



## Endgame, by Samuel Beckett

### In A Nutshell

*Endgame* was Samuel Beckett's first full-length play after his famous *Waiting for Godot*. When it first came out in 1958 it received somewhat mixed reviews (as had *Godot* a few years earlier), with some critics charging that Beckett was just doing the same thing over again. With time, however, people began to agree on the play's immense significance. *Endgame* helped to cement Beckett's role as one of the (if not *the*) most important playwrights of the 20th century. Renowned literary critic Harold Bloom wrote that *Endgame* "remains a larger play than any other dramatist has given us in this century."

So what's all the fuss about? For one thing, *Endgame* is an example of theatrical "minimalism" that would become enormously influential later in the 20th century. Minimalism is a style based on the simple premise that the less you put on stage, the more significant what *is* on stage becomes. Beckett was obviously fully aware of this increased significance because, not only did he revise the play repeatedly, but he also wrote *Endgame* in French (*not* his native language) and then translated it into English (which he did with all of his work after his 1945 novel, *Watt*). Beckett used French, which he was less familiar than with English, to ensure that he struggled with every word – to ensure that nothing came too easily.

A last point: for those not well acquainted with black humor, *Endgame* is a bizarre and cruel play. At the time it was written, not too long after World War II, apocalyptic visions were much in vogue, and readers were preoccupied with the problem of finding meaning in a world

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full of suffering. Beckett can squeeze comedy from these visions of human pain; nonetheless, he never ceases to sympathize with his characters. Over and over again, in all of his work, he depicted people who had suffered so much that they were long past hope. And yet, even in the absence of hope, his characters still continue on for reasons that they cannot understand.

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## Big Picture Study Questions

- 1 Why would Beckett name the play after a stage of a game of chess? How are Hamm and Clov like novice chess players that don't know how to let the game end? Pushing the metaphor a little further, how would an expert chess player deal with the post-apocalyptic world they find themselves in?
- 2 Why doesn't Clov leave Hamm? What is it about his cruel master that keeps Clov bound to him? In what small ways is he still defiant?
- 3 Imagine that the room that makes up the stage is not actually a room but actually the inside of someone's head, and the two windows in the back are the person's eyes. This makes Hamm and Clov and Nagg and Nell like different characters inside of someone's mind. What parts of our minds might each character represent? Our consciences? Our base desires? Our insecurities?

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