

## ENGLISH EXTENSION 1

“Texts reflect the emerging attitudes of their times”

**How do the texts you have chosen (‘The Lives of Others’ and ‘The Children of Men’) and the core text, ‘Waiting for Godot’, explore social, political, religious and cultural ways of thinking in the time period after the bomb?**

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Various literature and artistic works developed ensuing, and even after the time period known as ‘After the Bomb’ have reflected the emerging attitudes of society toward an array of socio-cultural, political, religious and philosophical ideologies. Works associated with this time period are directly influenced by the various ideals present throughout the time; whether they are directly or indirectly commenting on the ways of thinking. Such texts as *Waiting for Godot* by Samuel Beckett, *The Lives of Others* directed by Florian von Donnersmarck, and *The Children of Men* by P.D. James explore certain elements of the evolution of socio-cultural, political, religious and philosophical ideologies expressed during the time period ‘After the Bomb’. The composers investigate these ideologies through a selection of textual features and forms appropriate to their texts to convey the ways of thinking during the time period.

*Waiting for Godot* by Samuel Beckett epitomises the essence of philosophical questioning and religious ideologies present during the time period known as after the bomb. Beckett presents numerous existential ideas within his Absurdist work, and in the process, rejects all sense of rational reality. Also, declining religious attendances due to the questioning of how God could allow such horrors of war to take place led to the uncertainty of humanity’s purpose. Beckett uses deliberate pathological dialogue structures through the character Lucky, to highlight the plight of human existence. For example, in Lucky’s outburst in Act One, he says “progress is an illusion, the human condition is irremediable, intellectual achievements are observably inflated and death is omnipresent”. Furthermore, Beckett’s stage directions are repetitive and absurd signifying a lost hope for the purpose of humanity’s existence, [*He takes off his hat, peers inside it, feels about inside it shakes it, puts it on again. ... He takes off his hat again, peers inside it ... peers into it again, puts it on again.*] Here, Beckett is tying the search for meaning to sheer futility; a completely futile exercise.

The characters Vladimir and Estragon represent society. Vladimir the blind believer hoping that his personal saviour will come and Estragon the wandering soul, not waiting for anything in particular, but all the while, waiting. Vladimir and Estragon constantly talk in circumlocution, representing their boredom in waiting for something to give them purpose and direction and while waiting get uselessly distracted. For example, VLADIMIR: What do we do now? ESTRAGON: Wait. VLADIMIR: Yes, but while waiting. ESTRAGON: What about hanging ourselves? VLADIMIR: Hmm. It’d give us an erection!

Beckett’s play also alludes to scriptural references to comment on the idea of sin and salvation. For example, Mr Godot’s messenger, the boy, says that he is a ‘shepherd’ and his brother is a ‘goatherd’, thus, in the Bible, sheep represent those who have been saved from their sins whilst goats represent the damned. However, the audience never sees the boy’s brother; Beckett could possibly drawing the audience’s attention to the fact that no one has even seen what happens to the damned, thereby questioning the need to do good works in one’s life. Vladimir also questions the gospels, pondering why only one of the four gospels mentions the two thieves. This question also comes out of nowhere, Beckett could perhaps be highlighting the inconsistencies within religion, even in the most sacred and official texts, and thereby questioning the basis of which people believe what they believe.

*The Lives of Others* directed by Florian von Donnersmarck in 2006, explores the socio-cultural and political impact of the Communist government in East Berlin before the fall of the Berlin Wall.

Donnersmarck draws particular attention to the hypocrisy of the regime through depicting the class divisions between superior officials and normal comrades within the hierarchy of the Communist Party, a political faction based on the supposed idea of a 'classless' society. Donnersmarck conveys this idea of class division through the emphatic use of dialogue. For example, when in the lunch room Gerd Wiesler, the protagonist, moves to sit at a 'common' table when lunch partner, a superior comrade reminds him that this was not the 'officers' table. Wiesler then responds by saying, "Socialism has to start somewhere". Here Donnersmarck is characterising the protagonist to portray the belief that individuals had in following the system properly; thereby differentiating Wiesler from the rest of the Party.

This idea of hypocrisy is further developed through the use of metaphor to portray sentiments of corruption within the party and again, the inequality amongst the Communist system. Wiesler is firmly told by his superior, Grubitz, after he had reported an affair by the senior Minister of the Party, that no member of the party is allowed to record senior comrades. Wiesler goes on to question this discrepancy by asking Grubitz, "Remember what we swore? To be the shield and sword of the party." Grubitz promptly replies by saying "and what's the party other than its members? If they've got kind of an influence, even better." The way Donnersmarck uses dialogue to convey the hypocrisy of the Communist government in this scene creates a microcosm of how the Communist system worked in society before the fall of the Berlin Wall; a party that stands for the rights of the working class is in essence, the same as a socialist system.

Donnersmarck comments on the eccentric mannerism used by the Communist government through the use of black humour to depict how the regime coerces the entire nation into obedient loyalty by using terror to instill fear in the 'lesser' individual. For example, in the lunch room scene, a low rank employee sitting at the other end of the table from Wiesler and Grubitz, begins telling a joke about a senior comrade just as his friends alert him to the fact that there is a senior official sitting at their table; the comrade immediately stops telling the joke. However, Grubitz encourages him to tell the joke, saying that it is "ok". When the joke has been told, Grubitz tells the employee that he just mocked the party which classifies as political agitation and threatens to report him whilst also emphasising that his career will be over. The scene is dramatically intensified by the sudden turn of Grubitz's façade and the look of sheer terror on the comrade's face. However, the tension is lifted when Grubitz says he was "only joking" and goes on to laugh in a jovial manner, failing to recognise the impact his 'joke' on the comrade. The scene ends with a close up, framed shot of Wiesler; Wiesler's facial expression portrays his deep consideration of what he just witnessed. The gravity of this scene created through the use of cinematography portrays the often cruel abuse of power by the Communist system to manipulate society in their favour and the burden that free will had under an oppressive system.

In further exploring the oppressive nature of the impact that the Communist regime has on society, a clever use of language in the form of a pun is employed. For example, when Dreyman confronts his partner Christa, about having an affair with the Minister, saying repeatedly, "You don't need him". Christa replies by saying, "No, I don't need this scandalous system. You don't need it either, even less than I do. But you're in bed with him too, why? Because they can destroy you too. Because they decide who can act and direct." Christa also refers to not 'ending up like Jerska', a director who was caught being politically incorrect and was ostracised from not only the industry, but from every other aspect of society as well. Here, Donnersmarck reflects the totalitarian nature of the Communist Government in East Berlin; highlighting the outcome not only of defying such a system but also the dependency of an individual's life upon the government.

Through techniques such as intertextuality, characterisation and dramatic irony, Donnersmarck illustrates how knowledge can lead to freedom for the individual even under the rule of an oppressive system. For example, automating dialogue replacement is used to read the text of a Bertolt Brecht anthology; Brecht was a twentieth century Marxist German playwright who explored theatre as a forum for political ideas. As the dialogue is read, the scene created is nostalgic and blissful, leaving Wiesler captivated, thus, portraying the gradual transformation of Wiesler from a pure Communist Stasi instrument to becoming more of an individual.

By placing emphasis on the pivotal moment in Wiesler's transformation, Donnersmarck portrays the development of self thought as a means for uncovering the truth and thereby gaining freedom. This is shown when Georg Dreyman plays a Beethoven piece on the piano and quotes Lenin saying, "I can't listen to this music or I won't be able to finish the revolution", Dreyman then says, "Can someone really listen to this music and be a bad person?" The scene then cuts to Wiesler listening to the bugged apartment through his headphones, completely entranced. The scene then cuts again to Wiesler going up to his apartment in a lift when a boy asks him if he is really a 'Stasi' and further explains that his dad says that "Stasi are bad people who lock people up." Wiesler is shown half way through the sentences of asking for the boy's dad's name, but then stops and instead asks the boy about his ball. Here Donnersmarck is externalising the internal, showing the audience the process of internal reasoning taking its effect outwards whilst reflecting how it can lead to the reclaiming of individual identity.

Set in 2021, *The Children of Men* composed by author P.D James, depicts a dystopian society experiencing universal infertility. James cleverly explores religious and philosophical paradigms through a range of literary techniques.

The post war years saw a mass disillusionment with the established church. Declining attendances meant the power of religious principles in people's lives was increasingly reduced as the desire for exploration of one's personal freedom evolved. In her novel, James explores the idea of a people who have lost faith in any such divine being and have abandoned the search for meaning which has permeated society for so long, and have instead turned to and become dependent on mankind. In the opening chapter, Theo, the protagonist, discusses the nature of society's relationship with "Western science [being their] God" through metaphorical language, personification and simile, whilst also making indirect references to the nature of God as a divine entity. For example, Theo says, "The light will always come on when we press the switch and if it doesn't, we can find out why". This is a clever play on words by James and also obliquely comments on the vain frustration once experienced by believers by the mysteriousness of God. Theo goes on to say, "it has comforted, healed, fed and entertained us and we have felt free to criticize and occasionally reject it as men have always rejected their Gods, but in the knowledge that, despite our apostasy, this deity, our creature and slave, would still provide for us;..". Again, James periphrastically comments on the qualities of a divine God in comparison to science; A divine God demands loyalty and unwavering faith, whereas science, a man made creation has not the ability to demand such things, and so always provides for its 'followers'. However, James then presents the view that their belief in themselves has been the downfall of their civilisation [in regard to being unable to find a cause or cure for universal infertility], "Like a lecherous stud suddenly stricken with impotence, we are humiliated at the very heat of our faith in ourselves". Furthermore, James emphasises the abandonment of spiritual religion through the use of symbolism. The rebellious group named 'The Fishes' say they secretly meet in churches "because they are available and empty". Their cover, if discovered is that they are a group who study the 'old book of Common Prayer'; this is symbolic of how temporal faith can be and how people only turn to God in times of trouble. The issues of philosophy and religion presented in James' novel reflect the time period after the bomb where people moved away from traditional spiritual practices and more toward personal exploration, particularly the medical profession.

The texts, *Waiting for Godot* by playwright Samuel Beckett, *The Lives of Others* by director Florian von Donnersmarck, and *The Children of Men* by author P.D. James, comment, reflect on and question the socio-cultural, religious, philosophical and political ideologies expressed during the time period known as after the bomb to highlight the changed attitudes of society toward such subjects.