

ENGLISH EXTENSION I

Essay: After the Bomb – ‘Waiting for Godot’

As demonstrated through the texts of the period after the bomb; the absurdist play Waiting for Godot, written by Samuel Beckett, the spy fiction novel The Spy who Came in from the Cold by John Le Carre and the related texts; the 1959 Science fiction/disaster film On the Beach directed by Stanley Kramer and the 1955 thriller novel The Quiet American written by Graham Greene, they cover a wide diversity of forms and genres. However, they all engage with the audience on various aspects of the Post World War II era. Each composer addresses social and moral issues such as the individual's life seeming absolutely meaningless and offer paradoxical views of the community and the individual. Existential and pessimistic questioning of humanity is represented through each form, the creators addressing personal and political concerns of the period, incorporating anxiety, uncertainty and optimism.

Struggle and a vision of continuation of the conditions of ruin, violence and inhumane cruelty and crimes of war, was a dominant idea during the Cold War period. Beckett used the form of an absurdist play to address this emotion and to confront the audience that human life is essentially pointless. The play opened in 1953 and presented the audience with existentialist ideas on human suffering and survival, engaging with personal and political concerns of the Cold War era. The rise of communism is contextualised through the play and serves as a frightening metaphor of the black nature of life. Beckett communicated this especially through the main characters Vladimir and Estragon who struggle with meaninglessness and the world of nothing. The repetitive ‘rhizome’ cycle of the script, such as the lines concluding Act 1 and Act 2, “Well, shall we go?” “Yes, lets go” “(They do not move)”, creates a thematic alignment with a pessimistic view on life as repetition and habit, showing the moral issue of finding a motive for existence. The constant notion of waiting, shown through the repetition “We’re waiting for Godot”, makes the audience conscious of the passing of time and creates the illusion of slowing time down confronting the social questioning of what exists beyond time. Furthermore, it shapes the Cold War feeling of alienation and destruction of time and inevitability of death from the very moment of birth, strengthened through the line “The gravedigger puts on his forceps”.

Beckett faces political anxiety of the period after the bomb through the bare and deserted landscape established in the stage settings, “A country road. A tree. Evening” representing the large scale destruction of post WWII as well as the large number of displaced persons. This raised the social question of words and calvary shown through Vladimir and Estragon’s struggle in their waiting and their belief that Godot, who represents an omnipotent being, will save them from their existential angst. While this corresponds to Foucault’s theology where society can not make a decision without a power hand, it also shows that a feeling of hope and security was also important. Lucky’s monologue “a personal god who loves us clearly with some exceptions for reasons unknown but time will tell”, symbolises Pascal’s *miser se l’homme sans Dieu*, which distracts them from the misery of the human condition through hope and faith, paralleling social and moral issues of the Cold War Period through an absurdist form.

The Spy Who Came in from the Cold, written by John Le Carre explores political and ideological conflict of the period after the bomb. Leamas is the representative figure of the individual life and rights without meaning or purpose and Le Carre presents the audience with a moral view that is cynical on the argument that the ends justifies the means. Evocations of building, place and landscape strengthen this existential feeling of the destruction of 19th century structure and order. A coherent and symbolic world is therefore created, employing images of darkness, decrepitude and coldness, creating a sense of loss and absence pointing to the superiority of the past. For example, the post atomic holocaust vision of a world of material and existential ruin is represented through the Berlin Wall, cinematically described in the first Chapter as “a dirty, ugly thing of breezed blocks and

barbed wire". Silence is another technique employed to create cold war alienation and the divided self, shown when Control asks Leamas about Liz, there is "a very long silence" followed by "another silence".

The "cold" serves as a grim irony in Le Carre's spy fiction novel because it alludes to the settings, emotions and situation of Leamas. Leamas is representative of the anti hero, a film noir technique and he is without political ideology, "I believe an 11 bus will take me to Hammersmith", a political issue of the period after the bomb as Le Carre recognised "various paradoxes by which we live". The morality of social and political concerns of the period is shown through the alcoholism and financial trouble of Leamas, a motif of the individual of the Cold war era. The uncertainty of the period, both politically and socially is mirrored through Le Carre's manipulation of the audience throughout the plot line and the expendability of Leamas, shown through the line "a blinded bull in the arena". This is furthered through the constant imagery of the car weaving through the Lorries filled with "smiling children", a metaphor of the ideologies of Russia and the Middle East crashing together, heightened at the final chapter when the "little car" crashed into the enormity of the Berlin Wall. However, Le Carre shows Leamas' need for connection and trust through his relationship with Liz Gold, "the caring about little things – the faith in ordinary life; that simplicity", an individual need during the Cold War period.

Stanley Kramer's science fiction/disaster film, On the Beach, was as historian Susan Sontag identified "the imagination of disaster", highlighting the social fears and anxieties, of the period after the bomb, namely the threat of human extinction and the atomic holocaust. The film responded to these fears through the dystopian setting of atomic radiation fallout, underlined with a small hope for survival through depicting Australia as the only uncontaminated country due to its isolated location. The character Mary, a young wife and mother, reflects society's existential fears with Kramer's use of an extreme close up on her and her newborn child "getting indoors and into bed to die". The struggle for existence is also explored through the characterisation of Julian Osborn representing the British Scientists who helped build the nuclear bombs. Osborn identifies the doomed fate of the world and his regret for participating in a single wide angle shot, showing the effect of alienation and lament. Through the form of a film, Kramer is able to confront the audience with the political and social concerns of the post atomic holocaust and the fear of human extinction. The solemn soundtrack used as well as the slow panning shots of a deserted landscape effectively warns the audience of the consequences accompanying monopolistic powers.

Like other texts, On the Beach maintains a hopeful outlook showing that optimism is a crucial part of the cold war period, through the characterisation of brave and patriotic naval officers who search the contaminated regions of America after hearing an unidentified SOS signal. The group shots of attentive and determined officers, comforts the audience in showing the hope of survival. Like the characters, the audience is unaware of the Coca Cola bottle pressing against the signal, reflecting the hope of survival. Escapism is an element used through the development of the 'suicide pill', giving the audience an option of no longer suffering, however, the film focuses greatly on redemption and blame is not a dominant theme. Instead the film re-united the human race as "Brothers", through positive scenes such as the beach and the soundscape of children playing.

The Quiet American, written by Graham Greene is set in French colonial Vietnam in the 1930s, but serves as a powerful metaphor for the social and political concerns of the Cold War Period. Narrated by Fowler, the 1955 thriller novel follows his career as a British correspondent reporting the progress of the fighting between several warring factions trying to take over the government. The text serves as a political parable of the destruction of structure and order because of an ideological clash, defined by different aspirations, needs and history, shown through Pyle's beliefs "You shouldn't be against York, you should be against the French. Their colonialism." Greene shows this by employing the characters as representatives of their nations and political divisions. For example, Phuong is paralleled to Vietnam, seen as an exotic country in need of saving, Fowler represents those who seem to have a passing interest in the country, and Pyle is America portrayed as wanting to take everything for himself. Greene therefore portrays a dark, dystopian view of the

world furthered by his emphasis on espionage inefficiency, corruption and double agents of the 1950s, establishing a context for the spy fiction of Le Carre. Like Leamas, Fowler is portrayed as an anti hero with no political views, “I believe my back’s against this wall. I believe there’s a sten gun over there”. He can also be seen as a representative of society through his desperate attempts at escaping the conflict. His Opium addiction serves as a powerful metaphor for the need to feel an extended period of relaxation and freedom from anxiety and pain.

Greene uses pragmatism devices to connect the audience to the reality of the Cold War. For example, Pyle, an idealised American argues that suppression of the ‘lesser race’ is needed because of their colonialism; however Fowler introduces the harsh reality, “the French are dying every day – that’s not a mental concept”. Greene uses social and individual alienation to effectively warn the audience of the consequences accompanying ideological conflict. He does this through the language of his text, using phrases which concentrate on action and doing based on reason not emotion, reflecting this uncertainty. However, like each text, subtle irony illustrates positive aspects of Fowler’s move from Britain to Vietnam. Like Leamas, Fowler finds comfort in his love and affection towards Phuong a Vietnamese orphan and at times of hardship, moments between them are explored showing that while social and political alienation and paranoia were at the heart of the period after the bomb, it is underlined by comfort and optimism.

In conclusion, while texts of the Cold War period cover a wide diversity of forms and genres shown through the explored texts of an absurdist play, a spy fiction novel, a spy fiction/disaster film and a thriller novel, they all offer various views and factors of the period. Each composer addresses social and moral issues both affecting the individual and the society, such as existential and pessimistic questioning of humanity incorporating anxiety, uncertainty and optimism.