that past from which it is running and the invasion of its project by a thousand parasites, until at last it loses itself completely. (790-791)

Sartre's description of a viscous consciousness resembles the voice dictating Bom's murmurs. Each of its phrases that at times are strung into sentences represent a condensed clot of ideas that could have been developed into an insightful paragraph, yet each of these clots is cut short by the next one, only to be revisited at a later point in the novel. However, the text is not only held back by its past, but also lives from its own future. One example of this is the repeated mention of the structure that shapes the three parts of the text. During the first part, after only a few pages, the text already looks ahead to the moment that the narration of the first part will have finished: "Part one before Pim before the discovery of Pim have done with that leaving only part two with Pim how it was then leaving only part three after Pim how it was then how it is vast tracts of time" (419). The text does not flow linearly like a stream of water, but is constantly sucked on by its own past and future, referring to moments in the narrative that have already happened or have yet to happen. Non-linear storytelling is another one of the narrative devices that modernist writers have popularized, but the narrative temporality in *How It Is* is uniquely viscous.

2.5 Facing the Absurd

Like Chestov, Bom recognises the absurdity of his situation, but identifies what he does not understand as God (Camus, *Sisyphus* 26). He takes the leap of faith that Camus calls the philosophical suicide:

Now, to limit myself to existential philosophies, I see that all of them without exception suggest escape. Through an odd reasoning, starting out from the absurd over the ruins of reason, in a close universe limited to the human, they deify what crushes them and find reason to hope in what impoverishes them. That forced hope is religious in all of them. (25)

Bom is attached to the nostalgic need for unity and the eternal. Hence, he believes that this purgatorial world must be ruled by a supreme virtue: justice. His suffering thus stems from justice taking its course, which implies that every individual in this world should be treated in the exact same way, which leads him to speculate on the possible organisation of purgatory based on his own experiences. He imagines an infinite number of sufferers forever crawling in a circle and undergoing the four stages of existence that they are subjected to: the journey, the role of tormentor, the abandon and the role of the victim. Bom bases this system on nothing more than his own need to explain his personal experience of hopelessness and suffering, and he has no factual proof of the existence of any other person besides himself and Pim. However, even Pim's existence is questioned at the end of the novel, the character that the entire organisation of the novel and Bom's life is organised around (520). Bom takes the leap of faith because of his sense of justice, which includes the need for unity and perfection. He refuses to recognize the absurdity of his situation and searches for meaning in every aspect of his life: the sack, Pim, the voice, the need to crawl, the images.

Eventually, Bom must admit to himself the truth of his life. In a final sequence of questions and answers to himself, he establishes a radical formulation of his life that negates all his previous ideas and experiences: Pim, Krim, Kram, the sack, the images, even the crawling. All is negated except the existence of his own voice, the voice that he now acknowledges as his own, as himself: "murmuring sometimes yes when the panting stops yes not at other times no in the mud yes to the mud yes my voice yes not another's no mine alone yes sure yes when the panting stops yes" (521). The radical doubt with which Bom scrutinizes his life is comparable to that of René Descartes. In *Meditations on First Philosophy* (1641), Larmore explains, Descartes systematically rejected all knowledge that he could not verify with absolute certainty until he arrived at a fundamental truth that resisted any doubt: that the radical sceptic can doubt anything except for his own doubting mind

(Larmore 59). Bom undergoes a similar sceptical thought process, radically doubting the reality of his situation and denying the existence of anything beyond his own voice. Descartes is a relevant thinker for existentialism and phenomenology, as his cogito locates the only absolute certainty within the own subjectivity. For existentialist thinkers, who believe that existence precedes essence, meaning and purpose can also exclusively spring from within and not be imposed from without. Certainty of the own subjective experience of life is also the reason why phenomenology places much importance on analysing consciousness and the way in which it experiences life.

While the final negation of everything external to Bom negates virtually all of the novel's plot until this point, it is not to be taken literally. Rather than becoming a radical sceptic, Bom awakens to the absurdity of his life. It is not so much the experiences themselves that are negated, but the meanings Bom attributed to them. And whether or not all of Bom's experiences are factually true is irrelevant in the first place. What is important is that his experience of them is real. Phenomenology is concerned with the world of appearances, not with reality. It is not so much important that he actually crawled, but that he felt himself crawl. After all, there is no witness external to Bom that can challenge the facts of his life besides us as the readers of his story. The reader experiences the novel's scenes in the same way as Bom, so that everything that happens becomes real in the reader's experience. As mentioned, it is Bom's judgements about his world that he comes to realize as fallacious. His ideas of a reign of justice, the procession of crawlers from West to East, the god-like being that oversees them all and distributes the sacks, he invented all of it for his own comfort, to give some meaning to his bleak existence in this dark space in the mud. Additionally, his awakening leaves Bom face to face with his own agency as an individual. During his time with Pim, Bom justifies his torture as just, since their relation is part of an infinite cycle violence, and it would be unjust not to torture Pim when it was Pim's turn to suffer torture. Bom hides his desire to hurt Pim behind his belief in the justice of the system he thinks them both to be a part of. But it is clear that Bom draws great pleasure from hearing Pim's voice, and he abuses Pim in order to control his voice. Bom teaches Pim commands to speak, sing, raise his volume, stop and many more via negative reinforcement. He effectively turns Pim into a sound machine, dehumanizing him in the process. The interaction between

the two, while consisting of an exchange in violent stimuli from one end and responses in words from the other, cannot be called communication. Pim is pressured under the threat of violence to tell Bom of his life above in the light and to answer his questions about his life here in the dark, the mud, when he tells Bom that he would wish him to leave him alone, that there was peace before he came along (482).

No communication between the two is thus possible in Bom's initial conception of the world. Proper communication can occur only between two individuals that have a balanced relationship. The relationship between Bom and Pim is greatly imbalanced, as one of them holds a violent grip on the other, tormenting them while the other wishes to escape the violence in preference of solitude. Moreover, Bom considers their time together as but one of an infinite number of meetings between the two. They are but players living out the predestined cycle of crawling, tormenting, abandoning and being tormented, and any communication within this cycle would be meaningless. Not only do they both inevitably forget their meeting at a given moment in the cycle, but their relationship is destined to repeat itself eternally without a chance for change or escape. But after Bom awakens to the absurdity of his existence, meaningful communication remains just as impossible. If Bom truly lives in a world that is indifferent to him, where he is unable to express agency using his own body, and he has nothing to believe in but the existence of his own consciousness, language loses its power to move and affect people. In the line of questions and answers between Bom and Pim in part two, it becomes clear that Pim's humanity has faded. He wishes to die but expects to live in the dark mud eternally without thinking, without stirring or eating. He also wishes for Bom to leave him, but he does not expect to ever be freed from his torturer (481-2).

Even Pim's life above in the light was a disappointment to him. He resumes his marriage as follows: "love birth of love increase decrease death efforts to resuscitate through the arse joint in vain through the cunt anew vain jumped from window or fell broken column hospital marguerites lies about mistletoe forgiveness" (472). The distillation of their relationship to "birth of love increase decrease death" is one of the recurring summarisations of life that Beckett occasionally includes in his works. Another such image is described by Pozzo in *Waiting for Godot* (1953): "They give birth

astride of a grave, the light gleams an instant, then it's night once more." (83) Pim and Pozzo both emphasize the brevity of love and life, respectively, and the little time there is to make meaningful connections with other people. Much like the shape of the mud that Pim and Bom live in, nothing lasts, no matter how much effort one puts into shaping and nurturing it, even in the world of the living.

Thus, finding himself utterly alone and abandoned in an absurd world, Bom decides that all there is left for him is death, and he is now ready to die. At the end of the novel, Bom addresses a line of questions to himself as he did to Pim before, until he stops answering himself: "so things may change no answer end no answer I may ... die no answer DIE screams I MAY DIE screams I SHALL DIE screams good." (521) Unlike Camus, Bom sees no virtue in rebelling against the absurd. In an afterword to Camus' *The Myth of Sisyphus*, James Wood comments on Camus' belief that while he may have been an agnostic, Camus chose to believe in an unbelief: "Camus cannot know that God does not exist; he is determined to *believe* that God cannot exist" (162). Camus then proposes an awareness of the absence of divine meaning as the basis for the revolt against the absurd. One needs courage to live in revolt every day and to find meaningful moments within that revolt. Bom has no such belief. In *How It Is*, Beckett expresses a nihilist view of the world in which there is nothing holds any value because all enactment of agency is doomed to fail from the moment of its creation.

2.6 Conclusion

Instead of reading *How It Is* as a text whose shape is divorced from its content, as Cordingley claims is the critical commonplace (1), this chapter has revealed the unified goal of the novel to represent the human body, consciousness, and their existential condition in their most naked, authentic state. Using an un-stylized, non-grammatical writing style, and the grotesque, the novel creates through Bom an image of humanity's most base condition. The body at its most base is foreign and disgusting, its natural processes of digestion and excretion oppose the ideal that the mind longs for.

The body as well as the language are also affected by a certain viscosity, which oozes into the shape of the novel, creating the slow and fragmented prose of *How It Is*.

Bom initially refuses to acknowledge the “freedom” he has in the purgatorial mud. While he lives in a world that, like Camus’ world, is indifferent to him, he does not realise that he can still act of his own accord within this world. Once he meets Pim, he tortures him for his own satisfaction of hearing another human being’s voice, justifying his cruelty by claiming that it is simply the nature of this world to do so. Yet Bom’s actions are the result of his own free agency. As he comes to understand by the end of the novel, his beliefs in the world were unfounded and untrue. Before anything else, humans simply exist. Like Bom at the beginning of the novel, all they have is the phenomenological perception of the limits of their own body, the need for food and the compulsion to move forward, either towards an undetermined goal or simply for the sake of moving. Faced with his own meaningless existence, and after having failed to communicate effectively with the only other human being he encountered, Bom chooses to die. The novel ends on a pessimistic note of impotence to act meaningfully in the world.

Chapter 3: Endgame: No Exit from the Prison of the Existential Body

This chapter will offer a formal analysis of Samuel Beckett's *Endgame*'s use of dramatic devices that Martin Esslin considers traditions of the Theatre of the Absurd. It will explain to what extent existential themes like the look, bad faith, the absurd and freedom of agency are expressed through these dramatic traditions as well as the plot of the play. The chapter will draw comparisons between *Endgame* and Jean-Paul Sartre's *No Exit* in order to make clear the parallels between Beckett's absurd theatre and the existentialist theatre.

3.1 Textual Introduction

Endgame, written roughly three years before *How It Is* (approximately 1956), will serve as the second case study for this paper. As a dramatic text, the formal techniques that contribute to the shaping of the final piece will be entirely different from those of a work of prose fiction. Since Beckett was extraordinarily particular in how he envisioned his plays to be performed, the transcript of *Endgame* is equipped with a large number of very precise stage directions that signal how the play should be realised visually and in terms of the actors' performances on stage. This paper will draw from the transcript for *Endgame* rather than any specific rendition of the play because my specific interest lies in juxtaposing Beckett's literary language in *Endgame* to that of *How It Is* in relation to the expression of the text's existential themes. Despite this paper's limitation in the study of *Endgame*, it is important to consider the many ways in which a dramatic performance will affect the audience differently than if they were to read a prose work. To fully appreciate the reasoning behind Beckett's choices in mediums as well as their implications for the representation of philosophical ideas, it is important to point out certain fundamental qualities of theatre that prose literature does not possess.

Endgame is a play in one act, which is set in one room. Hamm sits in an armchair in the centre of the room. Hamm is old, blind and cannot stand. Clov is Hamm's attendant and adoptive son, who can leave the room to go to the kitchen. Clov cannot sit. Hamm's parents Nagg and Nell live in

two dustbins at the front left of the room. They have no legs at all. Outside all seems dead. Even the sea is completely still. Over the course of the play, nothing happens except that, as Clov says “something is taking its course” (98). Yet that “something” is never defined. Is it the apocalypse? Is it the characters dying? Is it a metatextual reference to the play itself? The play never confirms any possible interpretation of itself. Martin Esslin’s exploration of the Theatre of the Absurd is mostly negative in the sense that the human condition that the absurd dramatists express through their works is characterised by a lack of meaning. However, by giving a comparative reading between *Endgame* and Sartre’s *Huis Clos* (1944; English translation, *No Exit*, first performed in 1946), this paper will point out the common existential themes between the two plays to reveal both the positive and negative expressions of meaning that *Endgame* has to offer in spite of its bleak setting. While John Calder writes of Beckett’s play *Play* (1964), that “there may even have been some slight influence from Sartre’s *Huis Clos*” (35), the same can also be said of *Endgame*. The plays all share the same setting, namely that of being confined with others in a room in a more or less direct hellish context, in conflict with each other for what seems to be eternity.

3.2 The Theatre of the Absurd

Martin Esslin identifies Beckett as one of the main playwrights of what he called the Theatre of the Absurd. In his influential 1961 study, Esslin identifies certain dramatic traditions that the playwrights of the Theatre of the Absurd make use of. He traces the literary histories of four major dramatic traditions that absurd theatre draws from. These are 1) “‘Pure’ theatre; i.e. abstract scenic effects as they are familiar in the circus or revue, in the work of jugglers, acrobats, bullfighters, or mimes,” 2) “Clowning, fooling, and mad-scenes,” 3) “Verbal nonsense,” and 4) “The literature of dream and fantasy, which often has a strong allegorical component” (272). All these traditions can be found in Beckett’s plays. *Quad*¹ is pure theatre, passing the hats in *Waiting for Godot* is clowning. There is verbal nonsense in *Not I* and in Lucky’s speech in *Godot*. Dream and fantasy can be seen in

¹ Quad is an entirely non-verbal play wherein four players in differently coloured robes repeatedly walk a given pattern inscribed in a square playing field.

Play, or nearly all of Beckett's theatre, since none of his plays are grounded in realism. *Endgame* too follows these traditions.

In fact, all of these traditions serve to estrange the work from the reality lived on a daily basis. The Theatre of the Absurd engages with themes that are not usually encountered or thought about in the average person's daily life. Yet their absence from the average person's day-to-day does not mean that the truths these themes discuss are useless. On the contrary, they often seek to express feelings that people often feel, but avoid exploring because of their unfamiliarity or the anguish they can trigger. One example of such a truth is the inherent meaninglessness of the world that Sartre and Camus discuss in their philosophies. The four dramatic traditions that find a successor in the Theatre of the Absurd help to expose and dramatize these anguish-inducing feelings that are a part of the human condition according to Sartre and Camus. Analysing their usage in *Endgame* will thus contribute to understanding the play's existential themes, beginning with its elements of pure theatre.

3.2.1 'Pure Theatre'

According to Esslin, "The element of 'pure', abstract theatre in the Theatre of the Absurd is an aspect of its anti-literary attitude, its turning away from language as an instrument for the expression of the deepest levels of meaning" (272). In *Endgame*, language fails to convey meaning beyond the most superficial emotions, like Hamm cursing his father for cursing him with life. Yet most of *Endgame*'s dialogue consists of meaningless back-and-forths between the characters as they exchange words merely for the sake of passing time. Clov repeatedly threatens to leave Hamm, yet he never does. Language cedes its priority of meaning to the actions performed on the stage, and much like Camus's formulation of the absurd itself (see chapter 1), it is the contrast between the intention of the spoken words and the actual actions performed that reveal the deeper meaning behind the character's motivations. Language, therefore, is not primary to the carrying of meaning, but it can occasionally contribute to the formation of meaning in collaboration with other elements of a scene.

In addition to the contrast between language and action, elements of the stage's scenery affect the audience emotionally. *Endgame* plays entirely in a single bare room lighted with "Grey light" (92). The back wall is entirely bare while the left and right walls each have a small window that can only be reached with a small step-ladder. Additionally, the right wall has a door through which Clov can leave the room for his kitchen as well as a painting facing the wall. It has no furniture except for the two ashbins and Hamm's armchair. A room thus sparsely furnished seems at first uninviting as a living space. It reflects the outside world in its deadness, confirming that inside as without the end is truly nigh, that whatever is "taking its course," be it the end of the world, dying, or a self-reference to the play itself, is inescapable. *Endgame's* stage-image bears important resemblance to that of Sartre's *Huis Clos*. Sartre's play is also set in a single, sparsely furnished room, containing only three differently-coloured sofas and a small bronze statue. Most notably, it also has a door, through which the three characters enter one after another, and whose importance will be discussed further below.

Esslin argues that in the Theatre of the Absurd, "the audience is confronted with characters whose motives and actions remain largely incomprehensible. With such characters it is almost impossible to identify" (347). While this may be true for the characters in *Endgame*, the room itself becomes a liminal space for the audience to project their own fears and desires onto. In "'The Backrooms': Exploring the Unconscious Together Through Collective Meaning Making," Samantha J. Stephen points out that "First introduced by Turner (1969) and Van Gennep (2019), liminality was used to describe transitions marked by ritual such as ageing, death and marriage" (202). Stephen further explains the opportunities that liminal spaces offer individuals to express personal emotions via online collaborative storytelling. In the case of *Endgame*, the stage gains a liminal quality because the play is about transition, about something ending, passing from one state of being to another. "Ending" most likely relates to Hamm (and his parents) being close to dying, a phenomenon that causes fear because one can never be certain of where this transition leads. *Endgame* expresses this fear through Hamm and his means to cope with it, turning the stage, much like "The Backrooms," into "a third area outside of both the inner psychic and objectively perceived world" (203) in which play

occurs. This third area bears a dream-like quality that can evoke existential dread as well as feelings of nostalgia (Stephen 203).

The feelings of nostalgia in *Endgame* are created by the neutrality of the room and the old age of the characters and actors that might remind the audience of their own grandparents. Additionally, Stephen quotes Claire Pajaczkowska's argument that "the blankness of the space allows the emergence of representational activity from the subjects own 'blankness' or the amnesia that protects the ego from the repressed unconscious" (204). Without further exploring psychoanalytical theory, it will be sufficient to recognise that more so than a realistic work of drama, *Endgame's* scenery, by presenting itself as a liminal space, breaks into the audience's unconscious to connect with a deeper level of emotion. All of this allows for the audience to connect with the play and better connect with the existential dread present in the play. Hamm is scared of ageing and dying, because those are processes that belong to the body, which in turn belongs to the irrational world. These are fears that every human being feels and that are evoked by the bleak grey room and the old age of the characters.

3.2.2 Dream, Fantasy and Allegory

The effect of the liminal also grants the play what Esslin terms the literature of dream and fantasy. *Endgame* does not mimic reality, but communicates its ideas to the audience indirectly at times. In addition to the scenery as a liminal space, the image of Nagg and Nell living in dustbins suggests a symbolic or allegorical interpretation of their situation. Does the play consider their romantic reminiscing of the past a useless pastime, a nostalgia that holds no more value in the present, so near the end? Indeed, not only are Nagg and Nell near the end of their own life, with Nell seemingly dying during the play, but their romantic relationship too is nearly over. Together, they reminisce of past moments, such as the day after their engagement when they went rowing on Lake Como. They both remember that day fondly, but for different reasons. It was the first time Nagg told Nell the story of the tailor, after which Nell laughed. She remembers laughing because she was happy, but Nagg insists that it was his story that made her laugh so intensely. They remember the same event

differently, now unable to trace their history to a moment in which they loved each other and were happy together. They have lost the ability to connect with each other, which is embodied in their inability to reach over the rims of their bins to touch and kiss.

3.2.3 Verbal Nonsense

The third tradition of the absurd theatre, according to Esslin, is verbal nonsense. This tradition includes any kind of nonsense language such as neologisms, forming sentences without proper grammatical or logical structure, or dialogues that do not represent a coherent conversation. *Endgame* questions the meaning of language in a number of ways. Time in particular has become a strange concept, the experience of which it has become difficult to express in words. The word “yesterday” for example is used by Nell to remember not necessarily the day before the present one, but a time that feels to be only in the recent past. So she and Nagg could touch and scratch each other only “yesterday” (101), referring in general to a time in which they were younger, different people. Hamm too questions the meaning of the word when Clov tells him he oiled the castors of his armchair only yesterday, upon which Clov complains violently: “That means that bloody awful day, long ago, before this bloody awful day. I use the words you taught me. If they don’t mean anything any more, teach me others. Or let me be silent” (113). Clov reminds the audience that language, like time, is a construct that only means something in the context of human communication. It has no inherent meaning. To him, silence is just as meaningful, if not more, seeing as the only possible type of communication between him and Hamm serves only Hamm’s desire to avoid thinking of dying. His fear is of tomorrow, of a day when he knows he will be closer to death than today or yesterday. The fear of tomorrow is also discussed by Camus: “Tomorrow, he was longing for tomorrow, whereas everything in him ought to reject it. The revolt of the flesh is the absurd” (12). The body is part of the irrational world and, as discussed above, the rational mind fears death and all it cannot fully understand.

Moreover, Hamm and Clov use language not to communicate with each other, but simply to pass the time. Hamm asks Clov the same “old questions” (110) regardless of the fact that the answer

will be the same. Much like observing the outside world through the windows (107), their verbal exchanges have become part of a routine. Tying back to *How It Is*, the dialogue's aim is not communication, but to fill the silence, "these details for the sake of something ... these details in preference to nothing" (432-3). Hamm also retells the same story, the story that the audience assumes to be that of how he came to welcome Clov into his home as his son. Every time he tells it, he adds a little more to it, if only a sentence or two. Clov has no interest in hearing the story. It means nothing to him, but Hamm prompts him to show interest in it regardless. The nature of their conversations is often arbitrary, provoked by a sudden order or question from the part of Hamm, to which Clov responds sarcastically and disinterestedly. His responses are generally aimed at ending the conversation with a single affirmative or negative sentence, such as in the reoccurring line of questioning about Clov's physical abilities:

HAMM. Wait! [CLOV *halts*.] How are your eyes?

CLOV. Bad.

HAMM. But you can see.

CLOV. All I want.

HAMM. How are your legs?

CLOV. Bad.

HAMM. But you can walk.

CLOV. I come ... and go. (109)

Much of the dialogue between the two characters follows this simple pattern of prompt and response, Clov speaking mostly only to satisfy Hamm. Hamm's compulsion to speak and the related need to be listened to replaces Sartre's third ontological dimension of the body, which will be discussed in more detail below. Since Hamm is blind he cannot be looked at, he instead completes his image of himself through the other via coercive verbal exchanges. Clov thus never manages to succeed in achieving a

lasting silence, which is why he frequently escapes to his kitchen. Like in *How It Is*, communication between the characters is impossible because of the imbalance of need and violence.

3.2.4 Clowning

Among the predecessors of the Theatre of the Absurd that used the element of clowning and fooling, Esslin cites the ancient mimeplay, the Italian *commedia dell'arte*, the English harlequinade as well as the silent film comedy. Both Hamm and Clov portray clownish behaviour. During the first moments of the play, the audience watches Clov repeat the same error three times in a row, forgetting at first to carry the step-ladder to the correct window, then turning back after mis-taking a few steps to grab it. This simple slapstick comic procedure adjusts the audience's expectation from the outset of the play to not take Clov seriously as a character, seeing as he is unable to remember his own intentions for longer than two seconds before carrying them out.

Beyond clowning for the sake of pure comedy, another type of clowning is used to undermine the meaning of common practices. This undermining occurs when Hamm, Clov and Nagg try to pray together. The stage directions indicate that all three characters take up "attitudes of prayer" (119), which implies folding the hands, closing the eyes, and looking solemn. The fact that the characters take up this position and abandon it as soon as their prayer is over indicates a misattribution of importance to the bodily position. Prayer is only a small part of religious faith, and the bodily position that the three characters display is essentially a caricature of that tradition. Yet the folding of the hands and closing of the eyes are interpreted by the three of them as the most essential part of praying, even of a spiritual connection to God in general, since none of them display any other sign of religious belief outside of this moment. As soon as the moment of prayer is over and none of them seem to have been able to reach God, as if it were a phone call that did not connect, Hamm curses God: "The bastard! He doesn't exist!" (119), showing clearly that he has no respect for or belief in God.

This episode of the play exposes the limited understanding that people often have for the things they believe in. After failing to receive a response from God via a brief prayer, the characters

conclude that God must not exist. The play also points out the absurdity of the vehicle of belief. The folding of the hands is but one example of the wider traditions that religious people, especially Catholic Christians, exercise. How exactly do other practices, like dipping a child in water, or the consumption of a piece of bread and wine bring a person closer to God? By parodying one such tradition, *Endgame* criticises that leap of faith people take towards religion instead of analysing their behaviours more closely and thereby recognising their absurd nature. Beckett challenges belief in this passage, and like Sartre, points out that humans are not subordinate to god, but that we are “condemned to be free” (*Existentialism is a Humanism* n.p.) Instead of relying on higher authority, we must realise our own power and agency, regardless of how frightening it is.

3.3 The Hesitation to End

Endgame thus makes use of these traditions to challenge the audience’s preconceived understanding of reality as they relate to sentimentality, language and belief. Moreover, most works of the Theatre of the Absurd do not operate in a progressing plot. Esslin describes *Endgame* as “the running down of a mechanism until it comes to a stop” (40). However, *Endgame* never truly stops. By the end of the play, Clov has made the necessary arrangements to be ready to leave, yet he remains at Hamm’s side until the curtains close, ending the play in nearly the same positions that it started in. *Endgame* is never-ending in that sense, or at least open-ended, or even an excerpt from an unending moment that progresses towards an end without ever reaching it. It is neither cyclical, nor intensifying, but an excerpt of the eternal moment which hesitates to end. *Huis Clos* follows a similar schema, except that the play focus not on a moment near the end of an eternity, but it tells of eternity’s beginning. *Huis Clos* is also a play in one act, wherein three characters are introduced into a room in hell, where they will spend an eternity torturing one another. The play chronicles the characters’ first encounter as the hellish mechanism is first set in motion.

The hesitation to end, or fear of ending, is explicitly mentioned by Hamm when he tells Clov his story and how it will soon be finished (122). He thinks of trying to avoid ending it by potentially

introducing other characters into his story, upon which Clov enters the room claiming that he has encountered a rat in the kitchen (118). The timing of this event suggests that Hamm's story represents a *mise en abyme*, a literary device through which a play or a story is mirrored within itself. Not only is Hamm telling the story of how Clov came to be his adoptive son, which functions as a sort of prequel to the play within the play, but elements from his storytelling are mirrored in the events of the play itself, such as the introduction of a new character: the rat. The *mise en abyme* is a modern literary device that specifically allows the characters of a play or a novel to obtain a glimpse of their own condition. In the case of *Endgame*, the rat becomes the embodiment of the hesitation to end, as it is felt by Hamm in regard to his story, his own self, and *Endgame* itself as if it were conscious of its own temporality.

Other moments in which the characters graze, but not break the fourth wall include Hamm's fear of "beginning to mean something" (108), where he describes the arrival of a rational being on Earth, who would "be liable to get ideas into his head if he observed us long enough" (108). Hamm indirectly references the audience, who must be trying to make some sense of the play as they are witnessing it. Hamm fears that "it won't all have been for nothing," suggesting that the play is either meant to be utterly meaningless, or that its aim lies not in being interpreted rationally, as an intellectual exercise, but perhaps rather in experiencing the play for what it is on the surface, for its shape, as is the case with *How It Is*.

The final self-referential moment in the play discussed here is Hamm's aside. In his chapter on drama in *Modernism*, Pericles Lewis mentions the aside and the soliloquy: "realists and naturalists generally supported the idea that the audience was looking at real action through the missing fourth wall of a room. They therefore avoided earlier techniques such as soliloquies or asides, which tended to acknowledge the presence of an audience" (194). "Metatheatre" is the term used to refer to theatre that openly acknowledges itself as such, either by addressing the audience, mentioning its author or other means to break the audience's immersion. The term of metatheatre does not apply to *Endgame*, however, as the characters do not openly acknowledge their fictional status but allude to that fact in a way that remains consistent with their fictional world. The soliloquy and the aside, which are

generally addressed to an audience, also express Hamm's need to be heard. Even if no one else in the room is willing to listen to him speak, Hamm will speak to an "imaginary" audience, but at the same time he fears that this audience will begin to recognise a pattern of meaning in Hamm's words and actions. De Beauvoir defines human being as a constant conflict between freedom and facticity (7), and that as a result, meaning can never be fully and lastingly determined (63). So is the case with Hamm. Hamm's character is ambiguous in the sense that his need to be heard conflicts with his fear of being understood. While he yearns for an audience that will acknowledge his existence, he also tries to hide his rotten, selfish character.

3.4 Violence and Love

Despite the characters' apparent purposelessness in the ending times, they still have desires they wish to have satisfied. Hamm wishes to connect with Clov, who wants nothing but order and peace (120), and Nagg wants Nell to laugh at his story like she used to. Hamm's desire becomes apparent through two requests that he makes to Clov, the first being that Clov kiss him, or even just touch him (125), which Clov refuses to do. The second of Hamm's request is that Clov finish him, that he kill him (119), which Clov would like to do, but cannot, whether that be for sentimental or moral reasons, or a lack in physical strength. Whether the nature of their connection should be violent or affectionate does not matter to Hamm, as long as he can get Clov to interact with him on a personal, intimate level. After all, violence and affection could be considered two sides of the same medal, which hold equal value in an absurd setting. Yet those two concepts share a feeling of intimacy. Hamm seeks companionship and closeness, regardless of the manner of interaction, but he fails to receive it from Clov.

Hamm tortures Clov and uses him like an object because he is ashamed to look at himself through Clov's eyes. For Sartre, there are three modes of viewing the body, the third of which states that "I exist for myself as a body known by the other" (Kirkpatrick 151). Sartre explains that part of how we view ourselves is through the gaze of others. In order to avoid seeing himself through Clov's

hateful look, Hamm consistently dehumanises him. He uses him as a tool to fetch things for him, look outside, and as an answering machine. But eventually, Hamm admits to his failures when he tells Clov that he was never there (128). Dennis deduces that Hamm grew blind to embody his unwillingness to see both the suffering around him as well as his own responsibility to help and save people with his wealth and privilege (107).

The tragedy of Hamm's failure to connect with people lies in the fact that his own father, Nagg, has shown Hamm no love even when he was but an infant. He cannot help making Clov suffer because he was never taught the proper way to show affection. When Hamm was a baby, Nagg says, him and Nell would put him out of earshot if he cried at night, so that they themselves might sleep in peace. Parental love and guidance are foreign words to Hamm, so he repeats the cycle of abuse with Clov. Hamm curses his father for having engendered him at all, to which Nagg replies with the excuse "I didn't know ... That it'd be you" (116). This reply is an insult to Hamm's personality as well as an evasion of responsibility. Nagg believes that Hamm was born this way, and that he was going to turn out to be this person no matter who his parents would have been. This belief indicates that unlike Hamm and Clov, Nagg believes that essence precedes existence, in some kind of divine certainty, and most likely also in human nature. He uses this pretext to avoid taking responsibility for his own agency. It is as much in his nature to be cruel as it is in Hamm's nature for him to require attention, an audience, which is certainly true considering that he is a character in a play, a role which he embraces, as becomes clear during his aside.

Nagg's essentialism is portrayed as a failure not only through his poor fathership, but also through the way he loves his wife. Since he does not acknowledge his own agency, he does not consider changing things about himself to make Nell happy. Instead, he retells the same old story, still expecting it to make her laugh, despite the fact that even the first time he told it on Lake Como, Nell only laughed at it because she felt happy. Nell makes an insightful comment on the evolution of relationships and happiness: "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 anymore" (101). Nell says that we laugh with "a will, in the beginning," meaning that in

their youth, one makes decisions about what is important to them. They choose their values and surround themselves with others who will fit and confirm those values. However, over the course of a lifetime, those values and the entourage one has chosen will eventually stop evolving because of a lack of a will for change. The initial “will” is replaced by routine and habit, which, in *Waiting for Godot*, Vladimir refers to as “a great deadener” (84). The importance of the will to act is a concept that Sartre wrote on. Kate Kirkpatrick explains that “Temporality, in Sartre’s view, has a nihilating structure, such that we are estranged from our selves by time. Freedom, therefore, ‘manifests itself through [anxiety]’ and ‘is characterized by a constantly renewed obligation to remake the self’ ” (101). This reasoning also applies to love. One is not simply in love for ever after having fallen into it once, but love is a constant work-in-progress which must be sustained by a consistent will for it. In old age, Nagg and Nell have forgotten how to love, so that in *Endgame*, love fails. Hamm too eventually realises this fact and regrets his past absence from Clov’s life.

3.5 The Final Sufferers Cursed with Life

Life itself is a curse on the characters in *Endgame*. Hamm reproaches his father for having produced him, cursing him “accursed progenitor” and “Accursed fornicator” (96). He is cruel not only for having failed his role as a father to Hamm, but also for having engendered him in the first place. Schopenhauer, whom Beckett enjoyed reading, as Peter Fifield notes (152), had a similar opinion on procreation: “Would each of us not rather have felt so much pity for the coming generation as to prefer to spare it the burden of existence, or at least not wish to take it upon himself to impose that burden upon it in cold blood?” (48). With Nell dies the last woman and representative of motherhood. Hamm raises his toque to say goodbye to his mother and to welcome the finality of the end. The cycle of birth and suffering has irreversibly finished, and the three remaining men are the final population of this world. Despite being birthed involuntarily, the characters struggle to keep on living in a dying world, until the very end. Nagg is the only one who wants to eat, to remain alive. Nell does not take the biscuit from him, nor do Hamm and Clov eat.

Beckett seems to condemn procreation in *Endgame*. Camus, while concerned with the discussion of whether or not already existing people should go on living or not, does not directly comment on the responsibility assumed in producing new life that will face the same challenges. However, if one is to follow his advice that to live meaningfully means to revolt against the absurd, then procreation is part of that revolt. Sartre does not directly comment on procreation either, but his existentialism is in general more hopeful. In his lecture titled *Existentialism is a Humanism* (1945), Sartre defends existentialism against accusations made by the church saying that existentialism is bleak and focuses only on the negative aspects of human life. His statement that existentialism is a humanism means that it cherishes human life and the freedom of choice and responsibility of action that come with it. Therefore the perpetuation of life is encouraged, unlike in *Endgame*.

3.6 Living Absurdly

Most striking about *Endgame* is the fine line that the characters tread between struggling against their absurd condition and seemingly having resolved the absurd conflict by adjusting their desires and actions to this world that is dead and indifferent to them. The characters do not attempt to act upon the world, but simply try to exist alongside it. The particularity of the absurd conflict, according to Camus, lies in the human desire for unity and familiarity (see chapter 2). The characters of *Endgame*, however, do not believe in God, salvation or a deeper meaning behind their condition. They try to become one with the world, like “a tree among trees, a cat among animals” (Camus 39), to *become* the world. Yet Hamm is plagued by a condition that is foreign to him and thus causes him a great deal of anguish. Hamm is anguished because he cannot see nor understand what is happening to him, which is that he is ending, dying. It is a natural process of the body that eludes rational understanding. Dying is of this world whereas the dying consciousness is not. He tries to drown out the creeping sensation that something within him is undergoing a drastic change with idle, meaningless chatter, trying to paint over his experience of the absurd.

Clov has an easier time coping with the absurd. In the beginning of the play, he looks out of the windows and laughs briefly. He regards his own absurd situation with humour. When he is not serving Hamm, he spends his time alone in his kitchen, watching his light die (98), that is to say in pure passivity, waiting for the time when he himself will reach the end. He embraces his condition in order to make it feel more familiar. In *La Peste* (1947), Camus comments on this tactic through the protagonist: “Pour lutter contre l’abstraction, il faut un peu lui ressembler” (98) [In order to fight against abstraction, one must resemble it a little]. The daily routines, the meaningless chatter and the general hopelessness of his situation have rubbed off on Clov, robbing him of any human desires. There is no hope of salvation for the characters of *Endgame*, unlike for the tramps in *Waiting for Godot*. Vladimir mentions the story of the gospels wherein one of the two thieves who were crucified next to Jesus repented and was saved (14). Esslin comments that this chance at salvation was arbitrary (32), but salvation remains a possibility, even if one has no control over the result. That hope does not exist in *Endgame*, at least not for the elderly characters who have lost their ability to walk. Clov is the only one who can leave the house and try his chance at a new life outside. After all, Hamm mentions that they live in a valley out of which it is not possible to see, and that perhaps beyond the hills, nature is still blooming. Clov repeatedly threatens to do just that, to leave Hamm and go outside, but until the very end, where his change of clothes suggests that he might finally take that step, he remains with Hamm. Moreover, Clov never claims his motivation to leave to be to begin a new life, but simply to get away from Hamm. Whether that means escaping the authority Hamm holds over him, escaping the conversations, or the risk of meaning something is unclear, but Hamm repeatedly requires him to act and speak, which Clov dislikes. Clov is the opposite of Hamm in this regard, preferring there to be nothing rather than something. Again, there is an echo of Schopenhauer: “You can also look upon our life as an episode unprofitably disturbing the blessed calm of nothingness” (47). Schopenhauer’s pessimistic view of the world is similar to Camus’ question of suicide. What is it that makes life worth living at all when the world rejects one’s desires and ambitions as meaningful? Clov himself cannot see the value in living, but merely seems to go on living because it has become a habit.

Moreover, like Bom, Clov lives in bad faith. He does not fully embrace the potentiality of his being but reduces himself to the role of playing Hamm's servant. Nell tells Clov to desert (103), to leave Hamm behind and find meaning in his own being, but the hope of finding meaning by oneself is near zero. To leave Hamm would mean certain death for Clov outside and for Hamm inside. Nell nevertheless achieves that goal by herself, getting away from Nagg by dying. In the end, death is the only escape for the characters. Unlike Camus' image of Sisyphus, who eventually overcomes his sorrow to find happiness in his labour, they have no means of escaping their situation or finding happiness in it. Hamm says it best in one of his asides: "The end is in the beginning and yet you go on" (126). From Clov's first words at the beginning of the play: "Finished, it's finished, nearly finished," (93), there is nowhere else they can go. The outcomes of their lives are predetermined by the situation they are in and their own incompetence in connecting with each other.

There is a direct parallel between the plot and themes in *Endgame* and *Huis Clos*. In both plays, the characters find themselves in a situation outside the conventional constraints of time and engage in a relationship of mutual torture that offers an apparent exit. In Sartre's existential play, the characters all depend on each other to feel validated as human beings. Garcin needs Ines to see him as courageous, Ines needs Estelle to love her as a woman, and Estelle needs Garcin to look at her beauty and grant her physical closeness. They are all each other's torturers because they will not give each other what they need, yet when the door opens and they have the opportunity to leave, they choose to remain with each other. They hope that eventually they can have their desires fulfilled, despite knowing that they are in hell and that this will never happen. Sartre's play is about the "look", about the fact that one part of one's being is entirely dependent on other people's perception of them: "It is [the third ontological] dimension of the body that exposes us to the omnipresent 'gaze' of the other. We are 'imprisoned' by this gaze, because the other deprives us of control over how we see our world and—more importantly—ourselves." (Kirkpatrick 152) Despite being physically able to leave, Clov's existence depends on Hamm's "look." Hamm's blindness then becomes a clever element through which Beckett makes clear the impossibility of Hamm ever giving Clov the "look" he so much needs (or needed growing up), which is that of a loving father. Like the characters in *Huis Clos*, Clov

remains in his hell regardless. It is in that vein that Garcin proclaims: “l’Enfer, c’est les Autres.” [Hell is other people] (128). Hell becomes real when the characters each hold the key to the other’s salvation, but refuse to validate the other for their own selfish needs, only to hurt themselves in the process in an eternal conflict with each other. This situation of simultaneous need and torture is as true for *Huis Clos* as it is for *Endgame*.

3.7 Conclusion

As *Endgame* progresses, it becomes more and more clear to the audience that the play is stalling to prevent its own conclusion. By continuously and directly reminding the audience of the play’s temporality, and that it must be nearly finished, the audience becomes aware of the passing of time and becomes entrapped in the play’s uneasy atmosphere. The audience becomes entrapped in their seats like Nagg and Nell in their bins, forced to listen to Hamm and Clov exchanging their meaningless dialogues. Being faced with and reminded of their own temporality, the audience is induced with feelings of existential dread, which in turn invites them to rethink their ability to act meaningfully in their own world. There is no spiritual exit to this world, so one must revise their own sense of agency and acknowledge one’s own terrifying freedom. Everyone is condemned to be free, but also paradoxically dependent on the Other. *Endgame* makes use of absurd dramatic devices to undermine preconceived notions of meaning regarding language and tradition that are taken for granted in everyday life in order to access the audience in a more honest, exposed state.

The body in *Endgame* becomes the embodiment of free will and at the same carries and expresses the character’s shortcomings. Nagg and Nell are too old and nostalgic to go anywhere in the present, Hamm will not look at Clov or his own failure to help other people, and Clov restlessly moves between the room and the kitchen, not wanting to remain with Hamm, but also unable to leave him. In its absurd, hellish experience, *Endgame* is a mirror of the negative emotions all humans share from living in the human condition. But in dealing with the worst aspects of the human condition and

human interaction, it nevertheless affirms that the everyone is the result of their own actions and as such has the ability to change into a better self by making use of the freedom one is granted at birth.

Conclusion

This study has revealed the existential philosophical system present in Beckett's works by making explicit the common existential ideas and concepts Beckett shares with Sartre, Camus, and, to lesser degree, de Beauvoir. It has identified as the common goal between these three existentialist thinkers and the Modernist movement the authentic representation of consciousness as it is understood in a world dominated by new scientific, technological and sociological realities. Beckett, through his work, has followed in their footsteps with a new, radically minimalist method. This study has made explicit the techniques and themes that Beckett has adopted from the modernist movement and his contemporary existential philosophers. In *How It Is*, for example, Beckett employs the stream of consciousness narrative technique in the context of first-person narration, as opposed to the third-person omniscient narrator in *Mrs. Dalloway*. Instead of destabilising the temporal aspect of the narrative via a recounting of past events that is occasionally interrupted by present interventions, as is the case in *Heart of Darkness*, the narrative of *How It Is* is at once stuck in the past as well as the future while narrating present events. In *Endgame*, the characters hesitantly refer to the audience, only nearly breaking the fourth wall to emphasize the uncertainty and ambiguity in their actions.

Chapter two of this study has revealed that beneath the mud of *How It Is*, there is only more mud. This novel clearly engages with an amalgamation of philosophical ideas, as has been demonstrated in a continuously expanding body of scholarship on the novel, but what seems to dominate them all is a strong flavour of impotence and pessimism. The protagonist roams the mud in hopes of finding some meaningful end to his journey. Unfortunately for him, however, he is not part of a divine procession, nor of any other higher order. He is responsible for his own actions, guilty of his torturous treatment of Pim and of his own impotence to make his life meaningful. Yet in worlds like those represented in *How It Is* and *Endgame*, can one even expect to find meaning anywhere? Are the characters really to blame for their own failures that eventually lead them to prefer death to living? The two worlds are paradigmatic for creating the feeling of absurdity in humans. Not only are they irrational worlds, but they are hostile to any other forms of life; they are properly apocalyptic. The

real world may not be rational, or have been created for humans to live in, but it certainly services human needs and offers engagement that is inherently pleasurable for humans. Humans generally respond positively to physical sensations such as a chill breeze on a warm day, or the touch of the warm, soft fur of a dog, or the taste of a sweet berry. The real world is in tune with the human body, despite its resistance to rationality and consciousness. It is for that reason that Camus can imagine Sisyphus happy, a reason that is not necessarily transferable to the Beckettian world.

Yet the morality of existential philosophy is independent from the external world, it is grounded in subjectivity and individual freedom. Regardless of whether the outside world is exclusively mud, or whether food supplies are irreversibly draining, it is up to every single individual to decide whether to act kindly or cruelly. Perhaps Beckett believes that humans are by nature cruel, that if stripped of their possessions and status, anyone would lash out as Hamm does, or abuse others for pleasure as Bom does. That if it were not for organised society, humans would behave no more or less morally than animals, with the only needs being those of eating, moving and defecating.

At the outset of this study, I had hoped to find in either of these two works by Beckett a note of redemption. A sign of hope that despite the bleakness and irrationality of the world, one could find solace in the experience of the own body, in which one could feel at home. However, in both texts, Beckett faces the reader with suffering, torture, abjection and the absolute hopelessness of finding a way to live meaningfully. The characters find themselves entrapped in endless seas of mud or claustrophobically small psychological torture-chambers. To push the feeling of discomfort even further, these characters are additionally entrapped in their own failing bodies. Bom's hands have a mind of their own, Hamm is blind and cannot stand or walk and his parents are amputees who cannot even feel each other anymore despite their bins touching each other. Yet even Clov, the only able-bodied character on stage (excluding his inability to sit), is helplessly subjected to Hamm's cruelty, because his very existence depends on Hamm.

As the characters struggle against their very own existence, they retire back into themselves. Nagg and Nell dwell in nostalgia, Clov withdraws to the kitchen to watch his light die. But neither are able to fully escape outside existence. Hamm continuously demands their attention, and it is

impossible for the others to not hear his call, to escape empiric sensations. The only true escape from life seems to lie in death, the absolute absence of all meaning and feeling.

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