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THE REFLECTION OF THE WASTELANDS OF *WAITING FOR GODOT* AND
ENDGAME IN ELECTRONIC MEDIA

By
Anya M. Cronin

A thesis

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements of the
Master of Arts in Theatre Degree
of
The Graduate School
at
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Approved by _____
Dr. Elisabeth Hostetter

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ABSTRACT

Anya M. Cronin

THE REFLECTION OF THE WASTELANDS OF *WAITING FOR GODOT* AND *ENDGAME* IN ELECTRONIC MEDIA

2007/08

Dr. Elisabeth Hostetter
Master of Arts in Theatre

The Reflection of the Wastelands of Waiting for Godot and Endgame in Electronic Media is a study of the wasteland settings of *Waiting for Godot*, *Endgame*, and the Internet according to the method of play analysis established by Bruce McConachie in *American Theatre in the Culture of the Cold War: Producing and Contesting Containment, 1947-1962*. Chapter One establishes my justification, methodology, structure, and survey of literature. Chapters Two-Four explore isolation and language, magic, and death in regard to *Godot*, *Endgame*, and the Internet, respectively. Chapter Four also briefly concludes the work. This thesis invites spectators to examine *Waiting for Godot* and *Endgame* in regard to electronic media, which helps us to understand both Beckett's work and electronic media in a scholarly, theatrical context that discrete analyses could not singularly achieve.

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I'll never forget any of you!

DEDICATION

To my Mom and Grandmom (both named Anna)—I will love you until the ends of time.

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CHAPTER 1

Introduction

Justification

Godot is and is not God; consequently, the universe is and is not a closed one. ...[B]y the strange twilight-dialectics, this is and is not a living world. It is a zombie life-in-death or death-in-life territory, fauna and flora, an almost Lovecraftian fantasy, or a surreal limbo between being and non-being. With obvious reference to Dante's Purgatory...it is an inverted Purgatory, tending downward into hopelessness. (Darko Suvin 130)

This thesis explores the ways Samuel Beckett's literary wastelands, the bleak, barren places of *Waiting for Godot* and *Endgame*, resemble the Internet in terms of the intangible, enigmatic medium of electronic discourse. It provides a new lens through which to view the wastelands of *Waiting for Godot* and *Endgame*. The term "wasteland" derives from the long literary tradition of blighted, wasted kingdoms featured in countless works from Sophocles' *Oedipus Rex*, to Sir Thomas Malory's *Le Morte D'Arthur*, to T.S. Eliot's *The Waste Land*, though in this thesis "wasteland" specifically indicates the settings of *Godot* and *Endgame* and the Internet.

Any place that evokes isolation, emptiness, and sterility can be considered a wasteland, though perhaps the Internet holds a true, modern claim. We lack the aid of our bodily senses online, except for sight. We can see computer generated text online and

fluorescent graphics glimmer. Our thoughts engage and explore an abstract plane much like Beckett's austere and thought-provoking wastelands in *Godot* and *Endgame*. We travel to the wastelands of *Godot* and *Endgame*, and these numinous places appeal to us. To label a wasteland "appealing" may appear strange, but Beckett's poetic lines imbue these devastated physical and emotional places with mythic allure. This same allure draws billions of people to electronic media, which promises to end loneliness and transform users.

Godot unfolds in a haunting and barren setting. Yet *Godot* tempts the audience with a Promethean glint of anticipation. The lone tree on *Godot*'s country road blooms leaves between acts. Vladimir is taken with the spectacle and demands that Estragon "Look at it" (*Godot* 440). Estragon refuses to believe the tree has changed. Undaunted, Vladimir sees the surfacing of the wasteland's buried transformative capabilities. "But yesterday evening it was all black and bare. And now it's covered with leaves" (*Godot* 440). Vladimir will wait for Godot. Eric Bentley, writing "The Talent of Samuel Beckett" in Ruby Cohn's *Casebook on Waiting for Godot*, argues that waiting characterizes "a rebuff to desolation" (66). Bentley compares the characters of *Godot* to those who endured the Holocaust. He writes, "the Auschwitz prisoners hoped, however improbably, to get out: it is not certain that Godot *won't* come" (Bentley 66).

Vladimir and Estragon communicate. They try to break despair with uncertain partnership, but *Godot* dramatizes people in sets of two who are not actually partners. The characters cannot meld, but they do collude. "Un-communication," a discourse marked by apparent communication devoid of actual understanding, bars the characters' way. Each character fumbles in choppy, pained solitude. Thomas Cousineau writes about

this lonely wilderness's lack of exchange in *Waiting for Godot: Form in Movement*. He writes that "in [Beckett's] director's notebook for the Schiller Theater production of *Godot*, Beckett makes clear that the second most important nonaction of the play, after Godot's failure to appear, is the lack of response to appeals for help" (Cousineau 55).

The characters attempt to help one another, but they simultaneously reject assistance. Again, Cousineau explains that even "the opening scene of the play immediately situates us in a world where human effort is highly ineffectual" (55). The characters of *Godot* persistently fail. Estragon approaches Lucky in an unsuccessful act of generosity. Estragon tries to swab Lucky's eyes, but Lucky kicks Estragon, and Pozzo chides, "I told you he didn't like strangers" (*Godot* 400). Vladimir, Estragon, Pozzo, and Lucky find a cohort or an audience, even a potential soul mate, if you will, and then rebuff each other in an ever-growing cycle of misunderstanding. Their discourse is fruitless. Whenever a character steps into the action, he is quite alone and receives no empathy from his fellows. Everyone is isolated. Pozzo's attempted exit reflects this, and Beckett's stage directions explain the action:

Pozzo extricates himself with cries of pain and crawls away. He stops, sees the air blindly, calling for help. Vladimir, propped on his elbow, observes his retreat. (Godot 461-462)

Endgame emanates more cheer than *Godot*. In *Endgame* all is lost. Hamm's storage of goods dwindles. Hamm and Clov eat, wear, and use the last non-renewable resources. Nevertheless, *Endgame*'s wasteland's irrevocability frees the characters to help one another. In the past Hamm dispelled his loneliness by adopting Clov. Beckett hints at Hamm and Clov's foster father-son relationship near the end of the play. Hamm

speaks of this bond and ponders the isolation looming before him. He anticipates desertion, saying:

I'll have called my father and I'll have called my...

(he hesitates)

...my son. And even twice, or three times, in case they shouldn't have heard me, the first time, or the second.

(Pause.) (Endgame 69)

Beckett's characters attempt to allay isolation. Their endeavors reveal the extent of their despair.

Isolation threatens many people. Yet some choose to face their loneliness. They seek electronic discourse for comfort. But can you warmly embrace a computer? Writing "The Internet? Bah!" for *Newsweek*, Clifford Stoll asks readers to "discount the fawning techno-burble about virtual communities" (41). To Stoll, loneliness is wed to electronic discourse. He asks, "what's missing from this electronic wonderland? Human contact" (Stoll 41). What if you don't know anyone who can discuss an esoteric topic you are taken with? Locating a person in actual life who can discuss your deep interests would please you. Finding someone who shares your passion is difficult, especially for students who require information to fulfill their studies and live at a distance from their school or university.

The Internet shares many qualities of Beckett's wastelands, because people seek longer and longer hours online in reaction to their lonely and disconnected existence. Modern living has eliminated the need for many of us to perform manual labor, and the endless days reinforce the ache of loneliness. In the modern world people push beyond

the things life offers to visit an abstract land. Though not an unpleasant choice, this abstract land requires the visitor to remain fixed in physical space, like in sleep. Electronic discourse leads to more electronic discourse. When does the cycle end? The suspension of time and space is similar to the conditions felt by Beckett's characters and audiences. The cycle of discourse never ends and can theoretically continue forever as long as there are audiences to respond and speculate.

Methodology

In a chapter entitled "Fragmented Heroes, Female Others, and The Bomb," from *American Theater in the Culture of the Cold War*, Bruce McConachie blends his understanding of nuclear science with analyses of plays and films (199-282). His analysis inspired this thesis. I liken *Godot* and *Endgame*'s wastelands to the landscape created by electronic media using McConachie's methodology, structure, and "taxonomy." Taxonomy refers to McConachie's system of classification and the vocabulary he created to define his categorizations. McConachie ties together two completely different plays and analyzes them in relation to American fears of the 20th century Cold War nuclear threat. His treatments of plays are confined to character, setting, and/or plot, and he compares and contrasts these dramatic elements to explore the overarching topic of how cold war fears were reflected and reinforced in theatrical works. My thesis compares and contrasts the wasteland settings of *Godot* and *Endgame* to the idea of the Internet as a conceived space. These "spaces" lack sustainable, physical locality. Instead, the wastelands of *Godot*, *Endgame*, and the Internet are characterized by their illusive blends of isolation, magic, spatial emptiness, despair, death, and sterility.

McConachie claims to offer “a cultural-historical analysis of representative theatrical events” in *American Theater in the Culture of the Cold War* and explains his methodology and structure in the Preface (vii). McConachie challenged himself to delineate how America’s cold war fears impacted the construction of theatre. McConachie begins by asking several questions he feels contemporary theatre theory cannot answer:

How did the experience of enjoying *The Seven Year Itch*, *The King and I*, and *J.B.*, among other shows, intersect with the everyday lives of...playgoers and help to position them within some of the major social, political, and ethical crosscurrents of their time? ...[W]ere there significant differences between these experiences of theatergoing and similar experiences before and after the period of the early Cold War? If so, how could I explain these historical changes? (vii)

McConachie tells readers that he sought taxonomy in cognitive science for its logic and then read “the cognitive psychology and linguistics of George Lakoff and Mark Johnson” (viii). Their theory of containment drives McConachie’s work. He cites their definition of containment as “an ‘image schema’ ...that designates what happens when a person categorizes a perceived image as having an inside, an outside, and a boundary between them” and presents containment in his book as the catalyst for “spectatorial perceptions...[that] organized much of the experience of theatergoing—indeed much of the experience of cold war culture—in the 1947-1962 period” (McConachie viii-ix). Filtered through the dominant American perception of containment, McConachie examines extant data such as “scripts, designs, reviews, memoirs, and other evidence” of

theatrical performances “to deduce the kinds of cognitive enjoyments that made them popular” and, at the same time, reinforced the shared audience experience of containment (ix).

McConachie informs readers in the Preface of *American Theater* that Chapter One explores his methodology, structure and bibliography. He introduces “containment figures—Empty Boys, Family Circles, and Fragmented Heroes...” (McConachie xi), which enabled cold war productions to enjoy lasting popularity. These models encompass Chapters Two-Five, and McConachie structures these chapters identically. For example, McConachie begins Chapter Four “Fragmented Heroes, Female Others, and the Bomb” with a citation of General Thomas Farrell’s eyewitness description of the first atomic bomb detonation, which occurred in New Mexico’s desert (199). McConachie then cites sources including *The New York Herald Tribune* and *Time* to present social and political responses to atomic power and concludes that atomic power, which Farrell described as the “strong, sustained, awesome roar which warned of doomsday” (199), reflected on cold war culture by “exacerbat[ing] the distance between feelings of puniness and omnipotence in many [cold war American] males” (201). In response to the ascendancy of nuclearism, McConachie suggests “cold war males turned to stars with well-muscled biceps and chests, such as William Holden, Charlton Heston, and George Reeves, who played super-studs, super-patriarchs, and Superman on film and television” (201). McConachie contrasts these images of all-powerfulness with the Fragmented American Hero’s flip side, weakness. He writes about the utter helplessness of cold war males, for whom “alien conspirators attacked individuals as well as states, making the Fragmented Hero an inherent security risk” (McConachie 206). This chapter introduction—a

definition of the Fragmented Hero taken from historical, political, and cultural sources— continues with several more examples of invincible and weak characters in film.

McConachie then introduces his play analyses. He compares Martha Graham's modern Oedipal myth, *Night Journey*, to Archibald MacLeish's Biblical Job parable play, *J.B.*

(McConachie 215). McConachie sets a context for these plays with discussions of opening nights, reviews, concurrent sociopolitical happenings, and acting techniques.

McConachie analyzes the plays with a discourse on masks as a physiological indicator of audience fears of atomic war rendering people mute. The works also play upon dominant cold war fears because of the emergence and effect of apocalypse endings in both works' final acts. McConachie analyzes each play in direct relation to how audiences contextualized these works in relation to the prevailing organizing mental response known as "containment theory." The chapter concludes with a second set of play analyses, including the relevance of nuclearism to Elia Kazan's cold war era work and Arthur Miller's *The Crucible*. McConachie discusses McCarthyism and containment in his theatre writing to illuminate the cultural significance of the texts.

I likewise filter *Godot* and *Endgame* through the lens of setting and draw comparisons between a cultural phenomenon (the rise of the Internet) and its literary evocation (Beckett's wastelands). These two phenomena share a connection in terms of the isolation, despair, and sense of death and sterility they offer to their virtual "inhabitants." Can anyone "live" on a Web site? Explaining what the Internet and the wastelands share mirrors the technique McConachie used to define how particular characters evoked the common fears of his American cold war viewers. I analyze the plays through their portrayal of the wastelands. This analysis is limited to electronic

media and to *Godot* and *Endgame*'s written "text" of the plays. I do not speculate about Samuel Beckett's intent, his purpose and any intended interpretations, in writing *Godot* and *Endgame* unless it has already been done so by previous scholars or articulated by the playwright himself. Nor do I presuppose or hint that Beckett foresaw the Internet or anticipated future interpretations of his work. The playwright's thoughts and intent are his own, unknowable, and entirely divorced from this work. I examine the "decontextualized" plays as complete, stand-alone entities rather than performance texts realized through particular actor and/or director staging choices. The plays' settings—the wastelands—bind my discussion. I focus exclusively on the wastelands and the space created by electronic media in terms of the idea of a disembodied voice and theories of communication, rather than the content of the specific messages sent between two people.

Structure

This thesis blends play analysis and explication of the social relevance of electronic media's dead and virtual spaces. Each chapter provides an analysis of the "wasteland" as it is characterized in *Waiting for Godot*, *Endgame* and The Internet, respectively, according to the relationships between the language and isolation and the wasteland's infinite existence; magic, spatial emptiness, and despair; and death and sterility. Chapter One defines my thesis and provides the justification, methodology, structure, and survey of literature. Chapter Two analyzes *Waiting for Godot*, in which every event ends in failure for the characters. Chapter Three analyzes *Endgame*, in which despair and loneliness saturate the play, and the characters' lives unfold toward an inexorable demise. Chapter Four analyzes the Internet, where Beckett's circuitous, fragmented discourse and e-mail's strange diction reflect and actualize one another. All

three of these wastelands are active, subtextual and factual. They do not just exist in defined philosophical or scientific discourse. They are actualized wastelands where virtual humans interact with the presence of a larger, passive audience. Finally, I conclude the thesis in Chapter Four and summarize what has been written. I also briefly speculate on the potential audience perception of *Godot*, *Endgame*, and the Internet's future.

Wolfgang Iser writes, in a chapter entitled "When Is The End Not The End?" in *The Implied Reader*, that Beckett's characters anticipate the "end" for unknown reasons (258). They enact or realize "a goal," at the end, but the aim itself remains undisclosed (Iser 258). Iser ponders how characters would respond if they achieved their goals. He wonders, "if we knew what goal was in view when the 'end' came...then the fascination of the 'end' would disappear" (258). The Internet, likewise, charms people. In a limitless trip through HTML space, electronic discourse writers and readers expect surprises, even delight. Their traveling recapitulates Beckett's characters' trudging through their days and expecting a thing, event, or person, like Godot, who may or may not materialize. The resolution lay in the characters' willingness to continue on their journey of fulfillment, just as those lonely thousands send their thoughts to the Internet without really knowing who might read them. As Vladimir says, when Estragon mentions leaving his friend alone in the wasteland, "I knew it was the right place. Now our troubles are over" (*Godot* 447).

Survey of Literature

I've chosen reference works for my thesis from two key categories. The first includes critical theory written about *Godot* and *Endgame*. One of the best examples from

this category is Eric Bentley's chapter entitled "The Talent of Samuel Beckett" in Ruby Cohn's *Casebook on Waiting for Godot*. *Casebook* explores the importance of *Godot* as well as interpretations of the work, such as the tree blooming overnight in Act II, which I reconsider in Chapter Two. Bentley discusses *Godot*'s plasticity in reviews and its appeal. He writes about his own shifting perceptions of the work over time. Also in *Casebook*, G.S. Fraser's "*Waiting for Godot*," Alfonso Sastre's "Seven Notes on *Waiting for Godot*," Hugh Kenner's "Life in the Box," Herbert Blau's "Notes from the Underground," and John J. Sheedy's "The Net" present interpretations of the tree in bloom. Darko Suvin's "Preparing for *Godot*—or the Purgatory of Individualism" in *Casebook* offers excellent interpretive descriptions of the wasteland. A second prominent work in this study is *Samuel Beckett*, by Linda Ben-Zvi. It presents an in depth discourse on despondency, imagery, and communication in Beckett's wastelands. She explores existentialism in terms of Beckett's writing. In addition, Martin Esslin details Beckett's style and the setting of *Godot* and *Endgame* in his seminal work *The Theatre of the Absurd*. Esslin also delves into existentialism and the intransigence of place and language.

Other works also proved useful, including *The World of Samuel Beckett: 1906-1946*, in which Lois Gordon discusses surrealism and place. She investigates Beckett's writings about perception of space and the paradox of viewing something, versus actually experiencing the event. She writes about disillusionment and discernment in terms of Beckett's writing. Likewise, Wolfgang Iser explores Beckett's characters' references to a final, unchangeable end in terms of philosophical, literary, and theatre theory in Chapter Ten "When Is The End Not The End?" of *The Implied Reader*, and Thomas Cousineau,

in *Waiting for Godot: Form in Movement*, explores different facets of *Godot*'s setting. These include the surreal, the text and language, and Beckett's use of metaphor. *The Absurd* by Arnold P. Hinchliffe presents critical theory on *Godot* and *Endgame*'s narratives and images filtered through absurdism. Normand Berlin discusses Beckett's refusal to answer questions about his work during a production of *Godot* in "Traffic of Our Stage: Why *Waiting for Godot*?" for *Massachusetts Review*. I also refer to a *Kenyon Review* article entitled "Dying Fathers: *Stirrings Still*," in which Robert Coover likewise addresses isolation and facing emptiness, the abyss, in Beckett's work. Writing for the *Economist* in an essay titled "What are Critics for?" Fintan O'Toole examines the appearance of critics and critical theory in the dialogue of *Godot*. "Such *Happy Days*!" by Richard Corliss for *Time Australia*, explores the contrast between hopelessness and vivid dark humor in Beckett's work. S.E. Gontarski examines Beckett's texts and their inherent meanings and interpretations in "Editing Beckett," from *Twentieth Century Literature*. Also in *Literature*, "Power, Self, and Other: The Absurd in *Boesman and Lena*" by Craig W. McLuckie explores the metaphysical elements of *Godot*. Esther Selsdon's "Ray of Light in *Endgame*" in *New Statesman & Society* explores a production of the play. She writes about Beckett's stage directions and explores Beckett's imagery, set pieces, setting, and the implication of these things on connections between people and relationships. Jonathan Kalb discusses characterizations and the difficulty of filming a Beckett work in his article "Stardust Melancholy" in *American Theatre*. Christopher Nassaar's "Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* and Salih's *Season of Migration To The North*" from *Explicator* examines characterization in Beckett's work. Yaun Yaun analyzes postmodernism and existentialism in terms of *Godot* for *Symposium*. His article

“Representation and Absence: Paradoxical Structure in Postmodern Texts” illuminates the qualities of “absence” (124) and “fantasy” (132) in the play. Landon C. Burns’ article “Beckett’s *Waiting for Godot*” from *Explicator* provides a brief, interpretive plot encapsulation. Finally, Charles Lyons’ cover story for *Daily Variety*, “Lindsay-Hogg Adds Weight to *Godot* Pic,” offers insights into the humor of *Godot*.

The second and growing set of critical works explores current communication theory about electronic discourse. A prime source I use is Andrew L. Shapiro, who considers the potential elitism of the Internet in his chapter entitled “The Information Age May Not Foster Democracy” in James D. Torr’s *The Information Age*. I also refer to Clifford Stoll’s article in *Newsweek*, “The Internet? Bah!” as he considers the Internet’s potential to numb society. In a *PC Magazine* article entitled “Computers and Modern Anarchy,” John C. Dvorak asserts that people refuse control and regulation on the Internet. David Politis, writing “Utah Tech Watch” for *Enterprise/Salt Lake City*, addresses technological market value and Internet expansion. Also from *The Information Age*, Dinesh D’Souza’s “Online Communities Cannot Substitute for Real-Life Communities” examines the limits of electronic communication; Mark Frauenfelder’s “The Internet Will Become a More Useful Part of Everyday Life” considers the benefits of the Internet; and W. David Stephenson’s “The Internet Benefits Society” suggests the advantages in problem solving that are unique to electronic communication. Kevin Hillstrom’s *Defining Moments: The Internet Revolution* discusses all aspects of the Internet, from a scientific explanation of how e-mail works to the societal implications that the Internet poses. Elizabeth Weiss Green’s “The Web of Social Networking” for

U.S. News & World Report considers the social and economic facets of electronic communication and also proved useful in my current study.

CHAPTER 2

Waiting for Godot

Introduction

[O]utside time without extension who from the heights of divine apathia
divine athambia divine aphasia loves us dearly with some exceptions for
reasons unknown but time will tell.... (*Godot* 413)

This chapter analyzes the wasteland of *Waiting for Godot* in terms of language and isolation; magic, spatial emptiness, and despair; and death and sterility. First, I define language and isolation in the wasteland of *Waiting for Godot* in Vladimir and Estragon's circuitous dialogue in *Waiting for Godot*, which invokes a sequence of antonymic forces, undercuts the uncertain alliance between Vladimir and Estragon, and reflects Vladimir and Estragon's constant traveling.

Second, I look at how magic, spatial emptiness, and despair define the wasteland of *Waiting for Godot*. This involves an examination of the concept of magic, which I define as any occurrence within the wasteland or aspect of the wasteland that serves as a gateway to fantasy. "Magical" events or qualities are seemingly divine, unusual, or fantastical. Each magical event or aspect of the wasteland can represent the wasteland as a whole, which would characterize the entire place as magical. Therefore, I conclude that the wasteland itself is supernatural because it houses *Godot's* supernatural blooming tree.

Finally, I point out that the characters of *Waiting for Godot* are suspended in time, and their deaths hang in the distance. The death and sterility in the wasteland of *Waiting for Godot* offers an analysis of Vladimir and Estragon's canceled suicide attempts. This tableau unfolds in the wasteland, which is a dead place, yet Vladimir and Estragon signify the undead. They are reminiscent of zombies, and this state of being undead seems sterile. All of this is rather glamorous in both the modern and medieval denotations of the word. With such mystery in the atmosphere, I question why the characters choose to die, yet ultimately call off their deaths.

Language and Isolation: Vladimir and Estragon as Antonymic Forces

Beckett's sparse writing distills the meaning and even the individual letters in print of each word. This is poetry. *Godot* reads like a beautiful, clear, unadorned love letter to mystery and the sublime. Lois Gordon writes about the limitations of language in *The World of Samuel Beckett* and cites *Chicago Tribune* writer Eugene Jolas in her exploration of Beckett's lexicon, concluding, "as [Jolas] later defined it, the Surrealists had failed to 'locate the language of the nocturnal world,' the language of 'a-logical grammar.' Beckett's mastery of this language...occurred as early as *Waiting for Godot*" (41). Beckett never explains what he considers unexplainable. In "Traffic of Our Stage: Why *Waiting for Godot*?" for *Massachusetts Review*, Normand Berlin reiterates this view by presenting an anecdote illustrating Beckett's discretion:

Ralph Richardson, slated to play Estragon in a British production, personally asked Beckett specific questions from a list he drew up. Beckett listened and then just said, "I can't answer any of your questions." So

Richardson turned down, in his own words, “the greatest play of my lifetime.” (426)

To understand what I define as the language and isolation of the wasteland in this chapter, consider the phenomenon of antonyms. Language can be defined by its antonym, silence. Isolation’s antonym is intimacy. These oppositions reveal the meaning of each word, because when a person says ‘discourse’ its opposite, ‘silence,’ appears, and when the person says ‘isolation,’ we can understand this as a lack of intimacy or society. The link becomes plastic when we consider *Godot*, in which many of these states simultaneously exist. In *Waiting For Godot: Form In Movement*, Thomas Cousineau defines the principles of opposition in *Godot*, by writing that the disagreement between language and action is “an opposition that pervades the play” (44). Vladimir and Estragon often speak and use language, paradoxically revealing their mutual isolation. The two never seem as far apart as when they attempt to bond through conversation. A miniature example of this rejecting, isolating pattern of conversation, which could represent Vladimir and Estragon’s discourse throughout *Godot*, occurs when lonely Vladimir awakens Estragon so that he might have someone to talk to and then—decisively—rejects Estragon:

VLADIMIR:	I felt lonely.
ESTRAGON:	I had a dream.
VLADIMIR:	Don’t tell me!
ESTRAGON:	I dreamt that—
VLADIMIR:	DON’T TELL ME! (<i>Godot</i> 378)

In a discussion of this dream speech, Cousineau explains that “[Vladimir and Estragon’s] failure to stimulate dialogue is ironically contrasted with those moments where Vladimir succeeds in repressing Estragon’s spontaneous impulse to talk” (57). The sad wasteland offers little more than loneliness. Vladimir and Estragon are isolated, and their discourse reinforces their isolation instead of eradicating it. Vladimir claims to be lonely, but rejects Estragon’s attempt to relate. Estragon’s foray into conversation—an act intended, perhaps, to alleviate Vladimir’s loneliness—encounters rejection. Estragon also appears sleep deprived, a condition difficult enough in an enjoyable setting. Who feels secure when they haven’t slept? Estragon lives an unsure existence where gangs of men attack and club him for no reason until he is bruised and nearly dead, he has no home, his future depends on the arrival of a wraithlike figure who may never arrive, and he is wakened from sleep. This heightens Estragon’s isolation. The social intimacy transforms into isolation and silence in this moment of evident communication. Even Vladimir, who awakens Estragon, alienates himself from his friend the instant Estragon tries to recount the story of his dream. Neither character is ever satisfied. The characters remain alone in the wasteland, especially when they are with others. The narrative drives ahead. The isolation poisons camaraderie. The characters reach out, as in the “dream” *tête-à-tête*, only to either experience rejection or regret their decision to communicate. In either case, they reject the other characters on the spot. One polarity cannot seem to exist without its counterpart.

In the next lines we encounter Beckett’s stage direction for “*Silence*” (*Godot* 378). In “Such *Happy Days!*,” a review of Beckett’s *Happy Days* for *Time Australia*, Richard Corliss extols Beckett’s use of such antonymic elements. Corliss cites dialogue

that illustrates the sorrow permeating *Godot*, “They give birth astride of a grave, the light gleams in an instant, then it’s night once more” (“*Happy*” 70-72) and considers an antipode to sorrow. People who read *Godot* and those who watch a performance find the sorrow tinged with the gravest comedy. Corliss remarks that in addition to Beckett’s textual darkness, “the language is also savagely, and savingly, comic” (“*Happy*” 70-72). *Godot*’s comedy gilds the enduring isolation Vladimir and Estragon live with every day and every night. Consider this droll conversation, in which Pozzo responds to Vladimir’s distaste:

VLADIMIR: I’m going.

POZZO: He can no longer endure my presence. I am perhaps not particularly human, but who cares? (*Godot* 395)

Comedy is a sheer veil masking and simultaneously revealing Vladimir and Estragon’s fate. And when the actors playing Vladimir and Estragon study their sides, find their marks, and rehearse director’s beats, the universe of *Godot* they enter contains bleak elements that both mask and unmask the play’s unexpected comedy, which in turn points to the characters’ isolation and hopelessness. Vladimir and Estragon experience the polarity between isolation and social intimacy in their lives, and their communication thinly obscures the underlying rejection bleeding into every aspect of *Godot*. This ironic quality is a hallmark of the effect of the wasteland on language usage.

Uncertain Alliance

In *The Theatre of the Absurd*, Martin Esslin describes Vladimir and Estragon as antonyms of one another, because “the opposition of their temperaments is the cause of

endless bickering between them and often leads to the suggestion that they should part” (27). Vladimir and Estragon are locked into this pattern of connection and disconnection. Each recapitulation of this system denies Vladimir and Estragon a conclusion and may even separate the pair a little more each time. The affecting aspect of discourse as a great isolator is that Vladimir and Estragon are very aware of their predicament. How could they not understand that they are essentially alone? They’re human. They can be said to represent existential Everymen, who constantly wield language even though language fractures as soon as, or even before, they speak. Vladimir and Estragon’s awareness reflects *Godot*’s sophistication, because the playwright crafted a script that does not simplify or condescend to its characters. The subtext of Vladimir and Estragon’s mutual isolation and concomitant understanding is that suffering acts like an avalanche for the victim. The characters not only endure the sorrow, but also an awareness of the situation, which they repeatedly brood over. In *Samuel Beckett*, Linda Ben-Zvi writes that Vladimir and Estragon remain cognizant, and “what keeps Beckett’s personae from becoming ludicrous figures is their total awareness of the ruse of habit” (140-141). Beckett introduces the dichotomy of discordant theatrical elements in *Godot* right away, and as Ben-Zvi notes, “a ‘tragicomedy’ is the subtitle for *Godot*” (141). The intrinsic comedy in the text stems from the actors’ recital, writes Ben-Zvi, and *Godot* is “tragic because the figures recognize the pathos of their feeble attempts to ward off anguish” (141). We never know what happens to these characters after the last scene. An inexorable continuation and worsening of their isolation seems likely, because as *Godot* unfolds, Vladimir and Estragon encounter ever-grimmer scenarios, and significantly, their dialogue further unravels. Vladimir and Estragon continue to talk to each other, or

perhaps at each other, but the talk never achieves closure and never provides comfort for the characters. For example, Vladimir and Estragon fail to reconcile a discrete topic, cannot rejoin or even discern the other's textual goal, and cannot gratify their own want for resolution in this scene. For example, after Estragon has been attacked by a group of men, the text states:

ESTRAGON: The best thing would be to kill me, like the other.

VLADIMIR: What other? (*Pause.*) What other?

ESTRAGON: Like billions of others. (*Godot* 435)

Vladimir and Estragon's incessant questioning of one another illustrates an unraveling discourse, because of this lack of conclusion. No clarifying answers arise. Instead, each moment of discourse produces new questions. Esslin notes the collapse of Vladimir and Estragon's discourse in *Godot* and extends the indicators beyond "any merely formal signs of the disintegration of language" (63). Esslin says the discourse collapses "because no truly dialectical exchange of thought occurs in it—either through loss of meaning of single words...or through the inability of characters to remember what has just been said" (63). The characters' relentless amnesia washes away their emotional attachments, and the wasteland of words pans out endlessly toward nothing but fuzzier and fuzzier vistas.

Constant Travel

In "Power, Self, and Other: The Absurd in *Boesman and Lena*" for *Twentieth Century Literature*, Craig McLuckie examines Vladimir and Estragon's lack of arrival, which can be seen as linguistically literal and metaphoric. McLuckie contrasts Vladimir and Estragon's offstage traveling to their onstage scenes, and "it is the walking,

not the temporary stops in the towns, that is most important” (424). Walking can be a metaphor, a physical manifestation of Vladimir and Estragon’s discourse. Estragon announces he and Vladimir’s societal and geographic isolation from Pozzo when he says, “(hastily). We’re not from these parts, Sir” (*Godot* 387). This announcement in the context of *Godot* unites the characters’ discourse of isolation to the characters’ physical isolation. They are not newcomers in any benevolent sense of the word, but instead exiles from an unspecified place, isolated from humanity and one another. According to McLuckie, Vladimir and Estragon’s offstage walking dominates *Godot* because, “the absurdity of their condition is found in this incessant, pointless, repetitive cycle of walks. The play could have been called *Walking for Godot* to emphasize the importance, and paradoxically, the meaninglessness of the action” (424). Vladimir and Estragon’s fruitless walking parallels their discourse, which in turn solidifies their mutual isolation. This isolation is intrinsic to Vladimir and Estragon’s partnership. According to Cousineau, isolation is integral to *Godot* because “the only occasions of insight in the play occur when the characters are alone or at least isolated in some way from the other main characters” (73). This also embodies the oppositional, since we only see them “at rest” in their restless travels, which never achieve a return home, closure, or any form of achievement.

Isolation permeates the entirety of *Godot*. As Esslin explains, Vladimir and Estragon are removed from the other characters even as they communicate with them and “it is significant that the boy...who appears in the second act is the same boy in the first act, yet the boy denies that he has ever seen the two tramps before” (30). Cousineau questions the very basis of the partnership between Vladimir and Estragon, since “we

may also assume that Vladimir and Estragon remain together not because of friendship in any ennobling sense of the word but simply because they are in the habit of being together” (72). If a friendship cannot offer any comfort then why should it exist? Or does a friendship exist at all under these circumstances? Cousineau wonders if Vladimir and Estragon might remain together out of fear, because “the most cogent reason for not separating seems to be the uncertain consequences of such a decision” (73). Vladimir and Estragon are held together by fear, but not comforted by one another, and this deepens their isolation. Vladimir and Estragon’s discourse further illuminates the isolation:

ESTRAGON: (*his mouth full, vacuously*). We’re not tied?

VLADIMIR: I don’t hear a word you’re saying. (*Godot* 384)

Isolation creates and defines the vastness of the wasteland.

The Magical Wasteland: *Godot*’s Blooming Tree as a Promising Event

The promising events in *Waiting for Godot*, such as the tree blooming or Vladimir and Estragon meeting Lucky and Pozzo, appear mysterious and magical because the events contrast with *Godot*’s inherently bleak mood. In *Waiting for Godot: Form in Movement*, Thomas Cousineau explains that there is a “radical skepticism that pervades *Godot*” (36). We cannot expect miracles in such an empty place. Yet in Act II of *Godot*, the “*Next day*,” the lone tree blooms, for “*The tree has four or five leaves*” (*Godot* 428-429). Later, Vladimir and Estragon discuss the tree:

They look at the tree.

ESTRAGON: I see nothing.

VLADIMIR: But yesterday evening it was all black and bare.

And now it’s covered with leaves.

ESTRAGON: Leaves?
VLADIMIR: In a single night.
ESTRAGON: It must be the Spring.
VLADIMIR: But in a single night! (*Godot* 440)

This event can be described as supernatural because the tree blooms too quickly to be part of the normal, natural world. Also, the tree blooms overnight, and this nocturnal and unobserved resurrection seems unlikely given the usual sunlight-chlorophyll processes most green, leafy plants and trees follow. The blooming is both a temporal and a circadian oddity, and the tree thus becomes atypical vegetation. T.S. Eliot wrote, “April is the cruellest month,” with the implication that nature must be cruel and strong enough to survive and break through winter’s frost. Similarly, Beckett’s tree is a wonder of strength. It has found sustenance enough in the desert to bloom. Such force seems magical. Could this miraculous tree be an illusion or a mirage? Iser examines Beckett’s work and postulates that “the negativeness of these texts would seem to consist in the fact that they refuse to satisfy our elementary needs” (261). When the tree blooms, Vladimir and the audience perceive a change, a chance, and a glimmer of hope. Iser’s argument suggests this as a false hope, because “whenever we think we have found something definite to satisfy our needs, we are made to realize that what we have found is only a fiction” (261).

Thomas Cousineau, in *Waiting for Godot: Form in Movement*, describes the tree’s nature as mutable. Cousineau cites a dialogue between Vladimir and Estragon in which the two men contemplate hanging themselves and he examines the lines as evidence that, “the tree, which began as a simple landmark associated with an expected meeting, is suddenly transformed into a potential instrument of suicide; it is the same tree yet seen

from an altered perspective” (111). Cousineau goes on to describe two more faces of the tree. He first writes that “[the tree] acquires yet another significance when Vladimir notices that it is not quite the same tree that they last saw” and cites the tree’s blooming in Vladimir’s lines from the text (111-112). Second, Cousineau writes, “we see the tree from an additional perspective when Vladimir and Estragon try unsuccessfully to hide behind it, leading Vladimir to observe, ‘Decidedly this tree will not have been the slightest use to us’” (112).

The Magical Tree

Clearly the tree represents many things to the characters and to audiences in the theatre. Its inherent magical, transformative ability alternately underscores and contrasts the wasteland’s emptiness. Ruby Cohn’s *Casebook on Waiting for Godot* offers several theories of the meaning of the tree’s bloom, from biblical allusions, to supernatural allusions, physics allusions, psychology allusions, and last, philosophical allusions. In “*Waiting for Godot*” in *Casebook*, G.S. Fraser claims the tree’s Christian symbolism and writes, “the tree on the stage, though it is a willow, obviously stands both for the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil (and, when it puts on green leaves, for the Tree of Life) and for the Cross” (135). Hugh Kenner’s “Life in the Box,” in *Casebook*, also examines the tree’s potential biblical allusions and other possible manifestations of meaning. Kenner writes that the tree “accretes meaning of an anomalous sort in the course of the evening” and then he lists the tree’s connotations:

[A]mpler beams which once suspended the Savior and two thieves, or
again of the fatal tree in Eden (and the garden has, sure enough, vanished),

or even of the flowering staff in *Tannhäuser*, it does this not by being explicated but simply by its insistent continual presence, during which, as adjacent events diffract the bleak light, we begin to entertain mild hallucinations about it. (108)

Kenner adds something about the theatre, noting the medium's drawing power for "only in a theater can we be made to look at a mock tree for that length of time" (108). The tree reflects the theatre's inherent capabilities for enthrallment and magic. Herbert Blau's "Notes from the Underground" in *Casebook* also evokes the play's supernatural quality, which breaks the laws of physics. The tree's bloom may be seen in Blau's assessment of *Godot*, wherein "someone cries, another weeps—by the sorcery of form Beckett defies the Second Law of Thermodynamics. Energy is pumped back into the dead system by having it come back from the other side of the stage" (118). In contrast, John J. Sheedy's "The Net" examines *Godot*'s unfolding into Act II as a recapitulation of madness. He says, "In Act II, the world has gone mad. All is intensified and accelerated. While Act I can be played for laughs, Act II shrieks. The tree has burst into leaf overnight" (164). Alfonso Sastre writes in his essay, "Seven Notes on *Waiting for Godot*," about the emptiness in the play. His argument considers the play as a whole, but can easily be focused on the tree when he writes, "the gray and meaningless mass of our everyday existence is suddenly illuminated, disclosing its true structure, naked and desolate" (Sastre 106-107). In this instance, the tree's blooming reflects just how empty life is otherwise. Sastre argues against critical dismissal of the play, writing, "'nothing happens' can be the form in which the most extraordinary and profound events are presented, just as 'many things happen' can be a form of emptiness" (107). Beckett's single tree, dead or

near death, which sprouts new life in act two, inspired many different critical explanations. These theories reveal both the tree's plasticity and affirm its allure. This speaks to the necessary magical dimensions of an actualized wasteland.

Vladimir interprets the tree in bloom as a sign that he and Estragon's lives will perk up. Vladimir's statement, "We are happy" (*Godot* 433), prefaces his talk of the tree in bloom, and his statement both introduces the topic of the tree and concludes the tree discourse. Vladimir sees the blooming tree and declares his joy, because he assumes the tree's transformation may signal Godot's return. This assumption seems likely, given Vladimir's next line, in which he decides that they will continue to "Wait for Godot" (433). He believes for the moment that Godot will arrive, and all will be well. Magic has occurred, and the force driving this change will beckon the illusive Godot and rescue Vladimir and Estragon from the emptiness and despair of *Godot's* wasteland. Iser notes that "Beckett calls memory an 'agent of security'" and suggests that if humans create security by "projecting a meaning onto the objects before us, then we automatically cut ourselves off from those experiences that can only arise if we allow the objects to work their effect on us without sheltering behind our preconceptions of their meaning" (262). In light of this, Vladimir may be jumping to conclusions and simultaneously preventing himself from seeing what the tree in bloom may actually represent, if anything at all.

Emptiness and Despair

Godot's setting also follows its own opaque logic, yet seems magical in its transformative nature. Vladimir may notice an omen after the play's end, but at the end of the script Godot still hasn't arrived and Vladimir's fortune remains unchanged. Thus, the

improbable tree in bloom highlights *Godot's* blasted wasteland's utter emptiness and its consequent shadowy magic. The tree's fertility marks the achievement and advancement that this strange place lacks, and the contrast seems magical. In "Representation and Absence: Paradoxical Structure in Postmodern Texts" for *Symposium*, Yuan Yuan argues that "*Waiting for Godot* dramatizes the metaphors of absence, exposing the limit of rational discourse and aiming at subverting the western metaphysics of presence" (131). Yuan's argument is about *Godot*, but his process can also apply to the tree and to the wasteland as well. In Act I, the tree lacks leaves. The tree blooms in Act II. Vladimir interprets this event as foreshadowing the return of *Godot*:

VLADIMIR: Wait for *Godot*. (*Estragon groans. Silence.*) Things have changed here since yesterday.

ESTRAGON: And if he doesn't come.

VLADIMIR: (*after a moment of bewilderment*). We'll see when the time comes. (*Pause.*) I was saying that things have changed here since yesterday.

ESTRAGON: Everything oozes.

VLADIMIR: Look at the tree. (*Godot* 433)

Vladimir sees a direct link between the tree and *Godot*, and what if there is a link?

Nevertheless, if the link is inversely proportional then *Godot* will never appear. To create a link at all, Vladimir extends a supernatural quality to *Godot*. Yuan argues that "because of *Godot's* absence, the present waiting occurs and the narratives emerge to explicate, actually to contribute to, the mythologizing of *Godot*" (129). Vladimir's optimism about the blooming tree can be seen as an example of Yuan's theory of mythologizing *Godot*.

That is, Vladimir's insight that the natural world sends omens to announce Godot's presence, by extension, implies that Godot controls the forces of nature or is at least *simpatico* with all vegetation. This deification of Godot lends a supernatural element to the setting that may or may not be real, like Godot, who Yuan describes as "the projected image of an omnipotent figure, like a phantom" (132). The phantom Godot elicits magic and, simultaneously, defines the very heart of emptiness in the play by showing how much better Vladimir and Estragon's lives could be in radical contrast to the existential limbo that the men's lives are. *Godot's* wasteland evokes Christian ideology of a blank canvas waiting for the magical hand of God for the genesis (or regeneration) of creation.

Death: Vladimir and Estragon's Canceled Suicides

The wasteland of *Waiting for Godot* is largely dead and sterile. In contrast to the transformational tree, for example, the wasteland's stone remains inert. No sword waits in this stone. The stone never glows, hums, speaks, or levitates. Cousineau writes about the stone in *Waiting for Godot: Form in Movement*, explaining, "we are tempted to interpret the stone as a symbol of death" (94). Death, in its suicide form, beckons to Vladimir and Estragon throughout the play. Vladimir and Estragon's own desires are nearly sideswept in favor of suicide. This disenfranchisement of human emotion in the face of the wasteland further paints the wasteland as a place of death. Cousineau asserts that good productions of *Godot* "create an alternative world into which the human concerns of the play have been permitted only limited entry," and he asks us to consider "that the visual form of *Godot*, which draws our attention away from the thematic center of the play, is itself a decentered space" (95). The vacancy of this area is stunning, and Cousineau maps the layout:

The two fixed points of stone and tree are both off-center. Hence the dominant feature of the setting is not some central object around which the movement of the actors is organized.... We would expect that the space left vacant by the tree and the stone would be frequently, and for long periods, occupied by the actors. But this expectation is not to be satisfied. Until Pozzo and Lucky arrive, the center of the stage is virtually ignored.

(95)

Later, Pozzo is mysteriously struck blind. Pozzo struggles to regain knowledge of the world around him when he reunites with Vladimir and Estragon:

POZZO: I am blind.

Silence.

ESTRAGON: Perhaps he can see into the future?

VLADIMIR: Since when?

POZZO: I used to have wonderful sight—but are you friends? (*Godot* 464)

Despite the utter futility of the situation, Godot may still wait in the wings. At first Vladimir and Estragon think Pozzo is Godot, and events like this, which tease the pair with hope of Godot returning, stop Vladimir and Estragon from killing themselves. Vladimir and Estragon resist death's temptation, but are psychically fixed. Vladimir and Estragon cannot live until Godot appears, and yet they cannot die. They're trapped. For Eric Bentley, writing "The Talent of Samuel Beckett" in Ruby Cohn's *Casebook on Waiting for Godot*, this tableau does not represent despair, instead "what Beckett's work

ultimately embodies is this hope” (66). Bentley explains that they hope to escape (66). Without hope, Vladimir and Estragon may give in to the temptation of death.

In *Waiting for Godot: Form in Movement*, Thomas Cousineau writes that “death enters the play on several occasions through metaphor” (99). Cousineau examines the connotations of *Godot*’s dialogue in regard to death and cites such words spoken in *Godot* as “night,” “grave,” and “grave-digger” (99). He concludes that, “one of the most powerful effects of the language of the play is produced when Vladimir and Estragon propose a series of resonant metaphors to describe the sound of ‘the dead voices’” (99). Considering the power of metaphor, the wasteland setting can also be seen as a stage onto which Vladimir and Estragon project their hope. The wasteland can house such projections, but ultimately, the characters abandon their projections of optimism and success and wish to die in cyclic turns. Landon C. Burns explains Vladimir and Estragon’s vacillation in “Beckett’s *Waiting for Godot*” for a publication called *Explicator*. Burns explains that “[Vladimir and Estragon] alternate between rage and resignation but finally accept their destiny and go on waiting” (42).

Vladimir and Estragon cannot live in the stifling wasteland of *Godot*, even though it inspires their daydreams for a while. The wasteland might endlessly allow Vladimir and Estragon to feel hope, if the pair could indefinitely sustain optimism. In the script Vladimir and Estragon continue to wait, only to encounter an experience which scourges their hope, until they recharge and reemerge again with a tiny bit of hope. As Jonathan Kalb writes in “Stardust Melancholy” for *American Theatre*, “[Beckett] is the indispensable playwright of the 20th century, standing perfectly, edgily, on the cusp of the print and media ages, the modern and the postmodern, the esoteric and the familiar” (42).

Death in *Waiting for Godot* spans the esoteric and familiar because we can relate to the ebb and flow of our expectations and hopes (either succeeding or failing), but we can also slip into the wasteland with a sense of exhilaration at our approach to the mysterious.

The Sterile Undead

Godot's wasteland is mysterious because it is slightly intangible. Though Vladimir and Estragon contemplate death but do not end their lives within the text of *Godot*, they are not exactly living. Vladimir and Estragon experience real physical and psychic pain. Ben-Zvi discusses Beckett's transition from prose to drama and considers the material reality of live characters on the stage. She argues that the characters are "always there," onstage, and that the characters are "devising stories of their past, lost in reveries of the future, [yet] they still present palpable, physical bodies that testify to their being in the present" (Ben-Zvi 139). Vladimir and Estragon are real and alive, but their existences have been cruelly limited to the roadside they inhabit. Despite the hopelessness, or maybe because of it, audiences might feel grimly eager to dive into *Godot* and to not be soothed. Therefore the play exudes mordant glamour.

Glamorous Wasteland

Death in the wasteland of *Godot* evokes glamour in the sense of both modern *couture* and medieval sorcery. The specter of death haunts Vladimir and Estragon, but the text reveals that, although death surrounds the characters, it is not so easy to die after all. Consider this dialogue introducing Vladimir and Estragon in Act I:

VLADIMIR: ...So there you are again.

ESTRAGON: Am I?

VLADIMIR: I'm glad to see you back. I thought you were gone
for ever.

ESTRAGON: Me too. (*Godot* 370)

This inability to die seems supernatural and, therefore, glamorous. Along that line, hope keeps Vladimir and Estragon alive, fixed to the desolate roadside. In an essay entitled "Dying Fathers: *Stirrings Still*" for *Kenyon Review*, Robert Coover discusses *Stirrings* in regard to Beckett's work, writing, "there is also the unmistakable edge of the end about it, an intimate thereness in front of the unimaginable void, so close by, all pretense stripped away, unequaled in [Beckett's] many previous texts of the moribund" (254). In *Godot* the end looms, but is forever unreachable. Vladimir and Estragon can either seek a better life elsewhere by abandoning Godot or end their troubles by committing suicide. Neither choice is desirable. Vladimir and Estragon appear to be trapped. The text would imply they have no other options, as seen in this exchange between Vladimir and Estragon, who denotatively enter a discourse on Estragon's boot, which opens *Godot*:

ESTRAGON: (*giving up again*). Nothing to be done.

VLADIMIR: (*advancing with short, stiff strides, legs wide apart*).
I'm beginning to come round to that opinion. All
my life I've tried to put it from me, saying,
Vladimir, be reasonable, you haven't yet tried
everything. And I resumed the struggle. (*He broods,
musing on the struggle....*) (370)

Whichever eventuality Vladimir and Estragon choose, the element of death truly envelops them as it almost physically emanates from the strange, ghostly wasteland. In “Lindsay-Hogg Adds Weight to the *Godot* Pic” for *Daily Variety*, Charles Lyons summarizes director Michael Lindsay-Hogg’s pithy explanation of *Godot*, in which “the director added that although “Godot” [*sic*] presents a bleak view of man’s fate and of life, the play can also be as funny as a Marx brothers movie” (21). The humor underscores death in *Godot*, because it represents one reaction to the all-encompassing, unfulfilled vision of death flowing through the play and allows us to reaffirm our existence when confronted by the void.

The unexplained void may also be cognizant and even an extension of Godot’s will, which certainly lends a kind of glamour. In *The Theatre of the Absurd*, Martin Esslin cites that Jungian psychologist Eva Metman “has pointed out in a remarkable study of Beckett’s plays, [that] ‘Godot’s function seems to be to keep his dependants unconscious’” (37). Esslin describes the narrative arc of Vladimir and Estragon experiencing hope, feeling deflated, and then having their hope restored (37). Esslin describes this arc as a reflection of Vladimir and Estragon living in a state of illusion, but the main point of his argument is that the pair actually harbor less illusion than Pozzo and Lucky and that Vladimir and Estragon sometimes break through the nebulous cloud of thought (37). Esslin cites Metman in an analysis of the wasteland’s propensity for stopping Vladimir and Estragon every time they achieve, or specifically approach, perspicuity:

As Dr. Metman observes, it is at the very moment, toward the end of the play, when Vladimir is about to realize he has been dreaming, and must

wake up and face the world as it is, that Godot's messenger arrives, rekindles his hopes, and plunges him back into the passivity of illusion.

(37)

Illusion is a key characteristic of the wasteland in *Godot*. In "Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* and Salih's *Season of Migration to the North*" for *Explicator*, Christopher S. Nassaar compares Tayeb Salih's *Season of Migration to the North* to *Godot*, and his comparison draws forth important aspects of characterization, such as Vladimir and Estragon's nebulous view of life and death. Nassaar specifically names Vladimir and Estragon in his analysis, noting their penchant for calling off their own suicides (106). Nassaar writes that the narrator of *Season* resembles Vladimir and Estragon because "his hold on life is as tenuous as that of Beckett's main characters, who daily contemplate suicide but reject it" (106). Their reasons, Nassaar explains, are slight: *Season*'s narrator remains alive in order to realize "the desire to smoke a cigarette" and "Estragon before him had chosen life for the sake of a carrot, which he craves violently" (107). Thus, an unimportant object like a cigarette or a carrot can determine whether or not a man dies in the wasteland. This fragility of human life reminds us that death is ever-present in the wasteland.

Vladimir and Estragon's relationship to this all-consuming element of death are revealed in their subsequent decisions to not die, and these choices are far from easy, in at least three ways. When Vladimir and Estragon pull back from suicide their justifications are initially like smoke and mirrors that mask the depth and pain of the situation. Second, Vladimir and Estragon's refusal to die, banked on seemingly insignificant reasons, reflects the haphazard, existential viciousness and arbitrary nature of the wasteland.

Fintan O'Toole notes that *Godot* contains "morbid reflections on the futility and cruelty of life" in "What Are Critics For?" in *Economist* magazine (91).

Third, Vladimir and Estragon are thwarted every time they try to die. Esslin writes that "there is a better solution to the tramps' predicament, which they themselves both consider preferable to waiting for Godot—that is, suicide" (35). Esslin argues that Vladimir and Estragon's aborted suicides are attributable to both their need of props and the characters' mishandling of the situation. He writes, "suicide remains their favorite solution, unattainable owing to their own incompetence and their lack of the practical tools to achieve it" (Esslin 36). Perhaps they cannot die. Perhaps the wasteland both depletes and demands life, because if one of the pair died, the other would remain. The final man standing would be plunged into even darker isolation and loneliness:

ESTRAGON: Why don't we hang ourselves?

VLADIMIR: With what?

ESTRAGON: You haven't got a bit of rope?

VLADIMIR: No.

ESTRAGON: Then we can't.

Silence.

VLADIMIR: Let's go.

ESTRAGON: Wait, there's my belt.

VLADIMIR: It's too short.

ESTRAGON: You could hang onto my legs.

VLADIMIR: And who'd hang onto mine? (*Godot* 475)

Vladimir and Estragon live close to death, even though they are perhaps too inept, indecisive, or without available means to kill themselves. They lurch about in an atmosphere of death in the wasteland, but they may not be in any danger. In “Dispelling the Gloom” for *Time Canada*, Richard Corliss compares Vladimir and Estragon to vaudeville players who continue for decades, for “they could be Neil Simon’s Sunshine Boys: wizened vaudevillians replaying the same old effective shtick for 50 years. They know the absurdity of their plight, yet like every Beckett character, they persevere” (“Dispelling” 54). Perhaps Vladimir and Estragon give only the illusion of being close to dying, but have never come close because the text has the bottom line—at *Godot*’s end, the two are still alive by their own choice.

CHAPTER 3

Endgame

Introduction

Within the enclosure, images repeat the dreaded loneliness. The two ashcans touch, but they isolate Nagg and Nell from each other. Nell threatens further separation when she tells Nagg, "I'll leave you," and seems to carry out the threat by presumably dying within the course of the play. (Linda Ben-Zvi 148)

Chapter Three analyzes the wasteland of *Endgame* using the same criteria of language and isolation; magic, spatial emptiness, and despair; and death and sterility. First, Nagg and Nell's choppy discourse from their ashcans in Hamm's blasted castle connects language to isolation. This discourse reflects Nagg and Nell's yearning for the past, entrapment in a machine-like, cold present, and eventual parting. The couple lives symbiotically attached to ashcans. Isolation is everywhere and in everything. Nagg and Nell plead and bark dialogue that cannot fill the emptiness.

Second, Chapter Three connects magic, spatial emptiness, and despair in the wasteland of *Endgame* in an in depth look at the wasteland outside Hamm's castle, which like *Godot's* setting, seems magical. Unlike *Godot's* location however, *Endgame's* wasteland has undergone a transformation that may be beyond society's or nature's capabilities, and this apparently supernatural event makes the wasteland look even more magical. A calamity that seems to have decimated all of civilization except for

Endgame's cast of characters establishes both the setting and the *raison d'être* for the drama. Whether the destruction is the result of nuclear war, plague, a killing swipe of alien gamma rays, or a devastating supernova, *Endgame*'s setting is an empty and sinister place. The emptiness crawls into Hamm's castle and exacerbates the despair the characters already feel. The characters suffer and believe they are near death.

Last, I connect death and sterility in the wasteland of *Endgame* in an analysis of dwindling financial and material resources. The wasteland of *Endgame* evokes a dark, yet strangely calm, atmosphere, much like the wasteland of *Godot*, only more surreal. Death, again, abounds. The death of everything, including material goods, permeates *Endgame*'s wasteland. Chapter Three considers this sterile economy as a primary feature of commerce and exchange within the wasteland. *Endgame* also emanates glamour, which here represents the possible supernatural backdrop to the play.

Language and Isolation: Nagg and Nell in Ashcans and The Past

The catastrophe seems to have flung a few souls into trashcans. Nagg and Nell are like parasites feeding off of the ashcans. They're creatures welded to the ashcans, without which they would presumably never survive. However, they might be there just because they are old—perhaps Hamm is also inevitably headed for an ashcan, with or without the apocalypse. In any event, Nagg and Nell exist as snails, and the metal ashcans protect their weak flesh from the toxic earth and air. Nagg and Nell are like crabs, mentally scuttling across a poisoned, immovable shore. The waters of the past continue to pound the shore. Past events are fixed, but never happen the same way in their discourse. Nagg and Nell's half-human physiology resembles a fusion of human and machine (the ashcans) much like the cybernetic medical devices produced by pharmaceutical

companies. The mechanical aspect of Nagg and Nell's lives hint at the pair's automatic, not autonomous, discourse and machine-like responses that fortify Hamm's isolated castle. Like Vladimir and Estragon's mordant and trenchantly comic discourse, Nagg and Nell's dialogue is also circuitous and repetitive. Nagg and Nell of *Endgame* are likewise dislocated in time, but also isolated from the present because they constantly refer to their lives in the past:

NELL (*elegiac*): Ah yesterday!
(They turn painfully towards each other.)

NAGG: Can you see me?

NELL: Hardly. And you?

NAGG: What?

NELL: Can you see me?

NAGG: Hardly.

NELL: So much the better, so much the better. (*Endgame*
15)

Nagg and Nell are achingly lost in memories of the past, which places them even further from the present and from each other than Vladimir and Estragon. Nagg and Nell's reminiscences disclose their heartbreak. For example, Nagg implores Nell to "Kiss me," and Nell responds, "We can't" (*Endgame* 14). Beckett's stage directions, which explain that "*Their heads strain towards each other, fail to meet, fall apart again*" (*Endgame* 14), underscore three things: the breach dividing Nagg and Nell, the wasteland that exists in the empty spaces between the two, and the past Nagg and Nell seek and cannot reclaim, just as they cannot touch. Esslin describes Nagg and Nell, writing that "Hamm's parents,

in their dustbins, are grotesquely sentimental imbeciles” (42). Esslin recognizes the emptiness of their discourse when “Nagg, in the tones of an Edwardian raconteur, retells the funny story that made his bride laugh then and that he has since repeated *ad nauseum*” (42). Why would he not want to return to the past? Why would they not crawl out if they could? After all, in *The Absurd*, Arnold Hinchliffe reminds us that Nagg and Nell are “Hamm’s legless parents” who live “in dustbins” (65). Nagg and Nell’s prison extends to the entire known world, which “is dead, or at least these four people believe they are the last survivors” (Hinchliffe 65). We can proscribe a needed itinerary of action for Nagg and Nell. Perhaps they should accept their fate and embrace the strange present in which they find themselves. Nagg and Nell could support their son Hamm and his protégé Clov, as a would-be grandson, and offer learned counsel. Alas, Nagg and Nell refrain from such parenting. They are incapable, disinterested, or discredited. Whereas Vladimir and Estragon endlessly reiterate the present through repetitive, isolating, and cyclic discourse, Nagg and Nell relive the past through repetitive theatrical stories they act out with character voices and sentimental bickering. In “Such *Happy Days!*” for *Time Australia*, Richard Corliss describes the plight of Beckett’s characters, who “are condemned to life: they must play games under a sadistic watchful eye and, worst of all, hope” (“*Happy*” 70-72). An absence of hope would free Nagg and Nell to resign themselves to death or maybe provide them the chance to become catatonic, washed away in memory and at last closed to the exterior world and its spectators. They could “put a lid on it.” This uninviting scenario aligns Nagg and Nell with the broken figures Corliss identifies:

In the later pieces Beckett scraped away at humanity even further, until the skin was gone and nothing was left but bone. These were not symphonies, but etudes, their settings even more mysterious and archetypal: a dark space near Limbo where people replay their lives...distressed at the past, fearful of the future. ("*Happy*" 70-72)

Nagg and Nell fear the future, or perhaps, find the present cold enough to recoil from. They were evidently a young couple in love, conceivably living in 20th century Ireland. Nagg tells his tale of pre-apocalyptic days when "An Englishman, needing a pair of striped trousers in a hurry for the New Year festivities, goes to his tailor who takes his measurements" (*Endgame* 22). The only place of comfort is the past, and even though both Nagg and Nell fully participate in these reminiscences, it requires them to separate further from the present to achieve a memory. Though the characters do not physically time travel, their discourse requires an abstraction from the present. They are psychically not there. This mind-shift, no matter how infinitesimal, marks the character's isolation.

The act of memory in the context of Nagg and Nell's discourse in *Endgame* is analogous to watching a play. When a person watches a performance and later remembers it, the actors are not present for the memory. Nell is present but passive as she listens to Nagg's stories. The corporeal Nell is not the same Nell that Nagg recalls in memory. The memory of the Nell from years ago is an abstraction, though this removal from the concrete present doesn't lessen Nagg's depth of feeling for his memories. Nell, conversely, is less impressed. When Nagg retells an old story and Nell counters that "It's not funny," Nagg defends his tale by imploring, "It always made you laugh. (*Pause.*) The first time I thought you'd die" (*Endgame* 21). Nagg's pause reflects profound

unhappiness. These nostalgic conversations obstruct the characters, for they are spectators and can never again fully participate in or recapture those specific tales from long ago.

The frustration Hamm exhibits poisons the atmosphere and further creates a tangible isolation. Hamm's obvious dismissal of his vulnerable parents can be viewed as an unseen but ever present poison that affects the cast of characters in this drama. Hamm's intolerance is a linguistic and gestural manifestation of an invisible, dramatic force echoing the poison outside his castle. Hamm mostly ignores his parents, and that signifies isolation and the irretrievable respect they must have earned from him in the past. His rejection forces them further into nostalgic isolation in the past, when they were not "less than." When the emotional atmosphere in a place becomes one of invective, the players' enthusiasm slackens. No one wants to speak, or perhaps no one is any longer willing to listen. Hamm explodes at Nagg and Nell's banter when Nagg recounts his "tailor" story, which occurred long ago. Hamm rails:

Have you not finished? Will you never finish?

(With sudden fury.)

Will this never finish? (*Endgame* 23)

We can imagine that when the sugarplums, bonbons, and medicine run out, everyone and everything, including the dialogue, in Hamm's castle will finish or, rather, be finished.

The Present and Machinery

An unknown apocalyptic occurrence precedes *Endgame's* narrative. In *Samuel Beckett*, Linda Ben-Zvi explains that, "Clow's first words that begin the play are

‘Finished, it’s finished, nearly finished, it must be nearly finished’” (147). The survivors of *Endgame*’s apocalypse are in decline. The pre-narrative catastrophe precedes the “action” of the play. Signs in the play point to the catastrophic event as affecting not just the biosphere, but also earth’s oceanic mechanism, the tides, and by extension, the moon, and perhaps the entire known and unknown universe beyond. These vast distances preclude the event as a man-made catastrophe, but the text hints otherwise. When Clov discovers a flea popping on himself, Hamm says, “(very perturbed) But humanity might start from there all over again! Catch him, for the love of God!” (*Endgame* 33). Hamm’s statement may represent unadorned optimism, or Hamm might be implying that humanity is culpable for destroying itself and now must climb back up the long road of evolution. It is not, however, clear whether he wishes to save or kill the flea.

In “Ray of Light in *Endgame*” for *New Statesman & Society*, Esther Selsdon describes the present of *Endgame* as “one rotting and dimly lit room with almost no props. ... The only objects to fix us specifically to the ‘real’ world are concrete monosyllables” (24). She explores the radically truncated discourse of Nagg and Nell’s wasteland, a place where “much of the text focuses on a discussion of simple solid objects.... Life has exhausted us. Even the characters’ names are crippled monosyllables, with ‘Nagg’ and ‘Nell’ just waiting to be heaved into the knacker’s yard” (Selsdon 24). Discourse clanks along in Hamm’s dark castle on a poisoned beach in a shelled wasteland, driving the characters into their own mental landscapes. Nagg and Nell have an impulse to connect but are actually frozen—encased in cold metal—and thus, barred from interaction. They are trapped. Their mutually unrequited desire to physically connect manifests in the form of ashcans, which can be interpreted as an external

metaphor of their metallic, fixed discourse. As cited earlier, Ben-Zvi notes that “the two ashcans touch, but they isolate Nagg and Nell from each other” (148). Nagg and Nell’s truncated bodies cannot escape their metal prisons. They are closed circuits. Nell invokes the ashcans inexorable power as a barrier when she announces her departure/death. Nagg seeks help, but Nell at last reminds him of the impossibility, due to the ashcans:

NAGG: Could you give me a scratch before you go?

NELL: No.

(Pause.)

Where?

NAGG: In the back.

NELL: No.

(Pause.)

 Rub yourself against the rim. *(Endgame 19)*

The cold metal of the ashcans dominates Nagg and Nell’s psyches, and when cold, a person often sputters short, breathless dialogue.

Though she says less in the play, Nell’s dialogue is smarter and more eloquent than Nagg’s. Her admission, “Nothing is funnier than unhappiness, I grant you that” (*Endgame 18*), demonstrates Nell’s elegant sophistication and world-weary cynicism, which also reflects the ashcans’ chill. Nagg appears less affected by their cold, bleak plight, because among other things, he saves Nell a biscuit and asks, “Do you not want your biscuit?” (*Endgame 19*). Nell has been psychically and physically damaged by the catastrophe that occurred before *Endgame*’s beginning and the cold ashcans. She refuses to eat and to indulge in discussions of memories. Nell seems averse to abstract reverie

and reveals how much she values precision when Nagg comments on the sawdust in their ashcans:

NELL: It isn't sawdust.

(Pause. Wearily.)

Can you not be a little accurate, Nagg?

NAGG: Your sand then. It's not important.

NELL: It is important.

(Pause.) (Endgame 17).

Perhaps Nell thinks of Nagg as an inoffensive fool, and this saddens and hardens her. The cold and the ashcans constitute the wasteland that forces Nagg and Nell to choke out terse dialogue.

But this dramatic irony allows us to observe a model of discourse, driven by cold, which reinforces moments when Nell's warm consciousness slips through the steel fortification. Nagg, Hamm, and Clov are oblivious. Perhaps Nell's imminent death slightly releases her from the ashcans' control. She can see outside and understand her fate with clarity and honesty for the first time in years. This phenomenon can be interpreted as a metaphysical allegory. The metaphor of being near-death hints at Nell's only life achievement. It is a tragedy of complete isolation in the text. The total isolation of death allows her to escape from the cold because she has finally embraced the cold and incorporated it into her character. Likewise, her discourse transforms into one of cold isolation: a character enveloped by total silence. Nell lives on the border of life and death and can ostensibly traverse these places in her mind. That is, she can breach the mental

incapacitation and the cold of the ashcans' hold over her and Nagg. Nell foretells this metaphoric state of becoming free of Shakespeare's "mortal coil" with foreshadowing:

NAGG: ...Are you cold?

NELL: Yes, perished. And you?

NAGG: (*Pause.*)

I'm freezing. (*Endgame 16*)

The cold will never abate for Nell, but she might be the only character to escape the wasteland of *Endgame*. She accomplishes this by eschewing discourse and embracing the silence of death. She does not bring up the subject of cold, but acknowledges it with frank simplicity and then projects outward to Nagg, rather than ask for help. Nagg and Nell's discourse indicates their isolation and that death is a metaphoric, ironic escape. Death is ironic because Nagg and Nell must lean into the isolation they would escape in order to be free from it. This duality, or layering of metaphor, and eerie connection between language and isolation in *Endgame* resembles Vladimir and Estragon's discourse and its motifs from *Godot*. Both examples illustrate the absurdist's philosophy of language. Esslin describes this outlook, for "Beckett's entire work can be seen as a search for the reality that lies behind mere reasoning in conceptual terms" (64). *Endgame* offers innumerable textual interpretations of isolation in discourse, and this intricate game for spectators maintains Esslin's argument that, "in the theatre [Beckett] has been able to add a new dimension to language—the counterpoint of action, concrete, many-faceted, not to be explained away, but making a direct impact on an audience" (65).

The Magical Wasteland: Outside Hamm's Castle and Cold Nothingness

Hamm's castle stands on the beach of a desolate ocean. The mysterious cataclysm that unfolds before the play begins appears supernatural because of its enormous scale and its opaque mechanism. These supernatural phenomena are merciless. In *Samuel Beckett* Linda Ben-Zvi quotes the director of the first American production of *Endgame*, Alan Schneider (150). Schneider considers *Endgame* "rather difficult and elliptic, mostly depending on the power of the text to claw, more inhuman than *Godot*" (Ben-Zvi 150). Ben-Zvi goes on to argue that "*Endgame* claws because of its images and because of its refusal to conform with dramaturgy that dictates that answers be supplied in last acts and themes be reduced to simple explanations" (150). *Endgame*'s inscrutability in conjunction with the backdrop of phenomenal catastrophe renders the play magical. Ben-Zvi quotes Hamm's dialogue, which spotlights the exploration of *Endgame*'s backdrop. Ben-Zvi says, "Hamm is the ham actor, demanding stage center. He is also Hamlet, desiring to end but unsure of what lies beyond the surety of his cell. 'Will there be sharks, do you think?' he asks of that 'unknown land'" (147). The outer world beyond Hamm's castle is unknown, and the bordering sea is, likewise, an inexplicable place. *Endgame*'s ocean may represent an even larger expanse, namely, a global plague or perhaps radioactive toxin that exterminated nearly all life on earth. *Endgame* clearly plays out in a dead wasteland:

HAMM: Nature has forgotten us.

CLOV: There's no more nature.

HAMM: No more nature! You exaggerate.

CLOV: In the vicinity. (11)

The inside and outside of Hamm's castle defines an empty wasteland. The setting is hollow enough to echo, and S.E. Gontarski's article, "Editing Beckett," for *Twentieth Century Literature*, cites Beckett's thoughts on *Endgame*: "'The play is full of echoes,' [Beckett] told his German cast, 'they all answer each other'" (202). *Endgame*'s wasteland echoes like an expansive stone vault. The environment teems with the poison that fills the air. Clov, looking through a telescope out of the castle's window, spies a small boy walking along the beach. Hamm explains the narrative rules of *Endgame*'s universe by saying, "If he exists he'll die there or he'll come here. And if he doesn't..." (78). Thus, in response to Clov's discovery of the boy, Hamm establishes the rule that any person remaining outside for any length of time will die because of the toxic atmosphere. Even if a person finds shelter, the individual will likely die from the effects of whatever happened to the earth. The latter instance also validates Hamm's theory, except indoors individuals die slower. The cataclysm affects more than earth's biosphere, however, because when Hamm cries, "If I could drag myself down to the sea! I'd make a pillow of sand for my head and the tide would come," Clov answers, "There's no more tide (Pause)" (*Endgame* 61-62). This reveals that the oceanic machine, the process of tidal forces, has broken down. Since the moon's gravitational pull controls earth's tidal phenomena, perhaps the moon has likewise been destroyed. The extension of emptiness travels beyond Hamm's castle and the shoreline and depicts an unstoppable, uncanny new world.

The Characters

The characters inside Hamm's castle yield to the continuing spread, or after-effects, of whatever killed the world, except the people inside the castle will die more slowly than everyone else did. The characters come close to survival because they are still breathing and they have just lived through the end of the world. The trouble is not over, though. Hamm and his coterie are saved from the initial destruction only to meet a slow death, and their protracted demise is more psychically painful than instant death. The characters have time to contemplate their inevitable reduction to wreckage. Perhaps the castle's stone walls were enough to save the characters from the initial event, but stone is not airtight. Clov, pondering mortality and most likely proclaiming the inevitable conclusion of the situation, says, "I see my light dying" (*Endgame* 12). Later, he tells us he bears almost unendurable pain: "The pains in my legs! It's unbelievable! Soon I won't be able to think anymore" (46). In "Ray of light in *Endgame*" for *New Statesman & Society*, Esther Selsdon describes the entropy in *Endgame*'s wasteland, telling us that "the world [of *Endgame*] is in terminal decline and everyone is suffering from some form of physical deterioration..." (24). This cosmic breakdown, she explains, may be one arm of a larger, stranger process working "in a universe which, though nearing the end of its meaninglessness, might well continue to repeat itself, in an increasingly contracted form, forever" (Selsdon 24). Selsdon's remark extends *Endgame*'s wasteland beyond a shelled-out earth to the entire universe. Hamm and Clov consider the scale of emptiness in *Endgame*'s wasteland, and their despair is apparent:

HAMM: You stink already. The whole place stinks of
 corpses.

CLOV: The whole universe.

HAMM (*angrily*): To hell with the universe.

(*Pause.*)

Think of something.

CLOV: What? (46)

The wasteland's deterioration is just one step in a larger course of decline and compression affecting everything. The mechanism driving the whole process remains invisible and unknown and lends *Endgame* a metaphysical backdrop that compliments its post apocalyptic, science fiction setting. Anything that could generate large-scale obliteration that is far beyond human capabilities may seem magical until its properties are revealed (and perhaps even then). The wasteland is a dystopia and an eschatological cauldron where astrophysical theories of an expanding universe, here inverted into a contracting universe in Seldon's theory, encounter the unknowable. Esslin writes that Beckett's plays interrogate such mysteries and he cites Beckett on this idea:

Beckett's whole work is an endeavor to name the unnamable: "I have to speak, whatever that means. Having nothing to say, no words but the words of others, I have to speak...I have the ocean to drink, so there is an ocean then." (63)

Clov helps Hamm in *Endgame* by cleaning when possible and satisfying Hamm's requests, nevertheless the encroaching mystery—the unknowable—envelops these characters, despite their bond. The wasteland slips into Hamm's castle and separates the characters. We see the despair and emptiness when Clov talks about what he sees through the window instead of engaging Hamm in conversation. Clov prefers the world beyond. The landscape shifts and seems somehow unreal. Martin Esslin contrasts this place to

Vladimir and Estragon's open-air crypt/prison by writing, "*Waiting for Godot* takes place on a terrifyingly empty open road, *Endgame* in a claustrophobic interior" (40). Yet Hamm's closed room is as vast and empty as the expanding universe beyond earth. Physicists say the universe will continue to spread forever. Enormous stretches of cold nothingness will subsume practically *everything*. *Endgame* feels like a drama unfolding in the midst of this cold, empty nothingness.

Emptiness and Despair

Ben-Zvi notes the cyclic nature of *Endgame* is reflected in the relationships between Hamm, his parents, and his surrogate son, Clov. She says, "ennui and despair mark this constant grinding down of the generations, one into another" (149). Considering this, Nagg and Nell have therefore been ground down into ashcans. Nagg and Nell live in the ashcans, bound to the metal objects like patients living in iron lungs. What mechanism allows a human body to survive in a metal can? The ashcans are unspectacular in form and function. They do not appear to have any internal robotic devices, electricity, or life-support supplies. The ashcans are just metal containers. The fact that metal containers could support two lives is magical, because the wiring is invisible. Iser speculates about an audience's approach to unexplained situations like Nagg and Nell living out their dotage in cold ashcans. Iser says, "the highly indeterminate actions of the characters, precisely because of the lack of consequence in these (simulated) actions, draw the spectator into the play because he wants to impose consistency, purpose, and meaning on it" (272). Nagg and Nell do not walk and are fixed to one spot. Nagg and Nell have continued to live, and their unremitting endurance seems

incredible. Not only do they live in impossible metal ashcans, but Nagg and Nell have also survived the death of the world. Nagg and Nell's story is tragic, however, and Iser remarks on the effects Beckett's work makes on an audience, citing "the special and inimitable effect unique to Beckett theater, tersely summed up by Hugh Kenner: '...for art has suddenly refused to be art and brought forth living pain'" (272). Magical events in *Endgame* can explicate Iser's argument, in terms of an analysis of reality itself and the appearance of reality to audiences of Beckett's plays:

A precondition for such reactions is an intensive participation in the action on the part of the spectator. And the more intensive this participation, the more fluid become the boundaries between literature and reality—and this in a play whose supposedly absurd character would seem to indicate that it had nothing to do with reality anyway. Finally, we are forced to revise, and indeed transform, our ideas as to what is reality. (Iser 272)

Magical events cause us to question reality. We lack closure and we feel the despair of the characters. Though nothing is ever closed and during the play "the participants do not speak of winning but of merely finishing," much is dead (Ben-Zvi 147). Ben-Zvi lists the endings the characters' have experienced. *Endgame*'s characters live in a world where "there are no more turkish delight [*sic*], bicycles, or coffins. During the course of the play pain killers, pap, and perhaps Nell are added to the list" (147). Both closure and unfinished events create a sense of emptiness and despair. The magical elements in *Endgame*, like the sustaining ashcans, cannot allay this existential hurt. This is illustrated in a discourse between Hamm and Clov, in which the pair encounter closure and despair.

When the sun disappears too quickly, almost supernaturally, Hamm searches for real-world things that would reassure him the world still works predictably, but to no avail:

CLOV: Never seen anything like that!

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

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

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

CLOV (*looking*): There was a bit left.

HAMM: The base.

CLOV (*looking*): Yes.

HAMM: And now?

CLOV (*looking*): All gone. (*Endgame* 30)

Death in Hamm's Realm: Economy and Poison in *Endgame*

Endgame's apocalypse occurs before the play starts. Death takes place in the past in *Endgame's* wasteland. *Endgame* can be seen to unfold in the same wasteland as *Waiting for Godot*, but millennia, centuries, or even fifty years later (just as long as *Endgame* begins *after* the cataclysmic event that kills the world.) The hushed stillness and scorched earth creates a "burnt-in-the-crucible" emotional air, which permeates *Endgame*. This mood also represents the characters' feelings about their world. In *Godot*, Vladimir and Estragon await death and Godot but in *Endgame* Hamm and his family look back upon death and consider their future demise as something that has virtually already happened. Almost everyone dies before the play begins, except the main players and, maybe, a small boy outside on the beach. The wasteland, which includes the castle interior, exudes a strange mood. In a chapter entitled, "When Is The End Not The End?"

in *The Implied Reader*, Wolfgang Iser describes the play as “one of Beckett’s most provocative...” and adds that “the title is a pointer to what is to come: the end is not to be shown, it is to be played...” (272). Iser describes the characters as players in a game and explains that “the degree to which Clov and Hamm are dominated by the idea of playing can be seen not only from the fact that they frequently refer to their activities as a game but also from the fact that all their activities are without consequence” (272-273). Why have these people survived? We can speculate. Are the characters dead? Maybe Hamm, Clov, Nagg, Nell, and the boy exist in some kind of afterlife where consequences do not exist. The consequences may be predetermined, such as in some chess endgames. In these cases, after a critical move the game is inevitably ended, and the players need only watch the pawns move until the King’s inevitable capture. Perhaps the poisonous residue of whatever destroyed the world affects the characters by muting some of their responses and heightening others. In *The Theatre of The Absurd*, Martin Esslin conceives several theories and asks of *Endgame*:

Is the death of the outside world the gradual receding of the links to reality that takes place in the process of ageing and dying? Is *Endgame* a monodrama depicting the dissolution of a personality in the hour of death? It would be wrong to assume that these questions can be definitely answered. (44-45)

No speculation can be proven or disproven by the text, which Iser also notes (273). The process of interpretation is important in this instance, not the end result. And so, Iser examines his game theory about *Endgame*, noting that the spectator “may tend to regard all the weird goings-on as part of a game, but [the spectator] finds that the rules of this

game are not divulged” (273). This interpretive roller coaster compels us and pulls us along at dizzying speed, and as Iser notes, *Endgame* affords much room for interpretation and cognition:

Endgame compels its spectator to reject the ‘meanings’ it stimulates, and in this way conveys something of the ‘unendingness’ of the end and the nature of the fictions we are continually fabricating in order to finish off the end...*Endgame* offers a new experience, unique to the world of literature...there lies a chance that the individual is able to free himself from the restrictions of his own outlook. (273)

Contemplating death can bring about such realizations. In *Samuel Beckett*, Linda Ben-Zvi writes about interpretation and cites the incidence when “Hamm in *Endgame* speculates about ‘a rational being’ who might ‘get ideas into his head if he observed us long enough’” (160-161). All of these examples of meta-interpretation mirror the level of deep thought and conjecture people initiate to understand death. *Endgame*, then, churns with death—with talk of the end, and those like Iser, who study the play and study the structure of such interpretation itself, evoke the efforts of philosophers and eschatologists who have attempted to understand death since the beginning of human history. This loop is similar to a mathematical fractal, like Benoît Mandelbrot’s famous Mandelbrot set, where the smallest part of the image recapitulates the entire image and the image spans from the subatomic level to the size of the universe.

This sense of the infinite, or infinite death, permeates *Endgame*. In *The Absurd*, Arnold P. Hinchliffe describes the atmosphere of *Endgame*, in which “the sense of deadness is remarkably consistent” (65). Death is everywhere. Even Hamm’s toy dog can

be seen to have inexplicably died when Hamm says of the dog, “He’s not there,” and Clov replies, “He’s lain down” (*Endgame* 57). This discourse between Hamm and Clov comes during a scene in which blind Hamm fumbles for his toy dog, and Clov tires of explaining that it is a toy before finally handing the dog to Hamm. That is the denotative meaning, but, again, one connotation of this scene is that even inanimate objects die in *Endgame*’s wasteland.

Poisoned, Sterile Economy

The poison flowing through *Endgame* inspires much speculation and attracts audiences to the wasteland beyond the narrative. Why is the wasteland poisonous? The characters’ deaths in *Endgame* are actualized, unlike Vladimir and Estragon’s canceled suicide attempts. Suspended in space and time, Hamm, Clov, Nell, and Nagg anticipate death and bemoan their current stasis. This mirrors the characters’ plight in *Godot*, but *Endgame*’s characters are certain of their deaths. They know they will die soon, but not exactly when or how. Suicide and murder haunt *Endgame*, and the potential for these acts haunts the text and invites the question, does Clov abandon Hamm at *Endgame*’s close? In *Samuel Beckett*, Linda Ben-Zvi asks this question and describes the scene:

Clov, in the last tableau, remains frozen still in the playing range, and Beckett purposely leaves unanswered the question: “Does Clov leave?” By so doing, he offers the possibility of the game continuing and the play form circling back upon itself to work out yet another move in an ongoing, unfinished game. (150)

We can read the play a thousand times and each time create a coherent thesis for why Clov will or won't stay, but we can never know what actually happens. Perhaps Clov could even calculate the time when he and the others will die based on when the food runs out. This consideration of resources lends an economic thrust to the narrative. Beckett's writing hints that the settings of *Godot* and *Endgame* are "uneconomies," or places where money has no value. Three legged dogs, the unfeasibility of removing ones shoes without help, bowler hats in the moonlight, and aged parents living in ashcans appear in the wasteland. Meanwhile money loses its currency because the entire world has ceased to function after collapsing under the weight of annihilating catastrophe. Inanimate objects, including the furniture, food, and medicine in Hamm's castle, have lost monetary value because no one remains on earth to buy them. Much like the sterile undead of *Godot*, for whom life has wound down into a deep freeze, the characters of *Endgame* experience an analogous economic freeze. Life is over but remnants of the tools of living still exist. As these resources run low, their worth increases but the market to replenish them has disappeared. The catastrophe that wiped out the world's population also, of course, obliterated the economy. In addition to an absentee population rendering commerce obsolete, the resources themselves are dwindling. Clov announces several times that Hamm's cache of food and pills are running out or have been entirely depleted. Hamm is surprised at the loss:

CLOV: There's no more pain-killer.

(Pause.)

HAMM (*appalled*): Good...!

(Pause.)

No more pain-killer!

CLOV: No more pain-killer. You'll never get any more pain killer.

(Pause.)

HAMM: But the little round box. It was full!

CLOV: Yes. But now it's empty. (*Endgame* 71)

The resources within the castle are diminishing but, presumably, Hamm still retains the rights of a landowner and holds the deed to his castle because no one has challenged his living there. However, Hamm and his family are the living dead. This is evident in *Endgame* when Hamm asks Clov, "What? Neither gone nor dead?," and Clov replies, "In spirit only" (70). Hamm's castle can then be seen as a tomb, a house for the dead. The room in which *Endgame*'s characters dwell is the coffin within the tomb. "Put me in my coffin," Hamm asks, and Clov replies, "There are no more coffins" (*Endgame* 77).

Considering the metaphor of Hamm's castle as a tomb, Clov would not see the coffin because he is already living inside of it. If roving bands of survivors similar to the post-apocalyptic feral children of Lorraine Hansberry's *What Use Are Flowers?* were to seek refuge or attempt to pillage Hamm's castle, the stench of death would likely put them off. As noted earlier, Hamm announces, "The whole place stinks of corpses" (*Endgame* 46).

Clov is economically and probably filially bound to Hamm. Even though Hamm is blind and cannot walk, he still controls the distribution of food. As Esslin explains in *The Theatre of the Absurd*, "Clov hates Hamm and wants to leave him, but he must obey his orders" (41). When Clov does not respond to one of Hamm's orders, Hamm rejoins with economic threats:

HAMM: I'll give you nothing more to eat.
CLOV: Then we'll die.
HAMM: I'll give you just enough to keep you from dying.
You'll be hungry all the time. (*Endgame* 5)

Clov apparently recognizes Hamm's status as executor and follows Hamm's initial order, saying, "I'll go and get the sheet" (*Endgame* 6). Hamm's orders might be predicated upon his controlling the food, and Esslin notes that "Hamm's store is the last remaining source of food" (41). In this sense, Hamm is equivalent to Godot, who controls Vladimir and Estragon through some unknown promise of food and shelter. Godot, however, never arrives to provide for Vladimir and Estragon. Clov has lived with Hamm his entire life, or at least since he was five years old.

Maybe because they have lived as father and son, Hamm controls Clov through economic means, and his power appears absolute. In *Samuel Beckett*, Ben-Zvi describes this father-son tie and alludes to Hamm's status as a monarch, something that also evokes connections to *King Lear* and the chess game metaphor, which have been written about time and time again. Ben-Zvi notes that Hamm's father Nagg "reminds Hamm of their paternal link" and "calling himself 'as happy as a king in the past,' Nagg appears as a dispossessed ruler condemned to the ashcan by the scion" (148). This monarch theory encompasses *Endgame*, because chess pieces represent nobility—king, queen, and knight. In this light, Hamm's control is more iron clad than just a despot's control over a post-apocalyptic, post-capitalist state in which most resources have disappeared. In *Endgame*, Hamm controls an economic state analogous to medieval European feudalism. Unfortunately for Hamm and his court, the vassal, Clov, cannot produce any new

resources. When Hamm asks about Clov's garden, Clov becomes understandably frustrated:

HAMM: Did your seeds come up?

CLOV: No.

HAMM: Did you scratch round them to see if they had sprouted?

CLOV: They haven't sprouted.

HAMM: Perhaps it's still too early.

CLOV: If they were going to sprout they would have sprouted.

(Violently.)

They'll never sprout! *(Endgame 13)*

Clov looks into the abyss in this discussion of his seeds. As a servant, Clov is closer to the unhappiness of drudgery and in this case, the awful reality of a lack of resources. Hamm is further removed from these realities because he is accustomed to receiving the food and medicine he asks for, but never actually interacts with his stores himself. Instead, Hamm concerns himself with the tale he is constructing. Hamm receives the items he asks for until the pain-killers run out, but Hamm never engages the mechanism that produces these things. He exists, unaware, in an ivory tower. Hamm's inquiry into Clov's vegetables may be generous and an expression of genuine concern, or selfish because Hamm wants to eat in the future, too. Either way, Hamm's question reflects resourcefulness and optimism. These qualities may have given Hamm the ability to acquire his kingdom long ago. For Hamm to be economically successful at one time,

he may have displayed traits associated with good management practices, namely, persistent optimism and confidence. That is, Hamm reveals a can-do attitude. Now that all is dead, this possible remnant of the past bleeds forth into the text like a ghost of previous, richer times. Hamm's question briefly illuminates who he may have been before the world died, namely, a monarch who could appear in *Forbes*. As Hamm rhetorically asks Clov:

But beyond the hills? Eh? Perhaps it's still green. Eh?

(Pause.)

Flora! Pomona!

(Ecstatically.)

Ceres!

(Pause.)

Perhaps you won't need to go very far. *(Endgame 39)*

To successfully manipulate resources, a person needs to believe that the resources will be there or will manifest when needed, and Hamm displays such optimism in his "Ceres" speech. Nevertheless, this magical, empty, and death-evoking wasteland can only continue to provide fuel for the characters' imaginations—not the sustenance of their bodies.

CHAPTER 4

The Internet

Introduction

Even when he gives a soulful and melancholy description of the sunset and the sudden falling of the night, we know he does not believe the night will ever fall on him—he is merely giving a performance.... (Martin Esslin 37)

This chapter analyzes the wasteland-like setting of electronic media of the Internet in terms of language and isolation; magic, spatial emptiness, and despair; and death and sterility. First, I explore electronic communication, namely, e-mail, on the Internet and connect it to the language of isolation in the wastelands of *Godot* and *Endgame*. Can people really understand each other through electronic discourse? Can electronic discourse convey the author's intent? Can a face-to-face conversation convey the speaker's intent? Ben-Zvi writes of the limits of language and the effects of such boundaries, which she says Beckett displays through wordplay in *Godot* (143). The mechanism underlying reiteration demands its appearance, since "sometimes repetitions signal the impossibility of fixing an experience in language" (Ben-Zvi 143).

Second, I consider magic, spatial emptiness, and despair in regard to the average user of the Internet. The Internet's structure and origins seem built on chance, which renders the place magical like the wastelands of *Godot* and *Endgame*. Iser writes that "one cannot even say with certainty that Beckett's texts confirm the misery of modern

society, although they appear to do so” (258). The modern Internet is a place democratically created by modern society and it is a mysterious place, like the wastelands of *Godot* and *Endgame*. The reader of Internet text sees glowing letters and characters that exist beyond space and time. The letters and characters remain unreal unless printed on paper. Yet these letters and characters are very real, as anyone who’s endured a wrongly sent or misinterpreted e-mail knows. The Internet, like Beckett’s wastelands, is a decidedly threatening and magical landscape. Not even “the experts” can tell you what changes electronic discourse will bring to society. People can speculate, but what actually happens on a daily basis remains a mystery. Like *Godot*’s promised appearance, the Internet is an illusory place.

Third, like *Endgame*, delicious in its suspense, the Internet (along with electronic discourse) is a potential ghost town. Chapter Four analyzes death and sterility in the wastelands of *Godot* and *Endgame* in regard to the Internet as a ghost town. The Internet contains unfinished events and veiled outcomes. The development and addictive nature of the Internet shares many of the wastelands’ cumulative effects. Journalist Andrew L. Shapiro reasons in “The Information Age May Not Foster Democracy” for *The Information Age*, that although the ideal of electronic discourse “presumes a public forum in which an idea can be aired and judged based on its veracity, not the resources behind it,” valuable contributions can be lost through “the proliferation of filtering technology...” (49). Without economic support, people cannot access the Internet.

Last, I conclude the thesis at the end of Chapter Four by briefly summarizing the work.

Language and Isolation: The Internet's Circuitous E-mail

Like the wastelands of *Godot* and *Endgame*, the Internet is a place that connects language and isolation through circuitous and fractured discourse. The Internet is all encompassing yet abruptly written for many. If communication channels fail, misunderstanding overtakes people's lives. On the Internet, an author's credibility is always suspect because, unlike the work of a published poet, novelist, or author, everyone knows that the Internet is largely unregulated and uncensored. E-mail is frequently short and decontextualized, unlike handwritten notes. This may be attributable to the apparent incorporeality of the medium. Beckett's lexicon and manner of transmission resembles electronic discourse, because both use spare, strange, and not easily interpreted words and meanings. This is a wasteland. The audience is complicit, too, because a play and an Internet chat requires at least two parties and may be available for unknown millions to read for time immemorial.

Kevin Hillstrom celebrates the Internet in his book *Defining Moments: The Internet Revolution* as "a global village" because of the expansion of electronic communication, "making international news and information readily available to users around the world" (72). If this is true, why would e-mail, a social connection, be isolating? The answer is found in the plight of Beckett's characters. Vladimir and Estragon converse all the way through *Godot*. "Vladimir and Estragon talk incessantly," writes Esslin, who cites their dialogue to answer why:

VLADIMIR: You are right, we're inexhaustible
ESTRAGON: It's so we won't think. (38)

In this sense of chatter covering the speaker's authentic thoughts, electronic communication can be considered a kind of interminable, clicking hum that distracts writers from actual rumination.

While Hillstrom accedes the ease of e-mail, which is "fast, cheap, and easy" he notes the medium's drawbacks, which "even devoted e-mail users are quick to point out" (80). Like Vladimir and Estragon's insistent give-and-take, e-mail can coerce parties engaged in discourse to react even if they haven't yet created an answer, because as Hillstrom notes, e-mail:

often leaves people feeling that they must respond immediately to every note.... And in the business world, the pervasiveness of e-mail access can also lead workers to feel they are always "on" and that they should always be available to their employers, even when at home or on vacation. (80-81)

These workers are like characters in *Waiting for Godot*. When any of these private or business dialogues occur electronically, it is as if the writers inhabit a place resembling Beckett's wasteland. The resulting e-mails, the ones that have been created by exigency, many times are empty and alienating. The texts, like Vladimir and Estragon's discourse, can feel clipped. Hillstrom notes the emotional fallout of this phenomenon, in which "e-mail can create misunderstandings, since brief messages tend to be abrupt..." (80). You didn't title your e-mail? You haven't written your e-mail in traditional letterform? You created a letter one sentence long and neglected to sign off with "sincerely," "love," or "best"? You may have lost a friend or a colleague, even though elegance *is* found in simplicity.

Hemingway-esque e-mails are refreshing in their directness, but many people read e-mails like this and feel personally affronted. This lack of an attempt to see the best in the other party or recognize their intent (presumably to answer you quickly and with clear information) resembles Vladimir and Estragon's frequent silences and apparent hurt feelings in the course of their dialogue. It's as though they are waiting not only for Godot, but also fully expecting to be hurt or rejected by the other. At every turn this system of distrust mirrors e-mail users' contrary response to a quick reply they've received. And then the distressed person feels compelled to respond. The response is tinged with dull anger, which the other party no doubt intuits. The cycle continues. Vladimir and Estragon continually repeat and top each other with new snappish lines, and as Esslin explains, "the dialogue in Beckett's plays is often built on the principle that each line obliterates what was said in the previous line" (61).

Fractured E-mail

Whereas the isolation engendered in misunderstood e-mails hurts feelings, the mystery of unanswered e-mails hurts feelings, embitters people, and creates anxiety. The pressure to use e-mail is strong, and such pressure can be understandable in the case of businesses. As David Politis explains in "Utah Tech Watch" in *Enterprise/Salt Lake City* "the management of any organization not on the Internet today is being questioned as to their collective sanity" (17). But this pressure extends to private communication as well, for Politis argues that "those individuals not using e-mail on a regular basis to augment or drive their communication functions is [*sic*] likely a Luddite through and through" (17). From this scenario, we can see that e-mail is not only prevalent, but also dominant. If you

send someone an e-mail, modern commerce and communication etiquette—now shifted to an electronic medium—demand that the person answer, and the sooner the better. This of course, does not apply to *spam*, which is unsolicited, junk mail that people (should) disregard and delete. Hillstrom writes that spam is another drawback to e-mail, because “opening e-mail often includes spending valuable time sorting through and deleting these junk messages” (81). If you send an e-mail to a friend, colleague, or associate and it remains unanswered, you are left with a number of probabilities. First, the party to whom you sent an e-mail is otherwise engaged, but would or will respond when they are available. They may have even forgotten to reply, though they intended to. Second, the person changed their e-mail address or you accidentally sent the e-mail to the wrong address. Third, the person refuses to answer you. Each of these eventualities occurs in the discourse we hear in the wastelands of *Godot* and *Endgame*. When your intended party doesn’t answer, you are *Waiting for Godot*. Your answer may never arrive. If the person’s e-mail address is wrong, then you are like Vladimir, who “would not be insisting that they return to the same spot each evening if it were not for a verbal promise made by Godot” (Cousineau 45). The recipient of the e-mail would have provided their address at some point, and the sender addresses an e-mail to this destination. Before an answer arrives, the sender must wait, wondering if perhaps a mistake has occurred. If the e-mail contains sensitive or personal information, then this wait could be excruciating. Vladimir and Estragon wait in this manner. They are unsure if Godot will arrive or if they even have the correct location:

ESTRAGON: (*despairingly*). Ah! (*Pause.*) You’re sure it was
 here?

VLADIMIR: What?

ESTRAGON: That we were to wait. (*Godot* 376)

Later in the conversation, Vladimir asks, “What are you insinuating? That we’ve come to the wrong place?” (*Godot* 376). Later, Vladimir and Estragon encounter Lucky, and when they ask him a question, he launches into an extraordinary tirade of words. Esslin explains that Niklaus Gessner has described the speech and other moments of broken conversation in *Godot* “as an indication that language has lost its function as a means for communication [and] that questions have turned into statements not really requiring an answer” (63). An unanswered e-mail reflects this part of the wasteland’s discourse in several ways. First, the intended party who hasn’t answered might have decided that you already knew the answer and that they need not validate it for you (fend for yourself), and silence is their answer, much like Godot’s significant absence. Second, the intended party refrains from answering because they harbor resentment at you, and language lacks the power to communicate this response. A non-answer is more powerful. All eventualities are isolating, which lends an air of chance to the Internet.

Many times in Vladimir and Estragon’s dialogue, each man speaks aloud a conversation he is actually having inside his own mind. Whatever the other’s response, many times the speaker replies according to his own internal, hidden script. This fractured give and take in the play fits Ben-Zvi’s discussion of separation, where “words and actions are constantly disjunctive and discontinuous throughout the work” (142). Likewise, e-mail is frequently choppy, and many times the senders include the original message in their reply. This not only reflects Beckett’s use of repetition, but also a sense of useless information such as Nagg’s oft-repeated, tailor story in *Endgame*. Of course,

such information is valuable in many situations, but can appear cold in personal communications. Significantly, the speakers in both Beckett's plays and e-mail are dislocated and isolated in space and time.

E-mail also reflects the isolating, fractured, and repetitive qualities of the discourse found in the wastelands of *Godot* and *Endgame* in its tendency to be deleted by accident, or conversely, retained on a server past its time. Like Nagg and Nell's hopeless search for the past while trapped in ashcans, a person who deletes an important or treasured e-mail is trapped. The sender cannot reclaim the lost e-mail, or if the text was accidentally sent to the wrong person or saved on a server somewhere when it should have been deleted, the sender cannot wrench it back. This accidentally deleted e-mail resembles the forgetfulness hounding Beckett's characters. The wrongly sent e-mail is nearly identical to the unfortunate fate of Beckett's characters, who have inadvertently stumbled into dodgy territory where the slightest statement to the wrong person can bring about a violent reaction or even death. Though a wrongly sent e-mail is frequently only a social *faux pas*, the emotional repercussions of this mistake on the sender can be likened to the fear and isolation in the heightened, dangerous wastelands Beckett's characters must navigate.

The Magical Wasteland: Nebulous Internet

Like the wastelands of *Godot* and *Endgame*, the Internet is an enormous space that we can see only an isolated portion of at any given time. Online, we may have many applications open at once, but we see only what we've chosen to view at each moment, even if we rapidly switch between applications, files or e-mails. In *Godot*, we view the proscenium-enclosed portion of the landscape Beckett has allotted to us, and nothing

beyond, though the play's atmosphere intimates a cosmic expanse. This is revealed through the hollows between words and Beckett's spare set. Likewise, in *Endgame*, we observe Hamm's castle and a fragment of the outer environs, though the expanse beyond is filtered through Clov. Like the lone tree in *Godot*, *Endgame*'s castle and Nagg and Nell's ashcans, by their very leanness, inversely suggest a large exterior place.

When we are online and viewing glowing text and illuminated pages (meaning pages both lit from a monitor and the medieval definition of illuminated), which could apply to e-mail stationary or even an e-mail decorated with emoticons that explain its meaning, we look into the bright light at the end of a long, oblique tunnel. This channel opens up to the rest of the world and the universe beyond earth, depending on how far wireless and satellite signals travel into space before, or if, they dissolve into the background static. Some scientists have asserted that electronic media will travel indefinitely. This indefinite sense of vacuous space echoes *Endgame*'s narrative arc as delineated by Selsdon. The static is itself the remnant of the Big Bang.

Though the known scientific basis of Internet communication can be explained, the process can be mystifying to many, and as a consequence, Internet communication appears spectral. The lack of corporeality in an unprinted e-mail cements the medium's nebulous character. You cannot hold an e-mail. E-mail, however, wields enormous power on the emotional and academic planes. The Internet, the setting that houses e-mail, is a psychically dangerous and yet magical place. In *The Internet Revolution*, Kevin Hillstrom explains the mechanics of Internet communication. He explains, "all information sent over the Internet is broken into small pieces—less than 1,500 characters long—called packets" (34-35). When a person communicates through e-mail, that person's "individual

computer sends packets of information to a local network server or the host computer of an Internet Service Provider (ISP),” and then, Hillstrom explains, “the packets are mingled together with packets from other sources and transported through many different networks and computers,” before being rebuilt when they arrive at their intended address (35). Hillstrom lists the transport channels packets travel through, which include “satellites, fiber-optic cables, Integrated Services Digital Network (ISDN) telephone lines, high-speed Digital Subscriber Line (DSL) connections, and wireless networks...” (Hillstrom 35).

This scientific basis of wireless communication is not a technology that many people could easily rebuild if they were to survive a cataclysm like that of *Endgame*. Food and water would be the survivors’ first priority. Perhaps the really technically savvy one percent of the population would later be able to rebuild Bluetooth. Hence, the medium’s effervescent, ghostlike aspect. The Internet seems intangible, and its structure and origins may be impossible to recreate, which therefore renders the Internet magical. *Godot* and *Endgame*’s wastelands mirror these qualities because, like the Internet, the wastelands also seem nebulous and can be viewed from many perspectives though we, as viewers, are given only a limited and fixed perspective of a single computer screen. Every spectator and character witnessing or experiencing the narrative might derive a different meaning from the events, in the same way that an Internet user uniquely (at least initially) reacts to the documents that she or he chooses to view. Martin Esslin, in *Theatre of the Absurd*, hints at the ineffability of categorizing *Godot*:

It is the peculiar richness of a play like *Waiting for Godot* that it opens vistas on so many different perspectives. ...[Y]et above all it is a poem on

time, evanescence, and the mysteriousness of existence, the paradox of change and stability, necessity and absurdity. (40)

The mutability of *Godot* is analogous to the Internet, which is defined by a similar mutability, because the Internet also offers infinite perspectives within the intangible atmosphere of a seemingly magical place.

Future Communication

The Internet may offer an expansion of communication efficacy, which mirrors the fragmentation and rebuilding mechanism underlying all Internet communication. W. David Stephenson, writing “The Internet Benefits Society” for *The Information Age*, argues that the Internet’s primary gift is its “ability to link ideas formerly isolated from one another. That will facilitate inclusive solutions to complex issues that would be impossible with piecemeal approaches” (18). Beckett’s dialogue can reflect this capability of e-mail to enhance collaborative discourse that bypasses tired, dead-end, superficial answers. Esslin describes the language, and by extension communication, in Beckett’s work and concludes that:

The recognition of the illusoriness and absurdity of ready-made solutions and prefabricated meanings, far from ending in despair, is the starting point of a new kind of consciousness, which faces the mystery and terror of the human condition in the exhilaration of a new-found freedom.... (64)

By throwing comments to one another, the characters in *Godot* and *Endgame* could work toward a nearly intuitive level of communication, marked by the absence of long expository sentences and illustrated through narrative action. The play’s arc can then

reflect the characters' awareness. Ben-Zvi discusses Beckett's dialogue and notes, "much of the action of *Endgame* is structured on questions" (149). Then she examines Hamm and Clov's first exchange, concluding, "few [questions] are satisfactorily answered, often receiving immediate, perfunctory replies that are often qualified. ...[Y]et questions, even those without answers, keep the dialogue going" (Ben-Zvi 149). Ben-Zvi cites a line of dialogue that fits with this idea of heightened communication brought about by the seemingly random shuffling of spoken words; she says, "the central question that Hamm raises is, 'We're not beginning to...to...mean something?' To which he gets no answer, merely a scoff" (149).

Layering and shuffling information in *Godot* and *Endgame* may produce synergistic realizations or extended misunderstandings, and a consideration of the implementation and extension of semantics recognition in Internet searches yields equally ambivalent answers. In "The Internet Will Become a More Useful Part of Everyday Life," in *The Information Age*, Mark Frauenfelder considers travel routes as a metaphor for the processes that semantic Internet technologies go through (162). He explains that "planning the shortest route through a number of cities" is relatively easy;

[b]ut when you get up to only 15 cities, there are more than 43 billion possible routes. The same kind of runaway situation exists for inference, where brute-force searches for answers could lead to time-wasting paradoxes or contradictions. (Frauenfelder 162-163)

Vladimir and Estragon wait and converse in blind alley fashion because they cannot know what awaits them, and the electronic communication paradoxes that Frauenfelder suggests can be seen to reflect their situation. Vladimir and Estragon continually add

more events to their collective experience, but each new event creates more discursive challenges. Yet such a challenge is inspiring, if not for their lack of a map. An e-mail likely never takes the same path through the wasteland from sender to receiver more than once, just as a spoken comment will never mean the same thing, though uttered several times in numerous productions and by many actors.

Emptiness and Despair

Like Vladimir and Estragon, Hamm and his family suffer communicative difficulties that point to utter dissonance. Yet Hamm's family live in their own home, which happens to be a castle. The family unit is real, but also virtual because each of the characters is cut off from the others, from pain, blindness, age, or infirmity. In *The Information Age* Dinesh D'Souza's "Online Communities Cannot Substitute for Real-Life Communities" compares online communities to an actual definition of community by Robert Nisbet, a sociologist, and D'Souza argues that "Professor Nisbet seems right in pointing out that traditional communities absorb the whole person, not just a particular role or interest" (46). A chosen topic or interest drives much of electronic communications. Nevertheless D'Souza asserts that "a life primarily shaped by voluntary associations is one that cuts itself off from the broader range of human experiences" (46). D'Souza evokes the nebulous quality of the Internet, by explaining, "while the relationships we develop on the Web may be useful or entertaining, they are generally too thin and ephemeral to constitute genuine community" (46). However, D'Souza also notes a contradictory outcome:

[W]hile real community can't be sustained through the Web, this technology has created a paradoxical effect. Because more of us can work out of our own homes, we can choose our ideal communities and spend more time in them. (46-47)

Given this, Hamm's family in *Endgame* may be healthier than some engaging in electronic communication, because Hamm's family is forced to adjust to various others within the same space. This occurs in electronic communication, too, such as when like-minded colleagues engage in intellectual debate.

Though they seem to extend their knowledge or worldview, it's more likely that the characters in *Godot* and *Endgame* bear deep, psychic wounds from the despair-filled dialogue they employ to fill the emptiness around them. These characters may be widening the emptiness and, as a consequence, increasing their despair. In concert with the idea of empty space created by communication failures, Cousineau writes that thinking and speech are disparate in Beckett's work, in the face of "our commonsensical assumption that they are interrelated" (35). Cousineau quotes a dialogue between Vladimir and Estragon illustrating this disassociation, citing Estragon's line, "Yes, now I remember, yesterday evening we spent blathering about nothing in particular. That's been going on now for half a century" (35).

Like the communication between Vladimir and Estragon, electronic communication can also facilitate the spread of empty space because, as Andrew L. Shapiro writes in his essay "The Information Age May Not Foster Democracy," in *The Information Age*, "unfortunately, theories of social psychology such as selective avoidance suggest that many people may be inclined...to reinforce existing political

beliefs rather than to challenge themselves” (53). The rest of the world, in such a situation of limited electronic communication, becomes empty space. Concurrently, Hillstrom writes that “on a global level, the Internet has the potential to fundamentally change the future of human relations” (99). Nevertheless Hillstrom notes the disadvantages technology specialists have predicted of the “continued integration of Internet technology into all corners of daily existence” (99). Of course, electronic communication is but a part of this Internet technology. Hillstrom cites “loss of privacy, increased social isolation and parallel erosion of relationships in physical communities, and increased work and social obligations associated with always being ‘on the grid’” (99). At least Vladimir and Estragon constantly challenge one another. Perhaps this aspect of their discourse represents Vladimir and Estragon’s desire to protect themselves from the magical, and thus unpredictably dangerous, wasteland through chatter.

Vladimir and Estragon’s tendency to challenge one another may also represent the medieval concept of the *wyrd*. In medieval science, the ability to ritualistically name something gave the speaker power over the object. In this light, the pair repeatedly saying, “Godot,” could represent a magical invocation. This magical invocation also resembles an instant message, which a user of electronic media uses to invoke their intended friend. When these messages appear, sometimes they are heralded by beeping or chiming bells (a ceremonial sound), and they suddenly appear like magic—out of the blue.

Death: Internet Ghost Town

The Internet resembles the wastelands of *Waiting for Godot* and *Endgame* in terms of its inherent deadness and sterility. The term shipwreck, or perhaps ghost town,

suits electronic discourse, because millions of unread e-mails are docked in servers. Like these ghostly documents, specters that may appear at any time for good or ill, dead Web sites haunt the Internet. The outdated or obsolete Web sites may have been useful at one time, or always useless, but they now decay, fixed in the Internet. The Web sites' existences mirror the almost disembodied lives of Vladimir, Estragon, Nagg, and Nell. Like Beckett's characters, the Web sites slipped through the cracks of the universe. They aren't dead, but do not thrive in the present moment. They share an "undead" quality. They cannot die and cannot be deleted. Even after Nell's supposed demise, her ashcan remains and transforms the castle into a crypt where the living stay to eat with the nearly and/or nearby dead. The dead in Hamm's castle will likely slip into obscurity, and their anonymity is likewise mirrored by the fact that unknown programmers created many of these dead Web sites.

The Internet self-creates a set of rules, only to rewrite them the next day, much like an individual in an existential universe in the wastelands of *Godot* and *Endgame*. The Internet, moreover, can be seen to be a dead, lifeless place because electronic media users must venture into a wasteland that could kill their work by eating a file or e-mail or render the work sterile by leaching out an important supplement whenever they enact a transaction. Likewise, such users also risk the garbling of their work or information, if the destination e-mail or site uses an incompatible program or OS. In such a situation, a converter can render the original text or signature illegible and leave it interspersed with letters, numbers, and text characters that look like alien code. Call SETI! This lack of important connection resembles the narrative arc of *Godot*. In Act II, Vladimir and Estragon meet one of Godot's messengers, a boy. He looks exactly like the first

not only tried to do correctly the first time but also had no way of anticipating. Such a situation could economically affect the user. This blanching of information resembles the wastelands of *Godot* and *Endgame*. It is similar to Beckett's paring down of scenes, characters, dialogue, and most importantly, setting. Esslin explains the distillation in *Waiting for Godot* and *Endgame*, noting that "[the plays] lack both characters and plot in the conventional sense because they tackle their subject-matter at a level where neither characters nor plot exist" (53). Beckett refines his work into archetypes, and electronic media, specifically e-mail, likewise appears distilled and generic. There are times when we do not see or know the sender of an e-mail but we imagine them in three dimensions. Beckett's characters and e-mail senders live only on a "page." Compressed text lends itself to many interpretations. If you want to clearly express a multifaceted concept involving shades of gray and requiring intricately connected supporting documents, perhaps e-mail is not the best medium. As Iser notes of *Endgame*, "if the rules of the *Endgame* have to be projected onto it by the spectator, then clearly the text itself cannot establish that any one of the possibilities is the correct one" (273). This dynamic is similar to visiting a tomb, where the dead can never discursively respond or elaborate.

Sterile Internet

This uncertainty in electronic media mirrors *Godot* and *Endgame*'s setting, because the Internet is a place defined by its lack of order and oversight and is, therefore, dangerous. Every time a user accesses a Web site or sends an e-mail, they have ventured into a wasteland. This land of the dead may produce miracles, like *Godot*'s blooming tree, or dread, such as Nell's death in *Endgame*. This danger reflects the uncertainty in

Endgame, of whether or not Clov will leave, and also hints at the play's economic sterility. Whether Clov abandons Hamm and his family can never be resolved. Ben-Zvi explains Clov's desire or threats to leave, noting that "Clov, from the beginning of the play, repeats 'I'll leave you'; yet he returns after each exit...." (148). Similarly, dead e-mails line the electronic walls of innumerable high-capacity servers like cobwebs in a basement, forever haunting the Internet. These sterile copies of original letters, many written by the now dead or addressed to those now deceased, have been inadvertently archived by e-mail programs and web servers. Will they ever be read? Or, rather, re-read? Are they not private and therefore protected? Anyone who encounters these works in the near or distant future and reads them will experience decontextualized letters. It would be like discovering Clov's ultimate decision without any knowledge of *Endgame*'s text.

What if the play were removed from the consideration? In "Computers and Modern Anarchy" for *PC Magazine*, John C. Dvorak imagines a world without the Internet. Dvorak explains that in around 1979 "there were 300-baud modems but no place to call" (91). He comments on the Internet's growth, asking, "how did we go from zero to infinity in about 25 years? ... This is a phenomenal societal change. We've watched it happen within a generation" (Dvorak 91). When Dvorak imagines removing the Internet, he concludes that "the differences may not be that substantial," for we would still access information through electronic media:

We'd still have e-mail, running through CompuServe, AOL, and MCI.

There would probably be bunches of information utilities such as AOL—each a closed system you'd call with a modem. One or two would come to dominate the scene, and most people would be members of both. We

probably wouldn't have spam as we have it today, and viruses would have a different character. (91)

This model resembles the evolution of phone and cable companies and the closed system operating in Godot's monopoly and Hamm's kingdom. That is, Godot seems to have a monopoly on resources. Even though Pozzo is wealthy and the patrons of the slave market in which Pozzo intends to sell Lucky presumably also have wealth, Godot is the primary businessman featured in the play, similar to Hamm's position in *Endgame*. Even in a closed system without an Internet, Dvorak postulates that electronic media "would have evolved along a different path to give us pretty much what we have today in terms of access to information and convenience" (91). Dvorak notes the economic impetus in electronic media, for "it's demand-driven" (91). At the end of "The Web of Social Networking" for *U.S. News & World Report*, Elizabeth Weiss Green discusses electronic media's economic weight. She writes that the draw of networking through electronic media creates "websites that offer advertisers a captive market with spending power" and she speculates that this demand suggests, "perhaps that's why media pioneer Rupert Murdoch decided to fork over \$580 million for *MySpace*" in 2005 (58). In "The Information Age May Not Foster Democracy" for *The Information Age*, Shapiro examines electronic discourse and censorship's relationship to money and the lack of money, apart from a government's dictum excluding people from discourse (49). Shapiro goes on to note the shipwreck that the Internet could become, and his proposed outcome mirrors Hamm's poisoned wasteland when he asserts:

[T]he voices of many of the internet's early beneficiaries—individuals, nonprofits, and small businesses—may... become lost in cyberspace,

drowned out by the din of speech that is paid for by the highest bidder.

(49)

Such wealth benefits investors but what about end-users who cannot even afford to dial-up online? For them the Internet can be a sterile, unreachable place, like the outside world to Clov, who only ventures to the beach to collect sand for Nagg and Nell:

NELL: And now it's sand.

(Pause.)

From the shore.

(Pause. Impatiently.)

Now it's sand he fetches from the shore. (*Endgame 17*)

As Shapiro writes in regard to the Internet, “there have always been different levels of access to this marketplace depending on a speaker’s status and wealth (it helps, for example, when you can afford to buy advertisements to spread your message)” (49).

Shapiro adds that circumstances may worsen ushering in “a much more cutthroat market for speech. And that will likely mean paying to be heard” (49). Hamm pays to be heard, yet still faces abandonment. Clov will ultimately choose his own fate. In this light, the

Internet is promising for end-users who can access open source programs, such as the free *Firefox* browser manufactured by *Mozilla*, when they cannot afford retail programs.

People have a choice. Likewise, in *The Internet Revolution*, Kevin Hillstrom explains that Internet can offer end-users with small businesses an opportunity to make money, for “as the government gave up its claims, businesses large and small started to view the Internet as an exciting new way to sell their products and services” (48). A few years later, though, “in April 2000 the ‘dot.com’ bubble burst and trading turned chaotic and

desperate on market floors around the country” (Hillstrom 62). The Internet has long since rebounded. What will become of electronic media? Clov announces, “The end is terrific!” (*Endgame* 48), and yet in *Endgame* there is no end.

Conclusion

Oh way back, way back, you weren't in the land of the living. (*Endgame* 44)

The wastelands of *Godot* and *Endgame* are enormous and complex spaces, because they contain and reveal the characters' isolation through clever, droll, and trenchant language. They radiate an innately magical aura, contain nearly unbroken spatial emptiness, and emanate death, as any supernatural place would. The Internet, like Samuel Beckett's numinous settings, beckons audiences and authors with its language and magic, all the while holding an implicit warning, “enter at your own risk.”

The Reflection of the Wastelands of Waiting for Godot and Endgame in Electronic Media links the wastelands of *Godot* and *Endgame* to that of the Internet, which means connecting theatrical settings to a real (yet incorporeal) setting. The wastelands of *Godot* and *Endgame* and the Internet contain similarities, which invite comparison. They are all actualized, rather than theoretical, spaces where we see in Beckett's wastelands flesh and blood characters act in a scene, and on the Internet we encounter media written by actual, living people. The Internet, like *Godot* and *Endgame*, is also a place primarily containing a visual and auditory setting. *Godot*, *Endgame*, and the Internet can be seen and heard.

Setting is of primary importance to a work, yet when we view a play in the theatre, we see a work unfold in a limited space. The proscenium enclosing the show might have been a window to a radically different production just a week before.

However, willing suspension of disbelief allows us to travel to the world that the playwright crafted for the stage. Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* and *Endgame* take place in wastelands that we glimpse through the plays' protagonists. The sets of these plays are spare, but the intimation of space is paradoxically huge. Likewise, accessing the Internet allows us to approach infinity. Our bodies are fixed in space, staring at a single screen, but we can see a potentially unlimited vista arise before us. This place promises both research benefits and calamity.

This taste of infinity makes the wastelands of *Godot* and *Endgame* quite plastic. They are open to nearly infinite conjecture of their meaning, which we can never know. This thesis invites spectators to examine *Waiting for Godot* and *Endgame* in regard to electronic media, which helps us understand both Beckett's work and electronic media in a scholarly, theatrical context that discrete analyses could not achieve. Beckett's plays are art and are mutable in interpretation. Walt Whitman's words, "I contain multitudes," can be applied to the meanings of *Godot* and *Endgame*. What kind of theories will analysts in the future create to explain the unusual twists and turns taken by electronic media? What new, as yet unidentified, Internet memes will archeologists and anthropologists discover? Will English Departments read anthologies containing e-mails?

The Internet is supremely plastic and contains facets applicable to varied disciplines. The theatre of the Internet is but one, and what the future holds remains a mystery. The telegram was Beckett's original inspiration for his terse dialogue. This obsolete form of communication is characterized by concise, well-thought out sentences. E-mail, in contrast, is frequently careless, and its clipped quality evokes impatience more than distillation. Yet, e-mail's purpose may be to communicate in snippets and create a

coherent discourse over time. E-mail is best read as a collection of letters at length, instead of as individual, decontextualized installments. This phenomenon resembles Beckett's characters' conversations, which go back and forth in each scene, building to a devastating whole at the plays' ends. Like Beckett's characters' discourse, e-mail is qualified by the notion that if words connote whatever the reader or listener interprets, then why communicate at all? We continue to communicate in the wasteland, through telegrams at one time, conversations, or e-mail, in the hope of being understood. As Esslin makes clear in a discussion of *Godot* in *The Theatre of the Absurd*, "the more things change, the more they are the same. That is the terrible stability of the world" (31).

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