

Crosbian Nihilistic Reading of Samuel Becket's *Endgame* and Sadeqh Hedayat's *Three Drops of Blood*

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Abstract

Nihilism as a philosophical concept is an inner feature, related to the mind of the man. This study aims at showing the futility of life that causes hopelessness in man's life through surveying the two selected works from world literature: Samuel Beckett's *Endgame* and Sadeqh Hedayat's *Three Drops of Blood*. The works signify the internal problems, tensions, and valueless feelings of man toward living in the world. This article shows that the two works under analysis, despite their being the products of noticeably different times, places, languages, and cultures, similarly deal with the concept of nihilism as a -if not the- dominant subject matter. It also proves that each of the two works tends to support its nihilism through a certain set of nihilistic arguments or themes, these sets remarkably overlap at some places, which further strengthens the two works thematic affinity, this time in terms of their attitudes towards their nihilism.

Key words: Nihilism; Absurd; Literary works

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INTRODUCTION

Derived from the Latin word *nihil*, which means "nothing"; it appears in the verb "annihilate," meaning to bring to nothing, to destroy completely. The doctrine of nihilism asserts that all values are baseless, there are no moral distinctions, and existence is meaningless. Moreover, nihilists and the most important of them Friedrich Nietzsche (1844) rejects religious teachings in favor of scientific rationalism and utilitarianism. Critics of this philosophy maintain that nihilism constitutes a serious social menace, as it intends to negate all moral principles and reject religious values. A true nihilist does not believe in anything, does not have no loyalties and no purpose other than, perhaps, an impulse to destroy.

The term nihilism is sometimes used with anomie to explain the general mood of despair at a perceived pointlessness of existence that one may develop upon realizing there are no necessary norms, rules, or laws. Movements, among others, have been identified by deconstructionism and futurism as commentators as nihilistic at various times in various contexts.

This article contains the necessary definitions and assumptions for the study, and is primarily based on the first two chapters of Donald A. Crosby's *The Specter of the Absurd: Sources and criticisms of Modern Nihilism* (1988). Crosby's book can be divided into two parts: a descriptive and a critical one. In the first part, Crosby exclusively seeks to describe, as objectively as possible, the different types of nihilism and then the arguments for the most important type, i.e. *belief in life's absurdity* (which is termed existential nihilism by Crosby), put forward by its adherents "as in literature and art, in daily life and practical affairs, and in philosophy" (p.460). Much of this first part of Crosby's work constitutes a good deal of this study.

1. METHOD

For the nihilistic study of these works, the article, at the first, compares *Endgame* and *Three Drops of Blood* by utilizing some of Crosby's nihilistic arguments written in his book that finds the traces of nihilism through the characters and the environment they are living into it. Then it contrasts these two works by using the other arguments those are discussed separately in these works.

The conclusion, in this article, includes Venn-diagram-based comparisons of the pair of the analyzed texts in order to show their overlapping nihilistic arguments or themes.

2. DISCUSSION

It is noteworthy that the nihilistic arguments retold by Crosby are universal and timeless enough to let the reader deduce a set of criteria for recognizing cases of belief of Crosby's book refers to the sources or arguments (regardless of their time) behind the modern nihilism at issue in his book.

In the chapter two of his book, Crosby provides the reader with "some of the most prominent" (p.38) arguments "that have been, or could be given in support of the nihilistic position" (p.38). Despite the fact that Crosby mentions a lot of these arguments, he does not claim to have done justice to all of the arguments for nihilism and asserts that by mentioning the selected arguments he aims to "portray [...] the nihilistic frame of mind" (p.38).

Endgame and *Three Drops of Blood* are two modern literary works. *Endgame* is set after some sort of apocalyptic disaster (though we never learn the details). Hamm, his servant Clov, his father Nagg, and his mother Nell are trapped together in Hamm's home. Besides of it, in *Three Drops of Blood*, the narrator of the story speaks about the bad conditions of his life in an asylum where he lives. By some evidences, in this article, it is shown that a range of nihilistic arguments – mostly corresponding to some of those mentioned by Crosby- is present in a number of them.

2.1 Argument Related to Suffering

According to Crosby these arguments first draw the attention to-as the arguers find it- "the pitiful fragility of human life, its susceptibility at any moment to wrenching pain, catastrophic loss, or death" (p.55) and then conclude that human life, "full with so much actual and potential suffering" (p.55) can have no meaning.

In addition to the above - mentioned physical pain and suffering, our ever-accompanying mental anguish, conflict, and dissatisfaction (produced, for example, by the unattainable ness of our apparently never-ending ideals, "the misery of our guilt, remorse, and an ever – present sense of frustration and failure"(p.60)) are also mentioned as other causes of a great deal of suffering which can bring us to the absurdity of life.

Human suffering is, as among the noticeable subject matters in *Endgame*. The characters in *Endgame* appear to have suffered a loss that renders their melancholic egos wounded, incomplete and empty. In the first speech, Clov says, "I can't be punished any more".

Hamm's first speech, he asks, "can there be misery (he yawns) loftier than mine?" Both characters are wounded and incomplete that is visually and externally represented by their physical disabilities. Hamm is blind and cannot walk. Clov can see and walk, but cannot sit. Nagg and Nell are legless, and have lost some of their hearing and sight. The features and abilities that one character lacks are reflected by the presence of that feature or ability in the other characters.

The characters appear on stage already wounded. The many references to the fact that they are "almost finished" or "at the end" indicate that the initial unnamable loss occurred long ago. As is the case with melancholia, there is no clear cause – it is an unconscious loss. The audience is presented with what seems to be the last stage of deteriorating process. When Clov says that there is no more nature, Hamm proves that there is by pointing not to nature's growth, but to its decay:

Hamm: We loss our hair, our teeth! Our bloom! Our ideals!

The process is not named, but only pointed to as "this" or "this thing" or "something". For example:

Hamm: Have you had enough?

Clov: Yes! (Pause.) Of what?

Hamm: Of this ... this ... thing.

This more universal endgame reflects Beckett's general nihilistic world view – that human life is meaningless and absurd.

Toward death, nihilists believe that the metaphor for death or coming to the "end" of something is apparent in the very first lines of the play as Clov states, "finished, it's finished, nearly finished, it must be nearly finished". Hamm's response to Clov's rambling as he awakens is "Me to play". Hamm's reluctance to die, however, follows shortly after as he says "And yet, I hesitate to end. Yes, there it is, it's time it ended and yet I hesitate to – to end."

Beckett juxtaposes a conversation between Nagg and Nell shortly after, which takes a more serious view of unhappiness and longing for death. It involves more introspection and a clearer understanding of the situation. After listening to Nagg's joke, Nell responds:

Nell (without lowering her voice): Nothing is funnier than unhappiness, I grant you that.

But ...

Nagg(shocked): Oh!

Nell: Yes, Yes, it's the most comical thing in the world. And we laugh, with a will, in the beginning. But it's always the same thing. Yes, it's like the funny story we have heard too often, we still find it funny, but we don't laugh anymore.

Certainly, the theme of the play resides in Nell's concluding words about life and meaninglessness.

Nevertheless, the comedic aspects of the play help the actors and the audience deal with the potentially negative issue about death in a more positive, cathartic way.

Toward this argument Crosby says: "So much routine suffering and deprivation makes the conclusion seem unavoidable that, when all things are said and done, our lives are fundamentally absurd" (p.56). In *Three Drops of Blood*, there are two kinds of sufferings: physical and mental suffering. Physical suffering is seen when the narrator describes the bad pitiful circumstances of some mad persons who hurt themselves. It indicates the extreme sufferings of these people, seeing these images also suffers Mirza Ahmad, the narrator and the protagonist of the story, alot:

He relates his suffering by saying that:

What long days and terrible hours I have spent here. In the summer, dressed in buff shirt and trousers, we sit together in the little room under the house where it's cool, and in the winter we sit round the garden in the sun. It's a whole year now that I have been living with these crazy people. There's absolutely nothing we have in common. I am a whole world apart from them. But the moans, the silences, the oaths, the crying, and the laughing of these people will always fill my sleep with nightmares.

The narrator's speaking in this part achieves his extreme fear from the world and the people of the world. Ahmad is the tragic victim of a society that has shut its eyes to the inevitable madness of him without any attention to his mental feelings and his feelings towards love.

During the story, the mental suffering of the narrator is seen obviously. The melancholic spiritual matters of this man show his hard suffering in the world. Michael Graig Hillmann and Homa Katouzian (1996) write: "the protagonist in *Three Drops of Blood* is caught between his consciousness of the meaninglessness and futility of life and his impulse to import meaning or imply that meaning existence brought creative communication; through writing. At the same time, the nightmarish horror of lives of suffering perceived as lived for no purpose is heightened by the very imagination of characters who can dream of an ideal order with which to contrast the hellish, senseless state of their own lives" (p.34).

In *Three Drops of Blood*, the narrator suffers from losing of his love; the effect of this losing is so hard that he becomes mad. Because of it, now, he loses his freedom also. He is prisoner in a place where he can not go anywhere and do anything. He wants to write but they do not give him pen and paper, and when they give him them he can not write anything just three words "*three drops of blood*."

In the viewpoint of the narrator, for human existence there is no hope in the world not only into the lunatic but also out of there, hope is a missed ring in the life of people.

Mirza Ahmad Khan loses his hope in the world, the hope to reach to his love. He loses the hope to release from asylum and the hope to live. Fear and stress are represented instead of hope in his life. Fear of loneliness because of losing of his best friend, Siyavosh. He is alone among many mad people; he fears of them a lot.

What provides the reader with more material to support the thesis of absurdity in the story is the interrelation of the story with the ones concerning death. In *Three Drops of Blood*, the narrator repeats a queer poem two times which shows his solution just to die:

Alas once more it's evening.

The whole of the world has turned black.
For all of God's creatures it's now time to rest
Except me whose trials and sorrows increase.
The world has no joy in its makeup.
Except death there's no cure for my woe.
But there in that corner under the pine tree,
Three drops of blood have dripped on the ground.

As evidenced through this poem death is regarded by the narrator, the final point of the existence. In other words, he believes death to be a window on to utter nothingness.

2.2 Argument Related to the Relation to Other Persons

In this section, Crosby cites some arguments for the denial of the existence or possibility of human community, and also refers to the connections between such a denial and nihilism.

Fritz Mauthner (1911), a strict adherent of the above-mentioned argument, developed a theory primarily about language (Crosby refers to the theory with such terms as "meaning – relativism" and "linguistic relativism" to illustrate that no genuine communication can take between human beings both 'at the level of the individuals and at the level of different linguistic communities' (p.23). It is dealt with the theory only in its first level). Mauthner, Crosby says, sees all of the terms of the language as metaphors, in the sense that they are "necessarily vague or ambiguous in the meanings they connote among persons" (p.23). This relativity or "indeterminacy of meaning", Crosby says, "constitutes Mauthner's conceptual relativism or nihilism at the level of individual. *We each live in our own world, with our own conceptual scheme or distinctive set of meanings and associations built out of our unique experiences and uses of language*" (p.23).

Crosby quotes also one of Karl Britton's criteria for a meaningful life in his book. Britton (1969) says "It is essential to a meaningful life that people matter to or may matter to each other" (p.42). The given criterion cannot be fulfilled, hence leading us to despair of the meaning of life.

The character's inability to form a meaningful connection with each other demonstrates another symptom of the melancholic condition. This inability, in *Endgame*, is depicted visually by the fact that the characters do not touch each other. Nagg and Nell want to touch and kiss each other but they are physically prevented from doing so by their infirmities and their bins. Hamm and Clov are physically capable of touching each other, but when Hamm asks Clov to kiss him and hold his hand, Clov refuses. The only affectionate touch is given to the unfinished, three-legged, castrated toy dog. Hamm feels it and fondles it at first, then he wants the dog to look up at him as if it were

begging or imploring him for a bone, and towards the end of the play, he throws the dog on the ground.

The characters have an ambivalent love - hate relationship. While Clov and Hamm need each other, they are adversarial. Hamm seems to enjoy making Clov suffer. Clov usually obeys, but defiantly. The relationship between Hamm and his father is also ambivalent. To some degree they need each other. Nagg needs Hamm for nourishment and Hamm needs Nagg to listen to his stories. Hamm calls Nagg “*accursed progenitor*,” “*accursed fornicator*” and “*Scoundrel! Why did you engender me?*” indicating a hatred of the father for having been born. This aggression and resentment is directed at the father, not the mother. Nagg curses that one day Hamm will be alone, frightened in the dark, and will call to Nagg as his only hope. The curse recalls the neglect Hamm experienced as a child.

The pauses in this play are very important. They empower Beckett to picture silences of inaptness, when characters are unable to find the words they need; silences of domination, when they are silenced by the aggressive reaction of their interlocutor or by their feeling that they may be violating a social taboo; and silences of expectation, when they wait for the reaction of the other, which will offer then an ephemeral sense of existence. The importance of the silences (through out the conversation) in emphasizing the two character’s failure to communicate should also be given due attention. Significantly, all the silences appear exactly after Hamm’s insistence on his own conceptions or interpretations of things, resisting those of Clov.

It is helpful to add that, quite in accordance with the nihilistic argument at issue here, in *Endgame* there is no community as such either. What “ties” Hamm and Clov together is a piece of rope; their monophonic master - slave, or sadistic - masochistic relationship inherently contradicts the conventional concepts of communication and community. And what has so far kept Hamm and Clov together, is waiting for the end when Hamm says:

Hamm: *Nothing you can do about it, just wait for it to come.*
(Pause.) No forcing, no forcing, it’s fatal.

In other words they endure each other and the life forces them to bear the fatal circumstances of modern world. As Adolph Wegener (1967) remarks what Beckett is saying in this play is that one can only affirm that meaning does not exist in terms that imply that it does. Beckett’s plays present an inability in anyone to be nihilistic (p.56). As the nihilist critics say Beckett has left us with a final bleak image of life in the universe: that of a woman giving birth astride a grave.

In *Three Drops of Blood*, during the story it is seen that nobody commiserate for the narrator. There is no family or intimate friend around him now. It seems that all of his relatives have left him for ever or he is exiled to this place. It is shown in his statement when he says:

It’s been a whole year now since anyone come to see me or bring me flowers.

For one year, he wants pen and paper; these are instruments for writing and communicating, but they do not give him them. After, one year they give him a pen and paper but he does not have anything to write. In asylum, he does not establish connection with the lunatics; even he can not tolerate them:

It’s a whole year now that I have been living with these crazy people. There’s absolutely nothing we have in common. I am a whole world apart from them.

In the story, it is seen that Mirza Ahmad khan has just one friend, Siyavosh who had been so intimate with him. The narrator relates that, during the whole year, Siyavosh has come to visit him just one time that in the last lines of the story Mirza Ahmad khan narrators that by singing the poem in the room by himself, Rokhsareh and her mother leave the room annoyed and in the yard, he sees Siyavosh and Rokhsareh who were kissing each other. In the mind of the narrator, his best friend, Siyavosh, also commits treason against him and leaves him alone.

2.3 Argument Related to Boredom in *Endgame*

Boredom has been put forward by Crosby an indication of doubting the meaning of life. Going on with the issue of boredom in this section, Crosby draws our attention to (as some nihilists find it so) the overarching ennui that plagues “our life in time”. As an example of the expression of this boredom, Crosby quotes from the character of Roquentin in Sartre’s *Nausea*: “*Nothing happens while you live. The scenery changes, people come in and go out, that’s all. There are no beginnings. Days are tacked on to days without rhyme or reason, an interminable, monotonous addition*” (p.8). From this standpoint (unlike the one in the previous argument in which time is considered too much fragmented to suggest any continuity), Crosby says: “time is too large to be filled up, so that we try to fill or pass it by resorting to any possible program or project, no matter how ridiculous it may be in itself, because, however so, it is preferable to being bored, with time hanging heavy on our hands and no prospect of anything to do” (p.68).

Beckett declares that the characters living leaves them so much time that, for them, it is as if “[t]ime has stopped”. This living has made all times seem the same to them. And “[i]f each day is like as the other, how can they then know that time is really passing [...]?” The following lines by Hamm indicate that, for these persons, time does not flow and all days are the same.

Hamm: *It’s the end of the day like any other day, isn’t it Clov?*

Clov: *looks like it.*

Or, in another situation when Clov complains of this situation,

Clov: *Why this farce, day after day?*

Hamm: *Routine. One never knows..*

The extreme boredom of them is especially shown here, when Clov says:

I'm tired of our goings on, very tired.

Regarded against the background of this section, the play dramatizes the way through which human beings try to flee the sense of the senselessness of their lives _ in _ waiting through grasping at the straw of whatever ("mundane" or/and "serious") game they find.

2.4 Argument Related to Reason in *Three Drops of Blood*

In this part, Crosby mentions that there are no transperspectival truths or meanings, i.e., that all claims to truth and structures of meaning are relative to the idiosyncratic assumptions and standpoints of particular persons, groups, epochs, or systems. Among explicit adherents of this sort of argument, according to Crosby, are Friedrich W. Nietzsche, Fritz Mauthner, Max Stirner, and Oswald Spengler.

"It is said that there is no ground of certainty or complete justification of belief on which we can base our claims to knowledge, and that without such a ground our arguments and appeals must be sucked into an infinite regress" (Crosby, p.42). This argument assumes our *knowledge* of something as equal to our certainty of that thing, and goes on to show that "we can never be certain about anything.

By reading Crosby's words, it can say that a story like *Three Drops of Blood*, as a short story, "dramatizes doubt and unknowingness" or the unattainableness of certainty. This unknowingness uncertainty initially operates at two epistemological levels: A) the main character's uncertainty about the meaning of their world; and, B) the reader's uncertainty about the meaning of the story as a fictitious or "secondary world". These two levels, for a true nihilist, can induce another third one, which contains nihilistic implications for life's meaning. C) Our epistemological uncertainty about the meaning of the real, "primary world" outside, and our existence in it.

The narrator's unknowingness concerning his world is frequently emphasized in the story. The first important example occurs in the first sentence of the narrator when he says that he is not sure about his illness and also his freedom for a later week. He does not know that he was ill or not and if he was ill he is now cured or not?!

Am I really completely cured now, as the warder promised I would be? And Shall I be free in a week? Have I in fact been ill?

After questioning the illness about himself, the narrator begin casting doubt on the place and the doubt that they want to kill him in the lunatic asylum.

Thus, numerous questions (not to mention many possible ones which might be raised by the above-mentioned uncertainties) either remain unanswered or receive ambiguous or confusing answers: Is there any cat really? Does this story state a process of a crime? Does any crime occur? Maybe it is a story of a hunter, hunttee or bait; thus who is the hunter? Who is the hunttee? Who is the bait? Does Rokhsareh love Mirza Ahmad khan? Who is Rokhsareh's sister? What is the relationship

between Rokhsareh and that girl who loves Abbas? Who is Abbas? What is his madness that they have brought him to asylum? What is the real story of the three drops of blood? Are they drops of blood of the cat, canary, Siyavosh or Mirza Ahmah khan himself? Etc. Such ever- present, never – finding – definite- answer questions about the story prevent us from gaining a complete knowledge of it, hence always leaving us lacking certainty about its meaning(s).

For a nihilist, Since s/he has chosen to read the story allegorically, both the character's epistemological uncertainty about their world, and the reader's epistemological uncertainty about the meaning of the story as a text indicate and mirror his/her epistemological uncertainty about the meaning of the universe itself as well as of his/her existence in it. The multitude of understanding questions which overwhelm the reader while trying to read the story can be said to represent human beings "great recurring questions" (p.77) about the nature, and purpose of their existence, questions for which no generally – accepted, totally satisfying answers have been found yet. Crosby's nihilism in modern life is seen in this story through the unknowingness and dark point of man's life.

2.5 Argument Related to Human Kind's Futile Existence in *Three Drops of Blood*

Perhaps the clearest part of the story which confirms the idea of the absurdity of human life is seen through reiterating the futility of any search for life's meaning. Mirza Ahmad khan, while narrating of his useless endeavors to discover the purpose or/and meaning of human life. In the following statement, he includes his futile quest for the meaning of life.

The deep blue sky, the green garden, flowers blossoming on the hill; a soft breeze carries their scent. But what's the good! I can no longer enjoy anything. All these are good for poets and children and the kind of people who remains children till the end of their lives.

Hedayat's fiction is a vaguely disturbing parable of the nihilism which absurdism affirm is so closely conjoined with futility of man's life in the world. *Three Drops of Blood* participates in the fatalistic, philosophically sad, and pessimistic end of the life of man in the world.

3. FINDINGS

This study is written with the aim of first, showing the philosophical theme of nihilism as a common subject matter in the two selected works from world literature, and second showing the extent to which they draw on common nihilistic arguments or themes to support their overarching thesis of absurdity.

As inferred from the analytical parts, the two texts under discussion in this study- despite their being the product of totally different places, cultures, languages and partly different times – are similar concerned with nihilism as a philosophical literary theme. What is more, although each work tends to support its nihilism through a certain set of nihilistic arguments or themes, such sets overlap

some places, which further strengthen the idea of the two work's thematic affinity in terms of their treating nihilism.

Considering, one important general result of this study can be the fact that nihilism-as a philosophical literary theme- should not be sought for as an individual or isolated theme in literary texts, but it should be regarded as the explicit manifestation of a possible set or series of underlying arguments or themes, which -remembering all the materials are involved in evitable interrelations.

Comparing the results of the analyses in these literary works proves the fact that the two have a noticeably close affinity in terms of both their containing and their dealing with the philosophical theme of nihilism. A comparative look at these works shows that the philosophical concept of nihilism is a dominant theme in both *Endgame* and *Three Drops of Blood*. Surprisingly enough, the two texts resort to very similar reasons to support their thesis of absurdity. Firstly, both draw on arguments concerning temporal existence: their highly common area on their respect is their preoccupation with death as the final point of human existence. In both of these works, their similarly negative behavior towards (the concept of) death, which is in agreement with the overarching theme of nihilism in them. Like *End game* in which death is as the final point of life, *Three Drops of Blood* allows the reader to infer a negative critical behavior toward death.

NOTE

“Venn - diagram, according” to the concise Oxford Dictionary is “a diagram representing mathematical or logical sets as circles, common elements of the sets being represented by intersections of the circles”. In other words, Venn - diagram is “used to show areas of overlap between [two] or among [more than two] elements. “The term has been named after the English logician, John Venn (1834-1923). The following two diagrams show those

according to which this dissertation discusses the above mentioned overlaps.

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