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# REMAINING WITH THE ARTWORK: READING SAMUEL BECKETT'S *ENDGAME* THROUGH SUSAN SONTAG'S "AGAINST INTERPRETATION "

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## Abstract

This paper focuses on Samuel Beckett's play *Endgame* through Susan Sontag's essay "Against Interpretation." Beckett's absurdity often becomes challenging to interpret and comprehend. His *Endgame,* particularly, deals with the lack of movement in physical form as well as in terms storyline which makes it quite implausible to understand. However, Sontag argues that in such stories, the potential lies in the reader's settlement with the meaninglessness. Instead of forcefully finding meanings everywhere, Sontag argues against readers' habit of interpreting everything as it weakens the richness of art. As interpretations distract readers from the work of art, Sontag suggest her own way of reading which emphasise on the form, style and sensory experience of the stories. In case of the *Endgame,* its fundamental essence can be explored when it is read without irritable attempt at reducing it to a simplified message.

**Keywords:** *Endgame,* Samuel Beckett, Interpretation, Susan Sontag, Absurdism, Meaninglessness.

## Introduction

In the study of literature, readers and critics are often predisposed to treat texts as puzzles to be solved. They first look for meaning when confronted with a play or novel that is difficult or unfamiliar, rather than taking the work as it is. There is a conditioning in society and in education to search for hidden meanings, symbols, allegories. Readers are frequently taught that the real worth of a literary work is in the philosophical or moral lesson, rather than the direct experience of reading it or watching it.

However, this approach can serve injustice to a work of art. It risks transforming a living creation into a purely intellectual exercise. This concern lies at the centre of Susan Sontag's influential 1966 essay, "Against Interpretation." Sontag argues that an excessive preoccupation with content and hidden meaning weakens the essence of art. Instead, she calls for a different mode of engagement, which is the one that emphasizes form, style, and sensory experience.

There is perhaps no more compelling testing ground for Sontag's ideas than the work of Samuel Beckett, particularly his 1957 play *Endgame*. Beckett's drama is often described as minimal, repetitive, and enigmatic. It resists straightforward explanation. Yet precisely because of this difficulty, it has attracted numerous critical interpretations that attempt to define its true meaning. Critics have variously argued that *Endgame* represents the effects of war, the death of God, or the psychology of the artist.

Although such interpretations appear interesting, they can distract attention from the play itself. They encourage readers to look through the play for hidden meanings rather than to attend to its immediate presence. This paper applies the arguments of Susan Sontag to *Endgame*. It argues that the play is most effectively experienced not as a riddle to be solved but as a direct encounter with form, silence, repetition, and absurdity. By concentrating on what Sontag calls the "sensuous surface" of art (Sontag 13), the primary appearance of Samuel Beckett's drama can be appreciated without reducing it to a simplified message.

## Absurdism of Beckett in the light of Sontag's Critique of Interpretation

*Endgame* is classified as an absurdist play and this designation has encouraged various critical interpretations to its reading. To understand why the play invites interpretive attention, it is necessary to consider its position within literary

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history. Martin Esslin claims in his book *The Theatre of the Absurd* that Samuel Beckett is a central figure in the Theatre of the Absurd.

In Europe during the 1950s, this movement came in response to the devastation of the Second World War. The war disturbed faith in logic, religion, and the idea of historical progress. As Esslin observes, if the world could produce such destruction, the belief in a rational meaning of life became difficult to sustain (16). Playwrights associated with the Theatre of the Absurd, such as Eugène Ionesco, Jean Genet, and Harold Pinter, tried to dramatize this crisis of meaning in their respective works (Abdi 8).

A play in traditional theatre usually has a clear beginning, a middle, and a definitive conclusion. Characters have clear motivations, and their behaviour is shown to be psychologically understandable. The main purpose of language is to facilitate communication and information transfer.

But these norms are broken in the Theatre of the Absurd. Characters sometimes find themselves trapped in unclear and unexplainable situations, and plots may seem circular or even non-existent. The dramatic structure itself reflects a sense of existential disorientation. As Martin Esslin explains, the "absurd" refers to a condition in which human existence is "devoid of purpose… cut off from his religious, metaphysical, and transcendental roots, man is lost; all his actions become senseless, absurd, useless" (qtd. in Abdi 4).

*Endgame* is Beckett's second major play and it has a very dark theme. It depicts a world that seems to be ending, inhabited by four physically impaired characters confined within a single room. Because Beckett stripped away the usual context of realistic drama, we don't know where the room is, what year it is, or exactly who these people are. As a result, audiences felt compelled to fill the missing explanations. Questions arose about the meaning of the "grey light" or the reason the parents are placed in ashbins (Beckett 11).

This historical and aesthetic context helps explain why interpretation became a dominant response to Beckett's drama. The apparent emptiness of the play invited critics to impose explanatory frameworks upon it. Susan Sontag's essay emerged as a reaction against precisely this tendency. She suggests that, in attempting to explain the absurd, critics risk domesticating it by transforming an unsettling artistic experience into a manageable intellectual system.

**Conceptual Framework of Sontag's "Against Interpretation"**

Susan Sontag was a major force in American culture, challenging how people thought about art. Her essay "Against Interpretation" is a manifesto for a new kind of criticism. Sontag begins by tracing the history of our thinking about art. She points out that mimesis, or imitation of reality, was the definition of art in the early conceptions of art, which came from Greek thinkers like Plato and Aristotle (Sontag 3-4).

This definition created a fatal split in our thinking. It separated the "form" of the art from the "content". Since then, Sontag contends, Western culture has placed a higher value on content than form. We believe that what a painting or book reveals about the world is its "real" value (Sontag 8).

This focus on content leads directly to the problem of interpretation. Sontag defines interpretation as a conscious act of translating the work of art into something else. The interpreter looks at a story and says, "X is really A, and Y is really B" (Sontag 5). For instance, a critic might argue that the white whale in Moby Dick is not just a whale but a symbol of evil, or of fate, or of God. This process Sontag calls "the revenge of the intellect upon art" (Sontag 7). She thinks this kind of interpretation is aggressive. It digs "behind" the text to find a "sub-text" that the critic thinks is the true meaning (Sontag 7).

Sontag is particularly critical of two dominant systems of interpretation: Freudian psychology and Marxism. A Freudian critic looks at a work of art and sees evidence of the author's childhood traumas or sexual repressions. A Marxist critic looks for evidence of class struggle or social history. Sontag argues that these systems treat the artwork as a symptom or a document, not as art. They "impoverish" the world by replacing the rich, complex reality of the art with a shadow world

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of meanings (Sontag 7). By explaining why, the art is the way it is, they explain it away. They make it "manageable" and "comfortable" (Sontag 8).

It is important to clarify that Sontag is not saying we should never talk about art. She is not against all analysis. She is against the kind of interpretation that replaces the work with an idea. She writes, "It is the habit of approaching works of art in order to interpret them that sustains the fancy that there really is such a thing as the content of a work of art" (Sontag 5). Instead of a "hermeneutics" which means a method of interpretations, Sontag suggests we need an "erotics of art" (Sontag 14).

This means we should focus on the sensory experience. We need to recover our ability to see, hear, and feel the art. The job of the critic should be to describe the form, such as the lighting, the rhythm, the speed and the texture, to show "how it is what it is," rather than "what it means" (Sontag 14).

### *Endgame*'s Minimalism and Its Interpretive Temptation

To apply Susan Sontag's theory, it is necessary to examine *Endgame* closely. The play opens in a "bare interior" illuminated by "grey light" (Beckett 11). Two small windows are positioned high on the back wall. At the centre of the room sits Hamm, a blind man confined to a wheelchair and unable to stand. He is attended by Clov, who may be his servant or possibly his son, and who moves with a stiff, unsteady gait and is unable to sit down. To one side of the stage stand two ashbins, which contain Nagg and Nell, Hamm's elderly parents, who lost their legs in a bicycling accident years earlier (Beckett 15).

The dramatic action of the play is deliberately minimal. It is frequently characterized as a drama in which very little occurs. Hamm and Clov engage in recurring disputes. Clov looks out of the window with a telescope and reports that the outside world is "corpsed" and reduced to "zero" (Beckett 25). Nagg and Nell emerge from their ashbins to request food or to revisit fragments of memory. Hamm narrates a story about a time when he may have offered help to a man and his son, although the conclusion of the story remains uncertain. Clov repeatedly threatens to leave Hamm but never follows through. The play concludes in a state of suspension. Clov stands by the door, dressed for departure, yet he does not exit. Hamm covers his face with a handkerchief, yielding to silence (Beckett 52–53).

This play becomes an ideal target for what Susan Sontag describes as the "leeches" of interpretation (Sontag 8). Play's unusual setting and physically impaired characters appear to invite explanatory frameworks. Critics have speculated whether the room functions as a bomb shelter after a third world war, whether the "grey light" suggests nuclear fallout, or whether the stage represents the interior of a human skull, with the two windows symbolizing eyes (Karthikeyan 100). Others have proposed that the name Hamm evokes a "hammer," while Clov derives from the French word "clou", meaning "nail" (Naqvi 36). Such arguments have occupied critics for decades. Yet, from Sontag's perspective, these debates risk diverting attention from the immediate experience of the play. They transform a visceral sense of confinement into an intellectual puzzle to be solved.

### Experiencing Form: The Sensory Impact of *Endgame*

If we stop interpreting *Endgame*, what remains is the formal structure of the play itself. Susan Sontag argues that the highest value in art is "transparence," a mode of experience that allows us to perceive the "luminousness of the thing in itself" (Sontag 13). In *Endgame*, this "thing in itself" emerges through a striking physical arrangement of bodies, objects, and spatial confinement. The meaning of the play does not lie beneath its surface but within its visible and material design.

The visual design of *Endgame* is striking and deliberate. The stage directions specify "grey light" (Beckett 11). This detail need not be treated as a symbol of despair; rather, it establishes a sensory condition. The dim illumination produces a fading atmosphere that requires sustained visual attention from the audience. In this way, it parallels the impaired vision of

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the characters. The sparse setting compels focus on a limited number of objects: the chair, the ashbins, and the ladder. Susan Sontag argues for the development of a descriptive vocabulary for artistic forms (Sontag 12).

From this perspective, the form of *Endgame* may be described as geometrical and rigid. Hamm repeatedly insists on occupying the exact centre of the stage, asking, "Am I right in the centre?" (Beckett 23). This concern with spatial precision functions as a formal device and it creates an imposed sense of order within apparent chaos. It does not necessarily symbolize divine authority but rather it reflects a material and psychological need for balance.

The placement of Nagg and Nell in ashbins remains one of the most famous images in modern theatre. A symbolic reading might interpret this staging as a commentary on the marginalization of the elderly. While such an interpretation maybe true, Sontag would encourage attention to the immediate physical reality of the scene. The ashbins are concrete stage objects with lids that open and close. The repeated movement of the characters rising and disappearing creates a distinct visual rhythm. The effect is at once absurd and comic. The audience hears the lids slam shut, producing a sharp sensory impact that precedes any sociological explanation. As Sontag observes, powerful art possesses a "directness that entirely frees us from the itch to interpret" (Sontag 11). The image of the heads emerging from the bins is so forceful and strange that it can stand on its own, without being translated into a moral or social statement.

The immobility of the characters functions as another formal constraint within the play. Hamm remains fixed in his chair, Clov moves restlessly yet awkwardly, and Nagg and Nell are confined within their ashbins. This arrangement produces a choreography of restriction. The drama becomes a study in limited movement. Clov's "stiff, staggering walk" is a precise performance detail specified in the stage directions (Beckett 11).

Observing the actor's laborious movement across the stage generates a tangible sense of physical strain and discomfort. In this respect, the play reflects Susan Sontag's assertion that we should "feel more" rather than simply think more (Sontag 14). The struggle itself constitutes the experience; its significance lies in the sensation of effort rather than in any abstract interpretation of that effort.

**The Aesthetics of Repetition, Rhythm, and Verbal Performance in *Endgame***

Sontag critiques the persistent search for hidden content in works of art and instead calls for a heightened appreciation of style. In *Endgame*, dialogue does not function primarily as a vehicle for transmitting information but it rather operates as a structured pattern of sound. Beckett treats language as texture and rhythm. The play is marked by frequent repetitions that generate a patterned beat and resembles the structure of musical composition.

The play opens with Clov's lines, "Finished, it's finished, nearly finished, it must be nearly finished" (Beckett 12). If this line is examined alone for narrative meaning, attention becomes fixed on the question of precisely what is finished. However, when considered as sound, the line produces a droning effect. The repeated "f" consonants and sibilant "sh" sounds create a hushed and weary acoustic effect. Sontag praises work of art that employ "redundancy" as a deliberate stylistic principle (Sontag 13). In *Endgame*, repetition functions as a central formal device, conveying the monotony and circularity that structure the characters' existence.

The dialogue moves in circular patterns and draws attention to the texture and rhythm of language rather than to the progression of meaning. Hamm asks, "What time is it?" Clov replies, "The same as usual." Hamm presses further, "Have you looked?" Clov answers, "Yes." Hamm responds, "Well?" and Clov concludes, "Zero" (Beckett 13). The word "zero" becomes a recurring rhythmic marker within the play. Its abrupt and final sound produces a sense of cold closure and it effectively halts the exchange. Rather than advancing the plot, such dialogue measures the passage of time. The characters fill silence with repetitive speech. This operates as a formal strategy. Language becomes a means of sustaining presence and momentarily keeping the void at a distance.

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Another instance of repetition appears in the recurring motif of "leaving." Clov declares, "I'll leave you." Hamm responds, "In your kitchen?" and Clov answers, "Yes" (Beckett 15). This exchange recurs several times throughout the play. Susan Sontag observes that in modern art, form often shapes content through processes of "doubling" or "duplicating" (Sontag 180). In this case, the duplication disrupts any sense of linear progression. In traditional drama we would move to action or resolution through the repetition of departure. But here the phrase is more like a refrain, a verbal fragment that is repeated and loops without consequence. It's a kind of feeling of temporal suspension. The form of the dialogue itself produces the feeling of being trapped.

Beckett also draws on features of the language of the music-hall, which is characterised by fast and precisely timed exchanges, akin to comic routines. "Hamm: We're not starting to... to... mean something? Clov: Mean something! You and I, mean something! (Brief laugh.) Ah that's a good one!" (Beckett 27). This moment seems to mock the audience's ongoing appetite for interpretive depth. It acts as a self-reflexive or meta-theatrical gesture. Beckett seems to indicate the absurdity of trying to find the play's overall purpose.

Such a moment would probably be valued by Sontag since it prioritizes performance and immediacy over symbolic explanation. Laughing functions as a physical release. The sequence emphasizes the feeling of humour itself rather than a subliminal message. The act of laughing, not an abstract interpretation of it, is what gives the interaction its value.

**Silence, stillness and physical Action in *Endgame***

Sontag called for an "erotics of art" to replace a purely hermeneutic approach. By "erotics," she refers to a mode of sensory and immediate engagement with the artwork (Sontag 14). In theatre, one of the most potent sensory elements is silence. *Endgame* is structurally organized around moments of pause and stillness. The stage directions repeatedly include the word "Pause," giving silence a formal presence within the text. For example, Hamm declares, "Nature has forgotten us." Clov replies, "There's no more nature." Hamm responds, "No more nature! You exaggerate." Clov adds, "In the vicinity." (Pause.) Hamm continues, "But we breathe, we change! We lose our hair, our teeth! Our bloom! Our ideals!" Clov concludes, "Then she hasn't forgotten us" (Beckett 16).

These pauses do not represent empty intervals but they rather carry weight and generate palpable tension. They compel the audience to remain within the quiet and to attend closely to the stage. Sontag observes that silence in modern art can function as a means of escaping "the rough grip of interpretation" (Sontag 10). In moments when dialogue ceases, there are no words to decode or analyse. The silence asserts its own presence. It requires spectators to inhabit the same physical space as the performers. Attention shifts to breathing, to the grey light, and to the stillness that shapes the scene.

In *Endgame*, silence also functions as a form of pressure. Hamm appears deeply uneasy with it. At one point he insists, "The dialogue. I've got on with my story" (Beckett 39), and suggests his reliance on speech to ward off stillness. Language becomes a means of filling the void. Yet silence repeatedly reasserts itself after each exchange. The play ultimately concludes in quiet suspension. The tension between speech and silence constitutes a central dramatic force. This conflict operates primarily on a sensory level rather than an intellectual one. By attending to the rhythm of sound and pause, the audience approaches the lived experience of the play more directly than by analysing the semantic content of the dialogue.

The action of the play remains deliberately minimal, a quality that aligns with Sontag's resistance to content-driven interpretation. In conventional drama, actions typically produce consequences that advance the plot. In *Endgame*, however, actions often register only as repeated physical movements. Clov climbs a ladder to look out of the window, descends upon realizing he has forgotten the telescope, retrieves it, and climbs again. This sequence resembles a clown routine (Abdi 106). Its humour arises from its physical awkwardness and repetition.

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When the episode is treated as a symbol of humanity's futile search for knowledge, the comic effect is diminished. The laughter gives way to abstraction. From Sontag's perspective, attention should remain with the physical comedy. The "thing in itself" is the image of the clumsy figure on the ladder (Sontag 13), not an allegory imposed upon it.

**Experience of The Audience and The Performance of The Play**

Sontag emphasizes that art should make our own experience "more, rather than less, real to us" (Sontag 14). *Endgame* is designed to create a very specific experience for the audience that is a mixture of boredom, claustrophobia, and amusement.

The play is described as uneventful, with little conventional action. Yet Sontag suggests that boredom can constitute a meaningful aesthetic response. It interests spectators to slow their pace of attention and to register subtle details. In a culture of "excess" and "overproduction," as Sontag observes, the senses risk becoming dulled (Sontag 13). *Endgame* counters this condition by stripping away surplus elements. The staging is thin as there are no elaborate props, no shifting scenery, and no dramatic plot reversals. As a result, the audience becomes attentive to minimal variations such as the tone of a voice, the creak of a wheelchair, the colour of a handkerchief.

The play also directly implicates the audience. At one point, Clov turns his telescope outward and remarks, "I see… a multitude… in transports… of joy" (Beckett 25). The irony of this observation is evident, as the spectators are more likely to feel discomfort, confusion, or boredom than joy. By acknowledging the presence of the audience, Beckett disrupts theatrical illusion and foregrounds the conditions of performance. He reminds spectators that they are seated in a theatre observing actors rather than witnessing a self-contained reality. This gesture corresponds to Sontag's preference for transparency in art. The play does not attempt to simulate life. Instead, it openly presents itself as performance.

The characters also perform for one another within the world of the play. Hamm explicitly adopts the posture of an actor, clearing his throat and announcing, "Me… to play" (Beckett 12). He later asks how effective his "last soliloquy" (Beckett 49) was and orders Clov to do his part. This persistent foregrounding of theatrical self-consciousness foregrounds the constructed nature of the drama. The play is a kind of game, structured by roles and cues.

This theatricality is attended to so that the audience is not tempted to see the characters as fully developed psychological case studies. Hamm is not offered as a subject for Freudian analysis, but as a figure of conscious action within a script. Sontag argues that admitting to such artifice permits a better understanding of the construction of art, rather than being trapped in a false realism (Sontag 10).

**The Reading of *Endgame* Without Symbolic Interpretation**

If we refuse to read *Endgame* as an allegory of war or as a symbolic representation of the death of God, the play must instead be approached as the presentation of a concrete dramatic situation. Rather than searching for hidden meanings, we attend to what is explicitly staged. The play presents a condition of exhaustion as the world that is ending, is not through spectacle but through gradual depletion. Everything is running out: the painkiller is gone, the pap is gone, the sugar-plums are gone, and even the bicycle wheels are gone (Beckett 15-23).

This process of depletion constitutes the central action of the play. The audience does not need to know why the supplies are running out in order to feel the anxiety created by scarcity. We can instead keep our attention on the characters dealing with and surviving the loss. When the painkiller finishes Hamm gets angry, and Nagg behaves like a little child if he doesn't get a sugar-plum. The audience can respond with immediate empathy rather than looking for symbolic explanations.

The play can also be read as a study of relationships. Hamm and Clov are bound to one another in a condition of mutual dependence. Hamm provides a kind of shelter, while Clov functions as his legs and eyes. Although they express hostility toward each other, separation is impossible. As Hamm asks, "Why do you stay with me?" Clov replies, "Why do

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you keep me?" Hamm answers, "There's no one else." Clov concludes, "There's nowhere else" (Beckett 14). This exchange presents a stark and simple articulation of human dependency. It does not require interpretation as an allegory of the Body and Soul or as a representation of Master–Slave class struggle. Rather, it depicts two beings confined within an inescapable bond. The meaning emerges from the tension sustained within their relationship.

Attention may also be directed toward the sensory details of the play. There is the sound of the alarm clock, described as "fit to wake the dead" (Beckett 34), the sensation of stiff legs, and the smell of the "corpsed" world (Beckett 25). Beckett constructs a physical environment that is concrete and specific. As Susan Sontag argues, the task of criticism is to show how a work of art functions rather than to assign it abstract meanings (14). In *Endgame*, the play functions through the steady accumulation of small miseries. It operates by stripping life down to its barest elements.

Even the story Hamm tells about the "madman" painter may be approached in this way. Hamm describes a painter who looked at a beautiful world and saw only "ashes" (Beckett 32). Critics often argue that this painter represents the artist's vision of truth. However, following the approach suggested by Susan Sontag, attention can remain on the image itself. The contrast between the "rising corn" and the "ashes" is primarily a sensory contrast (Beckett 32). It produces a shock to the imagination. There is no need to determine whether the painter symbolizes Beckett or functions as a prophetic figure. What matters is the sudden collapse of beauty into dust that the image presents.

**Critical Perspectives and Limits of Interpretation**

One must realize the importance of reading Endgame without interpretation. Readers want pattern and association. When we encounter a blind man seated in a chair, we may recall other blind figures in literature, such as Oedipus or King Lear (Karthikeyan 126). Beckett himself incorporates biblical echoes into the play. Hamm's name, for instance, recalls "Ham," the cursed son of Noah (Karthikeyan 100). Similarly, the "small boy" whom Clov sees at the end of the play may be interpreted as a symbol of rebirth or even as a Christ figure (Karthikeyan 127).

It is reasonable to ask whether these references can truly be ignored. Susan Sontag would likely suggest that such references may be acknowledged without allowing them to dominate the play. One may recognize that Hamm echoes King Lear without concluding that the play is fundamentally about *King Lear* (Karthikeyan 127). These allusions function as part of the play's form; they operate as textures within the text (Sontag 4). They contribute to its richness, but they do not provide a definitive key to interpretation. If attention remains fixed on determining whether the boy represents Jesus, the audience risks overlooking the actual ending of the play where Hamm is covering his face in silence. In doing so, the emotional force of the conclusion is replaced by an abstract intellectual theory.

Furthermore, excessive interpretation often diminishes the humour of the play. Although *Endgame* is not formally labelled a tragicomedy, it clearly blends tragic and comic elements. The play is meant to provoke laughter as well as unease. Nagg's joke about the "tailor", for instance, functions as a comic moment (Beckett 20). However, when it is analysed as a "parody" of creation, the joke loses its immediacy and becomes overly didactic (Sontag 10). Susan Sontag calls for a recovery of our capacity to experience art directly, including our ability to laugh. The comic relief comes in the absurdity of Nagg knocking on the lid of his bin and Clov finding a flea in his trousers. The humour is a defence against the surrounding darkness, and it works best when it is spontaneous, not over-analysed.

**Conclusion**

Susan Sontag's essay "Against Interpretation" offers a productive framework for approaching Samuel Beckett's *Endgame*. Rather than translating the play into abstract philosophical or symbolic systems, Sontag encourages resistance to interpretive reduction. She calls for a defence of the "naked power" of art (Sontag 99). *Endgame* exemplifies a work that resists such translation. It presents a drama of waiting, endurance, and ending grounded in material presence. The play unfolds within the physical reality of a room, a chair, and four bodies confined within space.

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By attending to the formal elements of the play, such as the grey light, the constrained movements, the circular repetition, and the weighted silences, the audience approaches the work more closely than symbolic analysis permits. The play does not present itself as a riddle requiring resolution but it rather demands endurance as an experience. The "meaning" of *Endgame* does not reside in concealed allegory but in the material reality of performance. The boredom is tangible, the humour immediate, and the pain embodied. As Sontag argues, the task of criticism is to demonstrate how a work functions rather than to reduce it to a paraphrasable message.

In *Endgame*, Samuel Beckett removes excess in order to expose a bare structural condition of existence. Sontag's approach enables us to perceive this structure without covering it with the conceptual "clothing" of interpretation. We learn to see, hear, and feel the stark presence that Beckett stages, discovering within it the "erotics" of a severe yet compelling art.

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