

After the bomb hsc english 2012



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

TRIAL FINISHED (but) “ There are certain events of such social significance that they rock the foundations of our world. ” To what extent does your study of the elective “ After the Bomb” support the given statement? In your response, you must make reference to the play “ Waiting for Goddot’ and two texts of your own choosing. If you so wish, you may use Plath as a second prescribed text but you will still need to write about two additional texts.

Particular events have such broad and long-lasting ramifications for our society that they shake the very pillars upon which our world is built. The dropping of the atomic bomb upon Hiroshima and Nagasaki was one such event. The very foundations of our society - traditional philosophical concepts such as totalising metanarratives, absolute truth and the purposefulness and rationality of life - were shaken by contestation fuelled by the uncertainty that was generated by the absolute destructive power of the atomic bomb.

The uncertainty generated by this cataclysmic event also gave rise to the aggression, paranoia and irrationality that drove the Cold War - a conflict which rocked the foundations of our world by threatening it’s annihilation in a nuclear apocalypse. The social significance of the unbelievably destructive nature of the atomic bomb resonates throughout the post-WW2 era, most blatantly through the Cold War between American and the USSR.

This era saw the development of new philosophical movements, such as existentialism, which arose largely due to the uncertainty generated by the dropping of the atomic bomb, and questioned fundamental assumptions such as totalising metanarratives and a meaningful, purposeful universe. In

the words of philosopher Jean-Paul Sartre “ Man is nothing else but what he makes of himself. ” The uncertainty that underpins the entire way of thinking of the Cold War period gave rise to dramatic traditions which embodied this uncertainty to its’ fullest extent, namely, the Theatre of the Absurd.

One of the seminal playwrights for this genre, Eugene Ionesco, expressed his ideology thusly: “ Cut off from his religious, metaphysical, and transcendental roots, man is lost; all his actions become senseless, absurd, useless. ” This postmodern dramatic form undermines the underpinning certainties of our world, and this contestation arose from the dropping of the nuclear bomb. Two of the most significant plays of this genre are Samuel Beckett’s 1953 masterpiece “ Waiting For Godot” and Harold Pinter’s “ The Dumb Waiter,” first performed in 1957.

Some events are of such great social significance that they destabilise the very foundations of our world. One such foundation was the totalising metanarratives that defined the social structure of the world in the modernist era and before, particularly the religious metanarrative. Lucky’s speech in “ Waiting For Godot” challenges the foundational traditional philosophical assumption that it is possible to adhere to a, in the words of Jeffrey Nealon, “ metanarrative which links together all moments in history within a single, continuous metaphorical system. The juxtaposition of reference to a “ personal God” with the nonsensical linguistic construction “ quaquaquaqu” satirises the veracity of the religious metanarrative. This notion is furthered through the allusion to religious and philosophical authority in the phrase “ Bishop Berkeley,” which is ridiculed through garbled version of the Latin assertion that “ to be is to be perceived/esse est

percio" : " Essy in Possy" of Testew and Cunard". By challenging the validity of the religious metanarrative, Beckett simultaneously challenges one of the foundations of our world.

This contestation of one of the foundations of our world in response to the cataclysmic disturbance wreaked upon the world through the dropping of the atomic bomb attests to the social significance of that event. The era following the dropping of the atomic bomb is characterised by an atmosphere of uncertainty and paranoia, and it is this atmosphere which led to the foundations of our world being challenged. In WFG, Beckett examined the use of ideology to perpetuate exploitative relationships, which is realised in the relationship between Pozzo and Lucky.

Pozzo is clearly abusive towards Lucky, as seen through the repetition of the stage direction " He [Pozzo] jerks the rope. " The rope is a symbol of Lucky's servitude, a servitude which renders him a puppet who does not recognise his potential to be free from Pozzo's narrative of power and hierarchy, a narrative that Becket suggests has no external reference point beyond Pozzo's self-interest. This is shown through Lucky's irrational compliance " Why he [Lucky] doesn't make himself comfortable?... he doesn't want to.

There's reasoning for you. " The reference to reason is subversive, as Lucky's actions are inherently irrational. This suggests that the underpinning ideologies, such as traditional power heirarchies, which form the basis of our world, are flawed. This exemplifies the social significance of the dropping of the atomic bomb, as this event was the catalyst for the contestation of the foundations of our world. There are particular events of such social significance that their reverberations shake the foundations of our world.

In the post-WW2 era, the conception of language as unstable and unreliable reflects the large-scale contestation of the traditional conception of an absolute truth - a cornerstone of our world. This uncertainty about the nature of 'truth' is reflected in the word play, punning and miscommunication that are features of the dialogue in both WFG and TDW- after all, humans ascertain truth through language, and yet language is indistinct. In WFT, subversion of polite and predictable discourse is a technique that explores the indeterminacy of language. Do you remember the story? /No/ Shall I tell it to you? /No. " This draws attention to the artificial nature of language, which in turn invites the viewer to ponder the inability to ascertain truth. In TDW, the veracity of language is undermined through wordplay. " How can you light a kettle? /It's a figure of speech! /I think you've got it wrong. They say put on the kettle. " Here, the deliberate misunderstanding of clichés draws attention to the hollowness of language.

The indeterminacy of language is furthered through the WFG dialogue " Looks to me more like a bush/a shrub/a bush. " Similarly, the dialogue in TDW builds upon this theme. " Kaw! /Eh, Ben. /Kaw! /Ben. " These pointless discussions draw attention to the meaninglessness of language and therefore the meaninglessness of life. In these post-modern texts, language is being manipulated so as to highlight the its' arbitrary nature. As soon as we see language as a construct devoid of clear meaning, the foundational concept of absolute truth is challenged.

Thus, the uncertainty fuelled by the dropping of the nuclear bomb rocked the foundations of our world. The Cold War was a heightened state of political tension and military rivalry throughout the " After the Bomb" period that

teetered on the edge of open warfare between America and the USSR. This conflict revolved around the threat of nuclear warfare, as can be seen from the Cuban Missile Crisis - a crisis which, in the words of Gorge O'Rourke, "pushed mankind to the brink of annihilation...[which] fundamentally altered humanity's perception of the world. Unsurprisingly, this threat - and the memories of Hiroshima and Nagasaki -gave rise to the anxiety which permeated the era. In Winston Churchill's iconic 1946 speech " Sinews of Peace," he was speaking just at the end of the Second World War when the utter destruction caused by nuclear weaponry were fresh in the world's consciousness. " We have genuflected before the god of science only to find that it has given us the atomic bomb, producing fears and anxieties that science can never mitigate. This iconic statement from Martin Luther King identifies the dropping of the atomic bomb as an event that fundamentally challenged the foundations of our world. Throughout the speech, Churchill's diction is motivated by fear when he describes the USSR. Phrases such as " iron curtain" and " the shadow which.... falls upon the world," with their use of negative imagery, reveal the anxiety that is a key feature of the post-WW2 era. Churchill also spoke on the importance of reason: " It is necessary that constancy of mind... the grand simplicity of decision shall guide...our conduct. This discourse espouses reason, but the primacy of reason is undermined through subsequent assertions that are inherently irrational. An example of this irrationality is the duality in ideology regrading peace/aggression, as Churchill subtly espouses aggression as the means to lasting peace. This can be seen in his proposed defence against nuclear hostility from other nations: " so formidable a superiority as to impose effective deterrents upon its [nuclear weaponry] employment, or threat of

employment, by others. Here, the phrase 'effective deterrents' is a euphemism for a policy of ensuring peace through the accrual of military strength, which is an inherently irrational argument, as the adoption of the policy of armament by the United States can only be reciprocated by a similar policy by the USSR. This inadvertent subversion of reason is indicative of the prevalence of paranoid irrationality in Cold War ideological systems, systems which sought to socialise the populace into accepting the necessity of an arms race founded on paranoia, aggression and the demonization of the politically constructed 'other' - in this case, the USSR.

This ideology arose in response to the dropping of the atomic bomb, attesting to the fact that it was an event of such social significance that it rocked the foundations of our world by threatening its' very survival. The anxiety generated by the dropping of the atomic bomb shaped the ways of thinking of the Cold War Era, a period which saw both an amplification of the militaristic values that underpinned the dropping of the first nuclear bomb, as espoused by Churchill, as well as a cultural backlash against such values - seen in the poetry of Sylvia

Plath. Plath herself stated: "the rationalizations of defence and making peace by killing and maiming for decades is crazy." In Plath's poetry, militarism is intrinsically linked to patriarchy, and Plath's rejection of these ideological systems is alluded to in the poem "Daddy" through the depiction of fascism, exemplified by recurring references to Nazi Germany: "Aryan eye...panzer-man.... swastika...Meienkampf look. Plath links militarism to patriarchy in the line: "Every women adores a Fascist, the boot in the face" In which the juxtaposition of affection and violence: 'adores'/'boot in the

face’ suggests both the masochism evident when the female complies with patriarchal aggression and the inherent militarism underlying this philosophy and is calculated to make the responder recoil from such ideologies.

The tone of defiance in the concluding line: “Daddy, daddy, you bastard, I’m through,” asserts Plath’s powerful rejection of the patriarchal narrative – and, by extension, the paranoid irrationality and militarism pervading society in the After the Bomb period. As a direct result of the socially devastating effects of the use of nuclear weaponry and aggression in the Cold War era, many felt a profound disillusionment with dominant ideologies. This can be seen in Plath’s 1962 poem “Fever 103,” which challenges the morality of a society which endorses the proliferation and use of nuclear weaponry – as seen at Hiroshima and Nagasaki.

The title “Fever 103” is an allusion to the fever induced by radiation poisoning, and in the opening stanza a subversion of pagan imagery suggests that Hades itself would be too tepid to purge the culpability of the western establishment at the time of the poem’s composition: “The tongues of hell are dull, dull as the triple tongues of Cerberus...Incapable of licking clean the auguey tendon.” Here, the reference to the “auguey tendon” employs the personal metaphor of a raging fever to capture the idea of a public guilt more intense than the fires of hell.

Plath also expresses a profound disillusionment with the Christian narrative of purity and reward in her parodic representation of the speaker as a ‘pure’ virgin rising to heaven in the manner of the Virgin Mary of Catholic faith. As Robin Peel has commented, “the speaker becomes a parody of Mary, celebrating an assumption which is part baroque painting, part cookery

program, and part rocket launch”, an idea illustrated by the distorted use of Christian iconography in the line: “ I am going up I think I may rise...I am a pure acetylene Virgin attended by roses. ” The reference to the chemical ‘ acetylene’, used to make plastic, is an anachronistic image in the context of the virgin Mary, serving to undercut the idea of ‘ pur[ity]’. Certain events have such broad and long-lasting ramifications for our society that they rock the foundations of our world. The dropping of the atomic bomb was one such event, as the uncertainty generated by the absolute destructive power of the bomb led many to question the likelihood of the continued existence of our world.

More profoundly, this anxiety rocked the certainty invested in metanarratives, and other key philosophical assumptions such as a purposeful and rational universe and the concept of absolute truth. Thus, the dropping of the atomic bomb was an event of such social importance that it not only rocked the foundations of the world through the threat of nuclear obliteration, it also destabilised the underpinning philosophical assumptions upon which our world was founded.