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Play by samuel beckett summary

Edit Jump to: An exploration of the philosopher Berkeley's dictum that "to be is to be perceived", from Samuel Beckett's only screenplay, originally written for Buster Keaton. It looks like we don't have a Synopsis for this title yet. Be the first to contribute! Just click the "Edit page" button at the bottom of the page or learn more in the Synopsis submission guide. 1. Introduction 2. Beckett's Catastrophe – a play about power and impotency 2.1 A close reading of Catastrophe as a "parable of Man and Satan" 2.3 The political dimension of Catastrophe 2.4 Beckett's "Theatre of Power" and the Foucauldian "Gaze of Surveillance" 3. Conclusion Bibliography [...] die Hölle, das sind die andern.[1] 1 Introduction Early in 1982, Samuel Beckett was one of the first writers to respond to an invitation from the Association Internationale de Défense des Artistes (AIDA) for contributions of works to show support for Václav Havel, the Czech playwright who was serving a prison sentence for his dissident activities. In 1979 Havel had been sentenced by the Czechoslovak communist regime to four and a half years imprisonment for subversion. He was co-founder and spokesman of the Charter 77 initiative as well as a member of the Czech Committee for the Defence of the Unjustly Persecuted (VONS). Shocked to hear that Havel had been forbidden to write, which must have "seemed the ultimate oppression" [2], Beckett wrote Catastrophe [3] and dedicated the play to Havel. It was first performed as part of 'Une nuit pour Václav Havel' at the Avignon Theatre Festival in July 1982. [4] Knowlson, referring to Beckett's refusal to employ didactic impulses in his writing, mentions that Beckett sometimes regretted his incapability "to write anything that dealt overtly with politics" [5], but the biographer also asserts that Beckett utterly rejected political implications in his writing. [6] However, with the invitation of AIDA, he could show his solidarity with a "victimized, imprisoned fellow writer" [7] who took a courageous stand against abuses of human rights. Nonetheless, a political reading of Catastrophe is grounded on the victimization of the Protagonist by the dictatorial Director. The play has also been identified as a "parable of Man and Satan" (see 2.2). In his biography Damned to Fame. The Life of Samuel Beckett, Knowlson argues that the play has also been related to Beckett's "own horror of self-exposure, and linked to the essentially exhibitionistic nature of theatre." [8] However, on the whole, Catastrophe exemplifies the workings of power upon the individual. The concept of power and disempowerment adds a perspective to the play that is inherent in all the interpretations of Catastrophe. Thus there is a crucial affinity between Foucault's philosophy and Beckett's work. Similarly to Foucault's notion that the self is not given to us, and that therefore "we have to create ourselves as a work of art" [9], Beckett's act of writing is also an act of self-creation and implies "a site of resistance against whatever it is that imposes the failure and impotence to which he habitually refers."[10] 2 Beckett's Catastrophe – a play about the staging of a play and therefore its compositional principle is, like in the novel-within-the-novel, the 'Chinese-box-structure'.[11] It is a play about a dress rehearsal for the final scene of a drama. Therefore Libera, amongst other critics, [12] has indicated that 'catastrophe' is used in its more technical, theatrical sense as the word retains its original ancient Greek meaning (kata =down; strophien =turn), namely "the final event of a dramatic action, especially of a tragedy." [13] The catastrophe completes the unraveling of the plot in a play and as such offers a solution to or conclusion of the conflictus. [14] Thus, because 'catastrophe as well as it is itself a catastrophe in the Greek sense as a synonym for dénouement and, thus, the downward shift of the protagonist's fortunes. There are only four characters involved in Beckett's short play: A Director of a theatre (D), his female Assistant (A), the Protagonist (P) of the play that is being rehearsed, and Luke (L), an electrician who is in charge of the lighting but who does not appear on stage. The Director and his Assistant put the final touches on the Protagonist, until the Director is satisfied that the representation of (P) as a catastrophe is "in the bag".[15] The Director sits in an armchair to the left of the stage and wears a fur coat and matching head-covering. The Assistant wears a white overall, has no hat on but a pencil on her ear so as to make notes of what Director suggests for the appearance of Protagonist. In the middle of the stage stands Protagonist on a square black block; he is clothed with a black dressing-gown that reaches down to his ankles. Moreover, he is bare-footed, his head is bowed and he has his hands in his pockets. "D and A contemplate P."[16] Director acts like a dictator as he barks orders to his assistant and reacts impatiently to her suggestions. He is filled with self-importance, does not accept other opinions, having a preconceived idea of the image that Protagonist should represent. Furthermore, he is obviously in a hurry as he frequently checks his chronometer during the rehearsal. While he transforms Protagonist into the image of a catastrophe respectively for the catastrophe (in the Greek sense), he focuses on the clawlike hands and the amount of flesh he wants to be displayed. The Director and his assistant speak in a distanced, unemotional, matter-of-fact-like language about the different parts of Protagonist's body: skull, cranium, crippled hands (fibrous degeneration).[17] So Protagonist's individuality is reduced to his outer appearance. He does not utter a word and remains immobile throughout the play; after all, it is Director's orders and Assistant's actions that transform his body, whereas he does nothing of his own free will – at least not until the end of the play. Protagonist is a human column, as it were, he looks like a sculpture and is designed by Director to produce the predetermined effect. As Assistant timidly suggests a "little gag" for Protagonist, Director tears her to pieces: "For God's sake! This craze for explicitation! Every i dotted to death! Little gag! For God's sake!"[18] Gontarski indicates that the play exhibits a conflict between revelation and concealment, as on the one hand the Director wants more and more exposure, yet on the other hand objects to "this craze for explicitation".[19] The Assistant's suggestion to let Protagonist raise his head produces a similar answer. Not "a trace of face" must show. So P is an inert, faceless and motionless object, a victim to feed the sadistic appetite of the audience. [20] The exposing and whitening of more and more flesh draws attention to P's mere materiality. Furthermore, Protagonist's transition from black to white and his joined hands make him appear as a martyr or saint.[21] White is either "not yet a colour" or the absolute combination of all colours of the spectrum of light. On the one hand, the symbolism of white connotes human innocence in Paradise, that is to say man in his primordial state; on the other hand, it is a symbol for the final aim of purification/purgation of man, when the state of innocence is re-established (that is after confession). Yet white has also negative qualities since it is the colour of death. [22] Combined with the exposing of flesh – Director suggests "Could do with more nudity", so Assistant rolls up to below knee the trouser-legs and undoes the top buttons of the pyjamas [23] –, it seems as if innocence was the symbolic inscription of the Protagonist. Nudity is the paradisal state of man before his fall from innocence. Therefore it also connotes the original state of man, without any socially or hierarchically distinguishing features through clothing. In many initiation rites, the candidate is nude and thus reminded of his original state after birth. [24] In addition to the symbolism of "white" and "nudity", Protagonist has his hands joined at chest-level, which recalls the imagery of martyrdom. However, Protagonist's innocent and sacrificial appearance is not only a critique of the myth of God, of art in general, and of social hierarchies. As for the language, States writes that "nothing in it [the play] serves only a local or a descriptive purpose; everything calls into 'play' its other, thus allowing us to speak, figuratively, of there being two plays in one (just as we can eventually speak of two audiences)."[25] The words Beckett applies carry worlds in their sounds, and therefore the "assault on the soul [...] is logo-rhythmic – overall, an odd syncopation of exoteric language. Idioms render the speech impersonal, "the speech of others into which 'one' disappears", thus implying the "security of class membership." [27] Exclamations as, for instance, "Lovely!" or "Terrific", indicate that one is in possession of one's world. The silenced Protagonist thus forms a crude contrast. On the other hand, there is the "vocabulary of science and formal discourse", lending a "clinical objectivity" to the rehearsal proceedings. Moreover, the Assistant's notes signify an accumulation of data and control, just as empiric science controls experiments and takes notes to confirm a thesis or to make investigations for statistics. [28] In the end of Beckett's Catastrophe, the most simple gesture expresses the possibility of transcendence: Protagonist raises his head and fixes the audience, defying the role in which he had been cast. The response of the canned applause fades out and gives way to P's encounter with the live audience, as he negates the drama that has shaped him. However, it remains doubtful if this gesture is an indication of independent will. Knowlson maintains that the awakening of P is a reassertion of his humanity and individuality, yet it is questionable if his is a conscious act of resistance against the status of impotent suffering. Knowlson speaks of a "single, vestigial, yet compelling movement"[29], thus the possibility of conscious rebellion is toned down. The illusion of Protagonist's objectness is dispelled, but he does not become a dominating subject. With the destruction of the scene, he becomes a living question confronting the audience, so the internally designed catastrophe turns out to be a catastrophe confronting the audience. The ending of the play lets the audience reflect its subjectivity and its sameness. Each individual viewer becomes aware of his passive objectness. [...] [1] Sartre, Jean-Paul: Geschlossene Gesellschaft. (Orig. Huis clos). Trans. Traugott König. Hamburg: Rowohlt, 1991, p. 59. [2] Knowlson, James: Damned to Fame. The Life of Samuel Beckett. London: Bloomsbury, 1996, p. 678. [3] Beckett, Samuel: Catastrophe. In: Collected shorter plays, London: Fame. The Life of Samuel Beckett. London: Bloomsbury, 1996, p. 677. [5] Ibid., p. 678. [6] Cf. ibid., p. 678. [7] Ibid., p. 678. [8] Ibid., p. 678. [8] Ibid., p. 679. [9] Quoted in: Guest, Michael: "Beckett and Foucault: Some Affinities." In: Central Japan English Studies Vol. 15 (1996), p. 66. [11] See e.g. Imhof, Rüdiger: Contemporary Metafiction. A Poetological Study of Metafiction in English since 1939. Heidelberg: Carl Winter Universitätsverlag, 1986. Pp. 225f. [12] See e.g. Knowlson, James: Damned to Fame. The Life of Samuel Beckett. London: Bloomsbury, 1996, p. 826, footnote no. 106. [13] Libera, Antoni: "Beckett's Catastrophe." In: Modern Drama, September 1985, p. 341. [14] Cf. Britannica online. Vers. 1999-2001. Encyclopaedia Britannica. 14th May 2001 [15] Catastrophe, p. 297-301. [18] Catastrophe, p. 299. [19] Gontarski, S. E.: The Intent of Undoing in Samuel Beckett's Dramatic Texts. Bloomington: Indiana. University Press, 1985, p. 181. [20] States finds that Beckett's play is neither a political nor a protest play, but a play about the making of a Havel", and that Beckett has linked the theme of "human victimization" to the paradox of theatre preparing "unpleasant subjects for the pleasure of its audience." States, Bert O.: "Catastrophe: Beckett's Laboratory / Theatre." In: Modern Drama 30 (1987), p. 14. [21] In a footnote, Knowlson suggests that the Protagonist reminds of the "praying, stone-like figures in a Mantegna painting. Behind Beckett's image [...] lie centuries of an iconography of a martyred Christ or martyred saints." Knowlson, James: Damned to Fame. The Life of Samuel Beckett. London: Bloomsbury, 1996, p. 826, footnote no. 108. [22] See "weiß", Knaurs Lexikon der Symbole. Augsburg: Weltbild Verlag, 2000, p. 480. [23] Catastrophe, p. 300. [24] See "Nacktheit", Knaurs Lexikon der Symbole. Augsburg: Weltbild Verlag, 2000, p. 480. [23] Catastrophe, p. 300. [24] See "Nacktheit", Knaurs Lexikon der Symbole. Augsburg: Weltbild Verlag, 2000, p. 480. [25] Catastrophe, p. 300. [26] See "Nacktheit", Knaurs Lexikon der Symbole. Augsburg: Weltbild Verlag, 2000, p. 480. [27] Catastrophe, p. 300. [28] See "Nacktheit", Knaurs Lexikon der Symbole. Augsburg: Weltbild Verlag, 2000, p. 480. [28] Catastrophe, p. 300. [28] See "Nacktheit", Knaurs Lexikon der Symbole. Augsburg: Weltbild Verlag, 2000, p. 480. [28] Catastrophe, p. 300. [28] See "Nacktheit", Knaurs Lexikon der Symbole. Augsburg: Weltbild Verlag, 2000, p. 480. [28] Catastrophe, p. 300. [28] See "Nacktheit", Knaurs Lexikon der Symbole. Augsburg: Weltbild Verlag, 2000, p. 480. [28] Catastrophe, p. 300. [28] See "Nacktheit", Knaurs Lexikon der Symbole. Augsburg: Weltbild Verlag, 2000, p. 480. [28] Catastrophe, p. 300. [28] See "Nacktheit", Knaurs Lexikon der Symbole. Augsburg: Weltbild Verlag, 2000, p. 480. [28] See "Nacktheit", Knaurs Lexikon der Symbole. Augsburg: Weltbild Verlag, 2000, p. 480. [28] See "Nacktheit", Knaurs Lexikon der Symbole. Augsburg: Weltbild Verlag, 2000, p. 480. [28] See "Nacktheit", Knaurs Lexikon der Symbole. Augsburg: Weltbild Verlag, 2000, p. 480. [28] See "Nacktheit", Knaurs Lexikon der Symbole. Augsburg: Weltbild Verlag, 2000, p. 480. [28] See "Nacktheit", Knaurs Lexikon der Symbole. Augsburg: Weltbild Verlag, 2000, p. 480. [28] See "Nacktheit", Knaurs Lexikon der Symbole. Augsburg: Weltbild Verlag, 2000, p. 480. [28] See "Nacktheit", Knaurs Lexikon der Symbole. Augsburg: Weltbild Verlag, 2000, p. 480. [28] See "Nacktheit", Knaurs Lexikon der Symbole. Augsburg: Weltbild Verlag, 2000, p. 480. [28] See "Nacktheit", Knaurs Lexikon d 2000, p. 301. [25] States, Bert O.: "Catastrophe: Beckett's Laboratory / Theatre." In: Modern Drama 30 (1987), p. 15. [27] Ibid. [28] Ibid., p. 16. [29] Knowlson, James: Damned to Fame. The Life of Samuel Beckett London: Bloomsbury, 1996, p. 679. [my emphasis, DE]

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