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VÁCLAV HAVEL: ABSURD TRAGEDIAN

A study into the influence of tragedy and absurdism on Václav Havel's plays from
1963-1989

By

HUW MELLISH

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School of Classics, Ancient History, and Archaeology
College of Arts and Law
University of Birmingham
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PROLOGUE

In the *Poetics*, Aristotle writes that a tragic hero is a complex being, who must be balanced just right between “decent” and “wicked”. He says that ‘decent men’ should not be seen to fall upon ‘bad fortune’ as this would evoke ‘disgust’.¹ Similarly nor should a ‘wicked person’ be seen to fall upon good fortune because this would not be tragic, but ‘agreeable’.² Therefore, the tragic hero must be a man with the potential to be “decent” but, due to the flaws in his character, cannot be.

I read a news report that told of a married 27-year-old woman who was killed along with her unborn baby whilst driving her car. My initial reaction was to proclaim: 'That's so tragic'. This story, however, is not, in the Aristotelian sense, “tragic”.

One must consider the man who met, fell in love with, and married the woman, and with her decided to have a baby, and is now left widowed and childless. This is a man who goes through a substantial loss of being. After the accident he is stripped of all that identity, he becomes a single man with no family. The situation is not an Aristotelian “tragedy”, as there is no evidence that the man did something wrong to cause the crash, such as somehow be responsible for the other motorist to drive dangerously. Instead, in a morbid sense, the whole thing could be seen as absurd. The sheer horror of the event, the fact that a man who had everything now has nothing, reflects the absurdity of life. In that humanity consistently strives for that ideal life, the ideal house, the ideal partner, the ideal car *et cetera*, despite both the unfeasibility of it and the fact that it can so easily be taken away.

So, to cry instinctively ‘That's so tragic’ upon hearing such a news story is not correct. As Aristotle says, such a story is not tragic for there is no pleasure to be taken from it, therefore it must be beyond tragic. Consequently, what is tragedy in the modern age? What form does it take? Do Aristotle’s beliefs stand up in modern drama? Finally, can tragedy be removed from its original context?

¹ Aristotle *Poetics* 1452b.

² Aristotle *Poetics* 1452b.

INTRODUCTION

Foreword

This dissertation is a study of modern classical reception which explores the ways in which one playwright has interpreted and reinterpreted classical tragedy. The choice of Václav Havel for such an exploration emerged from my interest in the effects of the altering political systems of twentieth century Europe on the performance and reception of tragedy.

This introduction explains my methodology and approach by reference to, first, the wider study of classical reception and then specifically to outline the relevant English-language secondary literature on Havel and Czech theatre.

Classical reception

There are different approaches to a classical reception study, however the overall aim is to demonstrate the relevance of the classics from both an academic and social standpoint. As Charles Martindale writes in *Classics and the Uses of Reception*, classical reception is ‘contesting the idea that classics is something fixed’.³ That is, there are other ways of studying works from antiquity by doing so through the lens of modern works. Furthermore, a classical reception study allows for an investigation into the society of the received texts. Lorna Hardwick writes that reception studies ‘has implications for the critical analysis of both [ancient and modern texts]’.⁴

Some academic work written about classical reception in drama in the twentieth century include Fiona Macintosh in *The Cambridge Companion to Greek Tragedy*, Edith Hall et al.’s *Dionysus Since 69*, Olga Taxidou’s *Tragedy, Modernity and Mourning*, and Raymond Williams’ *Modern Tragedy*.

Macintosh’s essay, *Tragedy in Performance: Nineteenth and Twentieth-Century Productions*, establishes that the study of classical reception shows how the performance of Greek tragedy both highlights the contextual ‘current concerns and needs’ a society, but can also shape them.⁵ This indicates the value that a close exploration of modern plays extends our knowledge of the ongoing relevance of Greek tragedy to our modern world. Macintosh writes; ‘The tragedies have always been turned to for commentary on prevailing political questions’.⁶ This gives the

³ Martindale 2006: 2.

⁴ Hardwick 2003: 4.

⁵ Macintosh 1997: 284.

⁶ Macintosh 1997: 320

implication that, by examining the context of the plays' productions, there can be gained a greater idea of the worldview of said context.

There is precedent for comparison between a Theatre of the Absurd playwright and tragedy in classical reception. Both Katherine Worth's chapter from *Dionysus Since 69* entitled *Greek Notes in Samuel Beckett's Theatre Art* and Olga Taxidou's *Tragedy, Modernity and Mourning* establish links between the Samuel Beckett and Greek tragedy. Taxidou refers to the playwright as tragedy's 'main representative for the twentieth century'.⁷ While Worth establishes that Beckett took a 'serious interest in classical mythology and drama'.⁸ Worth then sets out an approach that identifies various elements of ancient Greek drama, such as the Chorus, masks, and music, and demonstrates where these elements can be found in Beckett's theatrical works. Furthermore, she argues that Beckett's style inspired other theatre practitioners to take an interest in ancient Greek drama.⁹ This methodology enables Worth to present clear connections between tragedy and Beckett's work, thus strengthening her argument.

Two books, *A Handbook to Classical Reception in Eastern and Central Europe* and *A Handbook to the Reception of Greek Drama*, provide an introduction to scholarly work on classical reception in this region. Two chapters within these are of particular relevance to this dissertation: Alena Sarkissian's *Classical Drama on the Czech Stage, 1889-2012* and Eva Stehlíková's *The Reception of Greek Drama in the Czech Republic*.

Sarkissian's chapter provides a chorological survey of Greek tragic performance on the Czech stage, using Aeschylus' *Oresteia* trilogy as a case study. She particularly focuses on the details of the productions, including set and costume, and how each show was received by critics and the public, and specifically how each of these changed over time. This approach demonstrates the way in which classical reception reflects the worldviews of the time. As Sarkissian writes, although there was no overtly political production of the *Oresteia* during the communist era, 'a political message was often discerned'.¹⁰

Stehlíková also applies a chronological methodology, providing a survey approach to the history of performance of Greek tragedy in what is now the Czech Republic. Her method also explains how the social and political context of certain periods affected whether Greek drama was performed and in what form. For example, during the Nazi regime, when many plays were banned, Greek dramas continued to be performed as 'they were perceived as part of the

⁷ Taxidou 2004: 195.

⁸ Worth 2004: 266.

⁹ Worth 2004: 266.

¹⁰ Sarkissian 2017: 154.

European humanist tradition'.¹¹ Furthermore, Stehlíková addresses the more experimental approach to Greek tragedy in the 1960s, particularly Western playwrights who were hitherto banned, such as Jean Anouilh's *Antigone*. She touches on the area of classical reception research that explores inspiration as opposed to adaptation. Václav Havel is also mentioned here, albeit as part of a collection of original Czech playwrights that halted the growth of tragic adaptations. Rather than explicitly acknowledging the influence of classical tragedy on Havel, she instead emphasises the originality of his work. Stehlíková's approach focuses on classical reception as adaptation, rather than interpretation. Václav Havel's knowledge of Aristotle's work and the way he uses tragedy in his writing make his work viable for a classical reception dissertation, albeit from an interpretation stance.

The methodology used by Sarkisian and Stehlíková clearly highlights the importance of the effect politics can have on classical reception, and consequently becomes an important part of the study.

Whilst the discussion reception of Greek tragedy on twentieth century playwrights has been attempted before, such as Worth's study on Beckett and Taxdiou's on Bertolt Brecht, this is the first classical reception dissertation to focus entirely on Václav Havel.

English-language academic work on Václav Havel

Previous English-language research has been undertaken into Václav Havel's theatrical output and the relevance of the events of his life to his plays. Some of the English-language authors who have studied Havel are Carol Rocamora, John Keane, Michael Žantovský, Kieran Williams, and Marketa Goetz-Stankiewicz.

Keane, Williams, and Žantovský do not have backgrounds in drama, therefore whilst useful as sources for Havel's life, their works do not go into great analysis about the plays.

John Keane's *Václav Havel: A Political Tragedy in Six Acts* is a biography that argues that Havel's life '[resembles] a classical political tragedy'.¹² The author describes himself as a 'political thinker and writer intent on stretching the concept of power into the most private domains', thus also describing the purpose for his book.¹³ That is, Keane does not attempt to hide the possible flaws in Havel, even writing that the book might 'cause him discomfort'.¹⁴ The author equates the

¹¹ Stehlíková 2016: 341.

¹² Keane 2000: 3.

¹³ Keane 2000: 12.

¹⁴ Keane 2000: 12.

story of Havel's life to a Greek tragedy, and Havel himself to a flawed tragic hero. Keane is the only English-language academic who connects Havel and Greek tragedy. However his approach is not literary-critical, rather it is the approach of a political theorist. Therefore, Keane's connecting of Havel and Greek tragedy is only applied to Havel's life and does not extend to the plays themselves.

Kieran Williams' book, entitled *Václav Havel*, is also a biography. It is, however, an important source for a study into Havel's life. Scholars have praised the book for its attention to detail and accuracy.¹⁵ The book, a biography, does lend some discussion to the plays and even Havel's calligram poetry, thus making it an important political and literary source.¹⁶ Despite this, Williams' background, like Keane, is also in political academia therefore his discussion on Havel's plays is not extensive.

Another important biography of Havel is Michael Žantovský's *Havel: A Life*. Whilst highly detailed, it is also significant for being written by a person who was 'close' to Havel.¹⁷ He was a Czech politician during Havel's time in office. This matter is addressed by the author himself who recognises the potential for inaccuracy due to 'lack of perspective'.¹⁸ This source is therefore complicated as although it is comprehensive, and while the author's closeness to his subject could result in a more accurate description of him, it has the potential for bias. Like Williams' book, it is useful as a chronological depiction of Havel's life from birth to death. Though Žantovský does have a literary background, his approach to this work is not intended to provide literary criticism. He does, nevertheless, discuss each of Havel's plays.

Carol Rocamora does have a theatrical background, she is herself a playwright, and her work on Havel provides good insight into the specific plays. Her *Acts of Courage: Václav Havel's Life in the Theater* provides both a biography of Havel's life, as well as commentaries for each of his plays. Her purpose for writing the book is set out in the preface in which she describes his story, and importantly, 'a story that was not his alone', as 'thrilling'.¹⁹ Therefore, the purpose of the book is to inform readers of a history that she believes needs to be heard, and not just Havel's but the history of Czech history in the twentieth century. As a playwright, Rocamora provides a focus and an analysis of Havel's plays. She argues in that the collected plays 'are illuminating to those who want to better understand the turbulent events of the twentieth

¹⁵ Roberts 2017, Čulík 2017, & Štollová 2017.

¹⁶ Williams 2016: 80.

¹⁷ Žantovský 2014: 4.

¹⁸ Žantovský 2014: 7.

¹⁹ Rocamora 2005: xxii.

century'.²⁰ It is for that reason that she devotes much of the book to detailed discussions of each of the plays chronologically, making the book a useful source for a literary-critical discussion on Havel.

Marketa Goetz-Stankiewicz's *The Silenced Theatre: Czech playwrights without a stage* provides an in-depth analysis of all of Havel's plays up to 1979, the date of publication. The purpose of the book is to raise awareness of the then banned playwrights of Communist era Czechoslovakia. Along with Havel, these include Josef Topol, Pavel Kohout, and Ivan Klíma, among others. She argues why his work should appeal to Western audiences and why 'his work carries so strong a message outside [the Czechoslovak] borders'.²¹

Nevertheless, despite their detailed theatrical studies of Havel's plays, Rocamora and Goetz-Stankiewicz do not have a background in classical or classical reception studies and therefore do not include Greek tragedy amongst his influences. Both write about the importance of Ionesco and Kafka to Havel's work, which are valid discussions and more clear influences than Aristotle. But the influence is present, and it is a vital part that is missing from a study of Havel's work.

Rocamora mentions his 'celebration of Aristotle because he insisted on the importance of structure... what makes a play a play'.²² However she does not discuss what exactly Aristotle said about the nature of the structure of theatre. This shows how a classical reception study into Václav Havel's plays is beneficial for understanding them better. Such a study can reveal what exactly, Havel believes makes "a play a play", '*dělají brů hrou*', and what the composition, '*skladba*', of a play meant to him.²³ It can also reveal the significance of Havel's own use of "*Tragédie*" to refer to one of his plays.

Approach

My own approach examines the way in which a relatively modern playwright applies classical ideas of tragedy to their work, whilst also using this knowledge to reinterpret classical tragedy for a modern world and audience. In doing so, I follow Raymond Williams, Olga Taxidou, Katherine Worth among others, while addressing the gaps in Czech classical reception studies.

²⁰ Rocamora 2005: 2.

²¹ Goetz-Stankiewicz 1979: 87.

²² Rocamora 2005: 215.

²³ Havel *Dopis Olze* 115 3.

In addition to identifying how Havel interprets tragedy in his work, I also illustrate how the Theatre of the Absurd can be seen as the modern theatre genre most similar to classical tragedy, in terms of its approach and ideas. An exploration discussion of the Theatre of the Absurd is pivotal for a discussion of Havel, it is the genre into which his work is typically placed. His inclusion in Martin Esslin's *The Theatre of the Absurd* demonstrates this.²⁴ I argue that, rather than being separate genres present in Havel's work, Havel's version Theatre of the Absurd reinterprets the ideas of ancient Greek tragedy for the modern age.

To approach this I have adopted a similar approach to that used by Worth for her exploration of Beckett. For each individual play, I have identified a particular theme present as either, or both, tragic and Absurd drama and then demonstrated how Havel uses them. This helps to recognise, on a base level, the similarities and differences between both genres of theatre. For Greek tragedy this fundamentally involves a discussion of Aristotle's *Poetics* which, although written several years after the tragedies were first performed, is the earliest surviving form of classical reception. For a discussion on the Theatre of the Absurd there are two important sources. The first of which is Martin Esslin as the primary coiner of the genre name and the first to discuss that collection of plays together. The second is the existential philosophy of absurdism that inspired the theatrical genre, as described by philosopher Albert Camus in *The Myth of Sisyphus*.

The context in which Havel was writing, and the events of his life, shaped the style and mood of his plays. As Kieran Williams writes in his biography of Havel, he 'lived 75 eventful years'.²⁵ Therefore it is very important to include a discussion on the context. Previously classical reception studies on Czech theatre have highlighted the importance of context when discussing plays from this country. I have structured this dissertation into three chapters that represent three decades of Havel's life from the 1960s to the 1980s. This is also the structure that Rocamora adopts in her book *Acts of Courage*, for which her reasoning is 'Havel's life... divides itself clearly into five decades, paralleling his country's history in a striking way'.²⁶ The three decades I have focused on reflect three significant periods of Czech political history and consequently Havel's own life in the theatre from his first performed play in 1963 to 1988, his last prior to his presidency.

²⁴ Esslin 2014: 269.

²⁵ Williams 2016: 10.

²⁶ Rocamora 2005: 2.

Introduction

After 1989, with the collapse the communist government, Havel's life became focused on his political career. Whilst his theatrical era largely ended after this date, Robert Pirro notes how Greek tragedy continued to be relevant to his political writing and speeches, including a 1997 presidential address in which describes catharsis to the Czech parliament.²⁷ This era could provide the basis for further study, along with an analysis of 2007's *Leaving*.

Václav Havel

The thoughts and ideas of ancient Greece, particularly from fifth century BC Athens, of art, architecture, philosophy, and politics, have to this day inspired countless writers and thinkers. Thus, it is not surprising that one finds results of this inspiration in twentieth century AD Czech literature. But what I find interesting is not just the knowledge of ancient Greek ideas, but the use of them, particularly by the oppressed Czech writers under communism. Whilst the mainstream grand theatres such as Prague's National Theatre were performing the classical tragedies, within the smaller theatres, such as the Theatre on the Balustrade, and later secretly within private homes, the influence was demonstrated in a subtler manner.²⁸ These "Prague Underground" writers took the ancient Greek ideas and moulded them, rearranged them, into something new and relevant to their life and times.



Figure 1. Prague National Theatre (*Národní divadlo*). (photograph: H. Mellish).

²⁷ Pirro 2002: 233-234.

²⁸ Sarkissian 2017: 151.

Václav Havel, playwright and politician, was born on the October 5th in 1936 to a wealthy and prominent family in Prague. The Havel family built buildings such as the Lucerna Palace near Wenceslas Square (*Václavské náměstí*) and Václav's father, Václav Maria Havel, was friendly with Tomáš Masaryk, the Czechoslovak president from 1918-1935. This was a bourgeois family which became problematic after Czechoslovakia was “liberated” from the Nazis by the Soviet Union in 1948, when Havel was aged 12. Like the literary characters of Jaroslav Hašek's *The Good Soldier Švejk* or Bohumil Hrabal's *Dítě*, the Havel family saw their fortunes change with each consecutive conquest of their country.

The political world of 20th century Europe was turbulent and ever-changing, even within specific regimes. The history of Czechoslovakia during Havel's lifetime affected his life in both his class status and his freedom. In 1938, when Havel was two years old, Nazi Germany first invaded Czechoslovakia and occupied and controlled the country until losing the Second World War in 1945. Then, three years later, the USSR-backed Communist Party acquired total control over the country. The forty years of Communist rule was in itself turbulent, with Jonathan Bolton describing a change from terror to ‘tragicomedy’.²⁹ Communist control came to an end in 1989, whereupon Havel himself became president of his country.

In order to properly understand the plays of Václav Havel, one must understand the background in which he was writing. The changing political climate of Czechoslovakia influenced the evolving style of his plays. I focus on Havel's interpretation of tragedy and of the work that becomes the foundation for the Theatre of the Absurd.

Václav Havel and Tragedy

I came to be researching classical reception in Havel's plays when reading what has been published as *Letters to Olga* in 1983. From 1979 to 1983 the Communist Party had Havel imprisoned until he was released on medical grounds. During this time he wrote carefully crafted letters to his then wife, Olga Havlová. I say “carefully crafted” as they had to get past the prison censors, therefore, if he wanted these letters to be read by Olga and others outside the prison, he had to be careful how he wrote them. Among personal complaints, such as haemorrhoids, he also discusses some philosophical ideas, mostly that of Jan Patočka, a Czech philosopher who

²⁹ Bolton 2012: 81.

was interested in ancient Greek philosophy and culture. Havel also discusses his thoughts of theatrical philosophy, including that of Aristotle.

Aristotle wrote that every play must have a beginning, a middle and an end and that what comes must follow what went before. As long as we don't take it too literally, I think he hit, with brilliant simplicity, on another extremely important consequence of the special nature of theater [*sic*]: the importance of structure.³⁰

Furthermore, in a later letter he touches upon some other Aristotelian notions such as “recognition”, about which I will discuss later. From this I began to find further reference to tragedy (*tragedie*) and catharsis (*katarzē*).

Vaclav Havel's life has been described in terms of tragedy: ‘Havel appears more often as a tragedian’.³¹ John Keane's book, *Václav Havel. A Political Tragedy in Six Acts*, sets out Havel's biography in six acts, like a theatrical drama. He writes that, ‘as with all tragedies’, Havel's life is a combination of ‘triumph’ and ‘calamities, injustices, and unhappy endings’.³² There is comparison here, not made by Keane, to Orestes' journey through injustices to justice as seen in Aeschylus' *Oresteia*.

Havel's view of tragedy influences his writings. As stated by Robert Pirro in his essay *Václav Havel and the Political Uses of Tragedy* there is a ‘frequency and occasional prominence of... references to tragedy’ in Havel's work.³³ Pirro's essay pays attention primarily to his political career and how his beliefs on tragedy shaped his political thinking. My focus is on tragic influences found in Havel's plays. Nevertheless his political writings are important for understanding the way in which he Havel views tragedy. In a letter written to the communist president of Czechoslovakia Gustáv Husák in 1975, Havel refers to the 'tragic aspect of man's status in modern technological civilisation', “*tragického aspektu celkového postavení člověka v moderní technické civilizaci*”.³⁴

For Havel, drama encompasses and projects the state of human identity; the dramatist creates what it means to be human in the world:

It can but confront us once more with that tragic aspect of man's status in modern technological civilisation marked by a declining awareness of the absolute, and which I propose to call a “crisis of human identity.” For how can

³⁰ Havel *Letter 115* 285-286.

³¹ Keane 2000: 10.

³² Keane 2000: 10.

³³ Pirro 2002: 236.

³⁴ Havel “*Dear Dr. Husák*” 62.

the collapse of man's identity be slowed down by a system that so harshly requires a man to be something other than he is?³⁵

Here Havel is making reference to how the pressure put upon the citizens of Czechoslovakia to conform to a uniform identity during the communist regime has the effect of depriving them of their personal identity. Prior to this he criticises Husák's government of creating and maintaining order through 'fear'.³⁶ That is, the Czechoslovak citizens behave properly and cooperatively not because of absolute devotion to their state and their government but conversely out of fear of them. They do what is expected of them; they get married, they have children, they go to work etc. because otherwise all that would be taken away from them. Everything that appears concrete would be removed, like removing the ground from underneath the feet. A dissident gains individual personality by separating themselves from the collective identity. Thus, what is formed due to this removal of individual identity is a fear of individual identity, in a paradoxical manner.

In a 1988 essay, this paradoxical nature is explored by Havel with reference to František Kriegel, 'one of the great tragic figures of our recent history'.³⁷ Kriegel was a staunch supporter of communism and, despite everything he experienced in Czechoslovakia, never relinquished his ideals. According to Havel, this persistence was both what made him a great man, but, as a tragic hero, it was also his tragic flaw. Kriegel continually justified the Communist Party, in a battle with his own consciousness. As Havel writes:

The party slandered him for his courageous struggle in Spain, it persecuted him in the fifties, it expelled him in 1969, and mercilessly hounded him to death, before finally displaying the full depth of its depravity when it denied him a dignified funeral. Yet despite everything, he never renounced his socialist convictions.³⁸

Havel calls the fate of Kiegel a 'tragic paradox'.³⁹ This paradox in tragedy is that a person can spend their entire life striving for good, but in doing so, brings about their downfall. This story could be compared to the myth of Antigone, whose determination and dedication to the gods is what brings about her downfall.

Furthermore, it could be argued that such a society controlled and maintained by fear of higher figures has parallels with the characters of ancient Greek myth (and therefore tragedy) and the Olympian gods. Within the world of Athenian tragedy there exists these omnipotent gods who have complete influence over the thoughts and actions of the mortals. This then creates a

³⁵ Havel "Dear Dr. Husák" 62.

³⁶ Havel "Dear Dr. Husák" 52.

³⁷ Havel *František K.* 362.

³⁸ Havel *František K.* 368.

³⁹ Havel *František K.* 371.

kind of paranoid fear amongst the mortals, they become afraid to act in a way that might upset the gods and thus removing the life they lead.

I agree with Pirro when he writes that it is not important whether or not Havel ever explicitly read Aristotle's *Poetics*, he clearly has knowledge of those ideas that are, as Pirro puts it, 'important sources of the tradition [of theatre]'.⁴⁰ It is also possible that some of Havel's knowledge of Aristotle stems from his interest and friendship with Jan Patočka. Although Kieran Williams asserts that 'Patočka's influence on [Havel] should not be exaggerated', he clearly holds the philosopher in high regard.⁴¹ Havel admits that in his youth he 'hungrily devoured [Patočka's texts] in the university library', and within his essays, such as *The Power of the Powerless*, he quotes him many times.^{42&43} Patočka's work focuses much on ancient Greek philosophical ideas, including his book *Plato and Europe* as well as a series of lectures focusing on Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle respectively.⁴⁴ Therefore, the idea that Havel may developed his understanding and knowledge of Aristotle and *tragedie* from Patočka should be considered. According to Erazim Kohák, in a lecture on Socrates, Patočka 'inquires into the significance of Greek tragedy... to our century'.⁴⁵ Kohák writes that Patočka saw the tragic hero as someone 'charged with a moral calling'.⁴⁶

For the tragic man, the moral charge is not simply a harmonious extension of his natural life but in conflict with it, forcing him to ask the question of meaning.⁴⁷

This corresponds with Havel's plays, where the protagonist often finds themselves within a moral conflict.

⁴⁰ Pirro 2002: 239.

⁴¹ Williams 2016: 119.

⁴² Havel *Disturbing the Peace* 26.

⁴³ Havel *Power of the Powerless* 157 & 195.

⁴⁴ Kohák 1989: 47.

⁴⁵ Kohák 1989: 48.

⁴⁶ Kohák 1989: 48.

⁴⁷ Kohák 1989: 48.

TRAGEDY AND ABSURDITY – A MODERN DUALISM

Aristotle's *Poetics*

The earliest source for analysis and discussion of the origins and meaning of tragedy is Aristotle's *Poetics*, written in circa 335 BC. In this work the ancient Greek philosopher outlines the plot structure and language that make for an ideal tragedy, a “good” tragedy being that which induces “catharsis” in its audience. *Κάθαρσις*, in ancient Greek, is translated by Malcom Heath as ‘purification’, which is effected through the power of feeling ‘pity and fear’ for the tragic hero.⁴⁸ Heath writes that the problem of the exact translation of “catharsis” is ‘much-discussed and probably insoluble’.⁴⁹ But to summarise Heath’s argument, catharsis acts as a way of explaining why one enjoys watching tragedy, or listening to sad music, or even watching the news; it is the pleasure experienced when the tragedy before the audience is still just enough to bear, without becoming horrific.

Catharsis is enabled by “ἀναγνώρισις”, translated as “recognition” by Heath.⁵⁰ Aristotle writes that “recognition” ‘is a change from ignorance to knowledge’ that brings either good or bad fortune, depending on the pre-destined fate of the tragic hero.⁵¹ This is, arguably, the most important part of Aristotle’s discussion on plot and its role in the ultimate aim of tragedy, being catharsis. Within this discussion he writes about the difference between “simple” and “complex” plots, the difference then being the plot being influenced by “recognition”. An example of a “complex” plot would involve a change of fortune effected by a recognition, a simple plot, however, would have no such effect. A famous example of a “complex” plot from Athenian tragedy is that of Sophocles’ *Oedipus the King*. In this work, Oedipus seeks to find out who murdered the king of Thebes and in doing so comes to the “recognition” that it was he, himself. If this story had been written in Aristotle’s “simple” plot style, Oedipus would knowingly murder King Laius, in full knowledge that he was his father. Without the shift from ignorance to recognition, there is no tragedy.

⁴⁸ Heath 1996: xxi.

⁴⁹ Heath 1996: xxxvii.

⁵⁰ Heath 1996: xxx.

⁵¹ Aristotle *Poetics* 1452a.

Pity and Fear

Tragedy in its original performance context was religious. It was born out of worship and hymns to a god, it was performed at a religious festival. Thus, part of the emotions that arise from the spectators of tragedy must be seen through that context. A sense of euphoria, perhaps, from the grandeur of the worship for this god of wine and festivities. I would argue that a huge part of the spectacle arises from its original performance context. When Aristotle writes of “pity and fear” one must take into account the arguably heightened emotions the original spectators might have felt.

The religious element could be seen as the driving force of “fear”, a point I will return to. “Pity”, however, I believe is the emotion driven by the human element. Once again we are returned to this state of contrasts. Tragedy walks along the line of the world of gods and mortals. It, mainly, deals in the world of mortals, but with a focus on how their world is influenced by the god’s. David Konstan writes: ‘In the definition of *pity*, Aristotle had already said that pity is reserved for those kinds of evils that might afflict us or *ours*. Those nearest to us are, at it were, an extension of ourselves, and their misfortune affects us exactly as it does our own’.⁵² The “pity” element of Aristotle’s definition of tragedy thus arises from viewing the human experience. One of the reasons that tragedy has survived as a genre into the modern world is this focus on the human experience, something that is felt by ancient and modern humans. When playwrights such as Shakespeare and Miller claim to take up the tragic mantle, their version of tragedy does not concern the gods. There is the argument then as to how far they can be considered tragedians then, but that is for another essay. Arguably, in some cases of Athenian tragedy, the removal of the gods does not alter the *plot* to a large degree. Sophocles’ *Antigone*, for example, would still be about a young woman wishing to bury her brother and being punished for it. Even Euripides’ *Hippolytus* could merely be about Phaedra’s love for Hippolytus growing naturally, as opposed to being an influence of Aphrodite’s. Indeed, this plot variation forms the basis of Jules Dassin’s 1962 film *Phaedra*, starring Melina Mercouri. These examples, however, are few. Ultimately, even if the *plot* remains essentially the same, the nature of the “tragedy” is altered. Nevertheless, tragedy’s spectators watch fellow humans, like themselves, put through unpleasant situations which invokes the pity.

⁵² Konstan 2005: 14.

Aristotle writes that the right balance between what is pitiful and what is horrific is critical for a good tragedy.⁵³ The point that the characters of tragedy are like ourselves is important. The humans of tragedy are flawed humans, they have that *hamartia* which they cannot escape. At the same time they are not evil. Thus, the everyday flawed individual can relate to the characters they see, as I believe no-one believes themselves to be evil, and very few view themselves as perfect.

“Fear” is the other aspect that, according to Aristotle, is invoked by tragedy. One must remember that the idea of god being omnibenevolent is relatively modern and that the gods of the Greeks were not meant to be loved, but feared. In Book IX of Homer’s *Odyssey*, Odysseus and his companions arrive on the Cyclopes’ island. Odysseus announces that he is going to ‘probe the natives living over there. What *are* they – violent, savage, lawless? Or friendly to strangers, god-fearing men?’⁵⁴ Fear is therefore related to the gods. As barbarians do not fear gods, this makes them savages. From the actions of the gods in the plays, it can be seen why they need to be feared. It is through fear that one respects them, it shows them that one is aware that one is lesser than them. In Euripides’ *Hippolytus*, the titular character insults Aphrodite, ‘No god worshipped by night wins my respect’, and he is thus punished by having his step-mother fall in love with him.⁵⁵ Furthermore, in another Euripides’ play, the *Bacchae*, Pentheus rejects the worship of Dionysus in his kingdom which insults the god: ‘thrusting me away from his sacrifices and making no mention of me in his prayers’.⁵⁶ These examples show mortals who are arrogant enough to believe that they can belittle the gods, or side-line them. This is a crucial aspect of tragedy, this confrontation between the gods and the mortals. It is an aspect often ignored by future “tragedians”, such as the aforementioned Shakespeare and Miller.

Tragedy and Catharsis in Havel’s plays

As noted by Pirro are the ‘explicit references to *katarze* (catharsis) in Havel’s writings’.⁵⁷ It is through an understanding of Havel’s thoughts on catharsis that one can see what Havel’s modern take on tragedy is.

In a quote from his book *Disturbing the Peace*, Havel writes that catharsis is:

⁵³ Aristotle *Poetics* 1452b.

⁵⁴ Homer *Odyssey* IX.175.

⁵⁵ Euripides *Hippolytos* 102.

⁵⁶ Euripides *Bacchae* 45.

⁵⁷ Pirro 2002: 239.

Sharing with others the liberating delight in evil exposed... Somewhere in here is the beginning of hope - real hope, not hope for a happy ending. But if the play is truly to evoke this, it must somehow be internally disposed to do so.⁵⁸

For Havel, catharsis appears to be positive thing, the aftermath of, or the expulsion of evil, thus bringing forth a new hope. Not only this, it is also about an experience shared, the collective euphoria experienced as a group of people. This could be an audience in a theatrical setting, or a country in a political one. In his play *Leaving*, Havel uses a notable device in which he gives a commentary on what his intentions were with certain scenes or characters, through a quasi-narrator or director character called *Hlas*, “The Voice”. Havel frequently uses an Absurd Theatre device in which the comprehensibility of the characters’ dialogue collapses into nonsense, often just repetitions of lines spoken before. In this play he explains his use of such a device, giving it a name: ‘*balábile*’ which is a nonsense word translated by Paul Wilson as “hubbub”.⁵⁹ He explains that he puts this device at the end of the play, ‘*kde by měla být katarze*’, “where catharsis would be”.⁶⁰ Not only does this clearly show Havel’s acknowledgement of the importance of catharsis to theatre, it also shows his own take on it. *Leaving* is intriguing as one of Havel’s later works as its plot structure seems more in tune to tragedy than absurdity. It involves a former Chancellor’s fall from grace due to the flaws in his character; The play ends with him despairing of, rather than accepting, the Absurd. He is almost like Oedipus in that respect. Havel, according to his own words, places his “hubbub” at the point of catharsis, at a point in which the protagonist’s world begins to collapse around him. In his introduction to Aristotle’s *Poetics* Anthony Kenny also discusses the problem of the meaning of catharsis, saying that his translation, “purification”, was ‘the most obvious translation... having considered several others’.⁶¹ He concludes, however, that the use of catharsis can, to an extent, be extended to the writer’s discretion, mentioning ‘the plays of Václav Havel that... served to purify the emotion of anger [as opposed to “pity and fear”] against communist tyranny’.⁶²

Duality and Dionysiac ambience

⁵⁸ Havel *Disturbing the Peace* 201.

⁵⁹ Havel *Odházení* 116.

⁶⁰ Havel *Odházení* 116.

⁶¹ Kenny 2013: xxv.

⁶² Kenny 2013: xxvii.

As we have seen tragedy was born out of religion and ritual. According to Aristotle, tragedy ‘arose from the leaders of the dithyramb’, a hymn in honour of Dionysus.⁶³ It is important that the worship of this particular ancient Greek god is the origin of tragedy. The god of wine, Dionysus, is famous for inducing frenzy into those who worship him. In his entry in *The Oxford Classical Dictionary*, Albert Henrich describes how comedy evokes the excitement of Dionysus, and in turn drunkenness, whilst tragedy ‘dramatizes the negative, destructive traits’.⁶⁴ Furthermore he is ‘considered a foreign god whose original home was Thrace or Asia’, thus there is also non-Greek about his presence. Both terrifying and exciting, this contrast sums up what tragedy is. German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche describes tragedy as a ‘development from the duality of the **Apolline** [“*Apollonine*] and the *Dionysiac*’, a coming together of order and chaos.⁶⁵ The audience of Greek tragedy were part of something bigger than just the plays. The context of 5th century Athenian tragedy is the City Dionysia festival. During this the *polis* would come together and take part in processions, sacrifices, and performances all in honour of this erratic god. Here there is duality. This ecstatic display happened in the streets of Athens below the hills of the Acropolis and the Pnyx which respectively held the order of Olympian religion and democratic politics. Aristotle makes reference to this contrast in his description of what tragedy is, as something pleasurable induced by the catharsis of ‘pity and fear’.⁶⁶ This duality is also present within tragedy’s primary god, Dionysus. This starts with his very conception, fathered by the immortal Zeus and mothered by the mortal Semele. In antiquity he is perceived as both ‘man and animal, male and effeminate, youthful as well as mature’.⁶⁷ As such he is a significant part of tragedy’s duality as well as being a distinct aspect of the genre. Henrich writes that the tragic plays, the characters, and settings are all part of a distinct ‘Dionysiac ambience’.⁶⁸

In his book *Plato and Europe*, Jan Patočka also writes about this contrasting of Greek mythology: ‘Duality is at home in all myths’.⁶⁹ His particular focus is on the duality between good and evil, he writes that humanity is ruined by possessing the knowledge of the dual states of good and evil. He uses Sophocles’ *Oedipus the King* as an example of this ruin in myth. In this play the protagonist, Oedipus, attempts to do good by seeking out evil. He attempts to find and chastise the person who murdered Thebes’ former king, Laius. Unbeknownst to him, however, he was

⁶³ Aristotle *Poetics* 1449a.

⁶⁴ Henrich 2012: 463.

⁶⁵ Nietzsche *Birth of Tragedy* 14.

⁶⁶ Aristotle *Poetics* 1449b.

⁶⁷ Henrich 2012: 462.

⁶⁸ Henrich 2012: 463.

⁶⁹ Patočka *Plato and Europe* 46.

the one who committed the act, so by attempting to reveal evil, he reveals the evil within himself. As Patočka puts it: ‘Oedipus imagines he knows about the good and, in actual fact, that good of his is the very opposite’.⁷⁰ Thus, again, Greek tragedy is presented as a state of contrasts.

Athenian tragedy presents horrific scenes and events; murder, rape, self-mutilation, deception, and suicide. Yet it is intended as entertainment. This is not the barbaric practice of a long-gone culture whose psyche is impenetrable to the modern mind. Tragedy and its influence stretches across time, from medieval performances of Jesus Christ’s crucifixion, to the gore of Shakespeare’s plays, to the frustration of Arthur Miller’s, to even the music we listen to. For whatever reason, the human mind receives pleasure from tragedy.

Modern Tragedy

Albert Camus’ *The Myth of Sisyphus*

Albert Camus was a French-Algerian whose works, such as *The Fall*, *The Outsider* and *The Plague*, dealt with themes of absurdity. This dissertation must concern itself with what Camus writes about the subject for, as Martin Esslin writes, he ‘coined the concept of the Absurd in the sense that is used in the Theatre of the Absurd’.⁷¹ The most important work of Camus with which to discuss the absurd philosophy is his *The Myth of Sisyphus*, first published in 1942 during the height of the Second World War. I mention this because it comes at a time in which life’s meaning and religion itself was truly being questioned. What can possibly be the purpose of life if your life is no longer your own, you are punished for your beliefs, your race, or your sexuality? This is where absurdism is needed, so as not too fall into despair. Camus’ *The Myth of Sisyphus* delves into the question of why, despite all this anguish, we should not take our own lives. ‘There is but one truly serious philosophical problem and that is suicide’.⁷²

Sisyphus was a character from Greek mythology whose arrogance made him unpopular with the gods. His punishment came about when Zeus demanded that Hades took Sisyphus down to the Underworld. Sisyphus, however, tricks Hades and imprisons him in his house. With Hades gone people were no longer able to die, which annoyed Ares, the god of war. Ares freed

⁷⁰ Patočka *Plato and Europe* 49.

⁷¹ Esslin 1965: 15.

⁷² Camus *Sisyphus* 1.

someone who is able to carry on despite everything. This is the aim of his philosophy, to present to his readers how to deal with despair; not to give in to it, nor to pretend its inexistence, but to accept it.

The other character from Greek mythology that Camus mentions is Oedipus, with reference to Sophocles' play. He does take certain liberties in his essay, however, and I refute what he writes about Oedipus. He writes that Oedipus says: 'I conclude that all is well', after his realisation and after his self-mutilation.⁷⁶ He thus suggests that Oedipus too is an absurd hero, to come forward after his confrontation with the Absurd to state: "all is well". In Sophocles' play, however, Oedipus does not in fact say this: instead he gives in to total despair, he declares the opposite, that all will never be well again. I do not know why Camus claimed that Oedipus said this, it is possible he misread the text, or perhaps another translation made it appear for him to say something to that effect.

The giving into despair was Oedipus' fate. The tragedy of his story is that he was cursed from birth. His parents, Laius and Jocasta, were told that their inability to conceive children was a blessing as their son would murder Laius and sleep with Jocasta. They, however, disregard the warnings and give birth to Oedipus. Laius then takes his infant child and abandons him on a mountain side to die. Instead, Oedipus is saved and brought up by Polybus and his wife. When older he learns of his prophecy and, in fear, abandons his "parents" to protect them. On his way to Thebes he encounters Laius who angers him, so Oedipus murders him. When he gets to Thebes he solves the riddle of the Sphynx and frees the city from its curse. He then becomes their king and marries the now widowed Jocasta, thus fulfilling the prophecy. In an attempt to find the killer of Laius, he uncovers the truth about his birth and, in horror, realises what he has done. Thus, so late into his life, Oedipus recognises his rock that he has been pushing since birth. It is at this point, in which he recognises his fate, that Oedipus' rock falls down the hill. Both Sisyphus and Oedipus brought their fate upon themselves, but the latter did so without realising. In Camus' essay, Sisyphus returns down the hill, happy and accepting of his fate. Oedipus, on the other hand, does not accept his fate, he gives into despair and takes out his eyes.

'You'll no longer see no more the pain I suffered, all the pain I caused!'.⁷⁷ These are the words that the messenger quotes Oedipus saying straight after blinding himself, as translated by Bernard Knox. Here he is talking to himself, suggesting that he blinded himself to escape from his fate, too late. He is also escaping the absurdity that he has been exposed to, thus he attempts to

⁷⁶ Camus *Sisyphus* 118.

⁷⁷ Sophocles *Oedipus* 1271-2173.

escape the Absurd. If Camus writes that when Sisyphus walks back down the hill is what makes him the absurd hero, it is the moment at which Oedipus blinds himself that he becomes the tragic hero. This also corroborates what Camus says about the Oedipus: ‘the moment he knows, his tragedy begins’.⁷⁸ The Absurd is the abandonment of god, the realisation of one’s freedom as a thing of terror. Oedipus realises, or at least assumes, that he is ‘the man the deathless gods hate most of all’.⁷⁹ It is in this terror of abandonment that he commits his act of self-harm. When the Chorus ask him why he did it he responds: ‘Apollo – he ordained my agonies – these, my pains on pains! But the hand that struck my eyes was mine’.⁸⁰ Here he shows the recognition of his rejection by the immortals. In this realisation, he sees no reason to carry on and commits an act of sheer mortality, and takes pride in the fact that he has done something free from the will of the gods. Nevertheless, in this godless world he despairs: ‘Nothing I could see could bring me joy’.⁸¹

Secular Tragedy

As I have discussed, the birth of tragedy arises from ritual worship, an ode to the ancient god Dionysus. Therefore, on such a basis, the term “secular tragedy” appears as a contradiction. What is tragedy without the gods? Where does the controlling force come from? In my opinion, it is these aspects that define tragedy, and the Theatre of the Absurd is the best example of popular modern theatre to retain these attributes.

The term “Theatre of the Absurd” was coined by Martin Esslin in his 1961 book, *The Theatre of the Absurd*. Thus, Esslin is an important source for discussing this topic. It is Esslin’s belief, that ‘ancient traditions [of theatre] combined in a new form in the Theatre of the Absurd’, in particular that of ritual and religion.⁸² According to him, Absurd playwright, Jean Genet, believed his plays captured ‘the ritual element in Mass’.⁸³

In Theatre of the Absurd, however, there are no gods. If one was to remove the gods, the fate of the protagonist is firmly in their own hands. Both, however, create a similar effect of helplessness and loss. With both the gods and the lack of them, the Absurd, one is helpless to

⁷⁸ Camus *Sisyphus* 118.

⁷⁹ Sophocles *Oedipus* 1344-1345.

⁸⁰ Sophocles *Oedipus* 1329-1330.

⁸¹ Sophocles *Oedipus* 1335.

⁸² Esslin 1965: 15.

⁸³ Esslin 1965: 16.

resist their fate. This creates the same paranoiac attitude for the audience. The strangeness, the alienation, and the resulting positive experience is the same for audiences of both genres.

Therefore, whilst the cause may differ, the effect is the same. The positive experience being catharsis. 'By seeing his anxieties formulated he can liberate himself from them'.⁸⁴ In both genres the audience is confronted with their fears and are thus able to overcome them.

In his essay entitled *Thriller*, Havel explains that with or without the Olympian gods, humanity is still lost and clueless to the understanding of the universe. This is the Absurd. It is born out of the terrifying realisation, or "recognition", that one's life is meaningless.

Today the opinion prevails that everything can "rationally explained", as they say, by alert reason. Nothing is obscure – and if it is, then we need only cast a ray of scientific light on it and it will cease to be so. This, of course, is only a grand self-delusion of the modern spirit.⁸⁵

For the ancient Greek people who believed in the Olympian gods, the world must have been an extremely absurd place. When thought and actions are controlled by omnipotent, immortal higher beings, how can there be rationality? How can one be happy if the gods have it in you to be miserable? Surely the only escape is suicide? Tragedy and epic alike depict many examples of suicides. This is why Greek tragedy is such a good reflection on the psychology and way of life for the ancient Greeks. For they had in their lives that omnipotent, immortal power that is the Olympian gods. Thus, life for them was predetermined. It was hopeless and terrifying. The Athenian audience member could watch what was happening to Oedipus and see that they too could get caught up in such a vicious trap. Athenian tragedy, however, does not purely fall within this "tragic" philosophy and shows signs of absurdity. The lines are blurred because the characters, and indeed humanity, crosses the borders. Even the most absurd man can be pushed to tragedy.

In the chapter "Appendix" in his *The Myth of Sisyphus*, Albert Camus writes: "The human heart has a tiresome tendency to label as fate only what crushes it. But happiness likewise, in its way, is without reason, since it is inevitable... Much can be said... about the privileged fates of Greek tragedy and those favoured in legend".⁸⁶ Fate, thus, decided by the gods, can be both positive and negative. The characters of tragedy have their fates in the hands of the gods, and it is this absurd situation that creates the drama in tragedy. In Euripides' *Hippolytus* there are two gods

⁸⁴ Esslin 2014: 350.

⁸⁵ Havel *Thriller* 286-287.

⁸⁶ Camus *Sisyphus* 124.

involved whose contrasting attitudes to the actions of mortals creates tension and drama, to which the mortals are helpless. The play opens with Aphrodite proclaiming her attitude towards the mortals: 'If they show a proper respect for my power I give them due status, but overthrow any who harbour arrogant thoughts towards me'.⁸⁷ The characters of Greek tragedy are aware of this fact, they live in fear of it. As the servant says to Hippolytus: 'Gods must have their worship, boy'.⁸⁸ This must create a state of extreme paranoia among humanity. The knowledge that everything one says or does, or even thinks, is useless for the gods will get their way over one. This is then surely a state not unlike an awareness of the Absurd. A higher power having control must create a meaningless in one's own existence. This then is where, within the context of this play, Hippolytus and Phaedra become absurd and tragic characters respectively.

As Rutherford says in his introduction to the play, 'Although the play is called *Hippolytus*... the interest of the spectator is divided between [Phaedra and Hippolytus]'.⁸⁹ In other words this story is, arguably, much more Phaedra's tragedy than Hippolytus', for the true tragic character at the play's denouement is the former. She is the one who suffers for Hippolytus' "crimes". In fact, 1st century AD Roman playwright Seneca's adaption of this play is titled *Phaedra*. It is Aphrodite's 'scheming' which causes her to fall deeply in love with Hippolytus and fall into a sickness.⁹⁰ For doing nothing wrong, "fate" in the form of the gods forces her into depression. Such powerful emotions, love and depression, which can come "without reason", as Camus puts it, puts real doubt into the purpose of life. She loses the will to live due an outside force. It is here that she confronted with the Absurd and reveals herself as a nihilist. She says: 'Cover my head... to die aware of nothing is best'.⁹¹ Like Oedipus, Phaedra's attitude when confronted with the Absurd is to blind herself from it, to escape it. Ultimately she commits the permanent escape and hangs herself. She becomes the typical tragic character who ends her own life to escape the life she has been fated to live. What she does not realise is that her death was also part of the gods' design, for as Aphrodite says in her prologue: 'she must die'.⁹² Thus, in reference to Camus' writing, by choosing suicide to escape the Absurd becomes in itself an absurd act.

Despite this, the gods and the Absurd could be described as two sides of the same coin. They both represent a helplessness and hopelessness of the human situation. The gods, however,

⁸⁷ Euripides *Hippolytus* 5-6.

⁸⁸ Euripides *Hippolytus* 107.

⁸⁹ Rutherford 2003: 130.

⁹⁰ Euripides *Hippolytus* 25.

⁹¹ Euripides *Hippolytus* 243-249.

⁹² Euripides *Hippolytus* 48.

are a point of meaning and control. The gods are in *control* of the mortals they decide their Fate and their meaning. Whilst this may come across to mortals as demeaning and paranoiac, it does mean there is an aspect of control in the world. This is unlike the Theatre of the Absurd which shows its audience that there is, in fact, no control. One is thus paradoxically both free and trapped by themselves and their actions. In Franz Kafka's *The Castle*, the most terrifying solution is left unrevealed as Kafka died before finishing the novel. It could be argued, however, that the most terrifying truth is not that the villages are at the mercy of the Castle officials, instead that the Castle itself is empty. They are alone. That is what separates tragedy and absurdism.

Martin Esslin's *The Theatre of the Absurd*

As aforementioned, it was Martin Esslin who coined the term "Theatre of the Absurd" with which he associated plays which presented themes similar Camus' essay.

In common usage, "absurd" may simply mean "ridiculous", but this is not the sense in which Camus uses the word, and in which it is used when we speak of the Theatre of the Absurd. In an essay on Kafka, Ionesco defined his understanding of the term as follows: 'Absurd is that which is devoid of purpose... Cut off from his religious, metaphysical, and transcendental roots, man is lost; all his actions become senseless, absurd, useless'.⁹³

A full discussion of the origins and history of the Theatre of the Absurd can be found in Esslin's book, particular the chapter entitled "The Tradition of the Absurd". I will, however, briefly discuss this tradition.

Esslin states that the genre was born out of a combination of theatre and literature types. These are primarily associated with the reflection and exaggeration of the state of being, in both its joys and its struggles. According to Esslin, Theatre of the Absurd's earliest ancestor was the Roman *mimus* which took humour in representing 'character types' with clowning.⁹⁴ This in turn influenced the clowns and fools of William Shakespeare, such as *A Midsummer Night's Dream's* Bottom.⁹⁵ This type of visual comedy that laughed at the fool who appears to have limited logic would go on to influence the silent film era, another of the Theatre of the Absurd's ancestors.

⁹³ Esslin 2014: 5.

⁹⁴ Esslin 2014: 273-274.

⁹⁵ Esslin 2014: 276.

Furthermore, a common trope of the genre is nonsensical dialogue, whose precedents can be seen in nursery rhymes or the nonsense poems of Lewis Carroll.⁹⁶ There is, however, ‘another type of the Theatre of the Absurd’, one with darker undertones, which comes from a tradition that follows Georg Büchner’s *Woyzeck*.⁹⁷ From this tradition came prose writer Franz Kafka. Esslin asserts that his writings had a ‘direct impact on the Theatre of the Absurd’.⁹⁸ He quotes Eugène Ionesco, a chief creator of Absurd theatre, who wrote this about Kafka’s work: ‘If man no longer has a guiding thread, it is because he no longer wants to have one’.⁹⁹ Moreover, according to Esslin, André Gide and Jean-Louis Barrault’s adaption of Kafka’s *The Trial* ‘preceded’ and ‘anticipated’ the main Absurd theatre writers.¹⁰⁰ For Esslin the most significant playwrights of the Theatre of the Absurd are Samuel Beckett, Arthur Adamov, Eugène Ionesco, Jean Genet, and Harold Pinter.

Esslin mentions Václav Havel in his book, however, as part of a chapter entitled “Parallels and Proselytes”. This suggests that, whilst he sees Havel as clearly inspired by the Theatre of the Absurd, he is doing something different. Havel himself mentions ‘crucial productions’ occurring at the same time including Beckett’s *Waiting for Godot*, Ionesco’s plays, the aforementioned *The Trial* adaptation, as well as his own plays.¹⁰¹ This shows him being part of that tradition, at least in his home town of Prague. Nevertheless, despite his plays being ‘described as a Czech version of the Theatre of the Absurd’, Havel believes ‘Kafka had a greater impact’ than the classic absurd works.¹⁰²

Václav Havel and drama

Václav Havel was a man who lived a drama. A president both admired and distrusted by his people. I spoke to one Czech woman who told me “Havel was theatre”. The woman was someone to whom I was teaching English and her level was relatively low, therefore her above statement is merely a grammatical mistake. Nevertheless, it is a phrase that rings surprisingly true; Václav Havel was theatre. His life and his work, both caught up together in an absurdist dream,

⁹⁶ Esslin 2014: 283-284.

⁹⁷ Esslin 2014: 281-282.

⁹⁸ Esslin 2014: 295.

⁹⁹ Ionesco 1957: 4 (as quoted by Esslin 2014: 296).

¹⁰⁰ Esslin 2014: 296-297.

¹⁰¹ Havel *Disturbing the Peace* 48.

¹⁰² Havel *Disturbing the Peace* 6.

or perhaps a tragic nightmare. Then it must be considered: how far is the absurdity tragic and how far is the tragedy absurd?

Whilst in Prague I visited the Václav Havel Library (*Knihovna Václava Havla*), an archive dedicated to Havel and his legacy. After ringing the bell, I was led upstairs whilst I attempted to explain why I was there and the plays I was interested in. I was eventually led to room with a desk whereupon I was sat down and told to wait. Minutes later I was presented with copies of two Havel plays, *The Garden Party* and *The Memorandum*, in Czech, both dating to their original productions. What intrigued me most, however, was that beneath the title of the former play was a subtitle not included in my English translation of the work; “*Tragédie o čtyřech jednáních*”, “a tragedy in four acts”.



Figure 2. *Zabradní slavnost* (*The Garden Party*) title page. Knihovna Václava Havla (accessed 17 Apr 2018).

Havel, then, saw this play as a tragedy. The question then is, what similarities does it bear to Aristotelian tragedy, where does it differ, and how does the Theatre of the Absurd sit alongside tragedy?

Havel’s everchanging situation, accompanied by the shifting fortunes of Czechoslovakia, influenced both him and his writings. Writing in 1976, Havel says that his experience of the world greatly shaped his influences.

The fortunate way in which my own “bioliterary” time meshed with historical time gave me another tremendous advantage: my early beginnings as a playwright coincided with the 1960s, a remarkable and relatively favourable era in which my plays... could actually reach the stage, something that would have been impossible before and after that... It was not just the formal fact that my

plays were permitted; there was something deeper and more essential here: ... that they resonated with the general state of mind.¹⁰³

The absurdity of the time, the popularity of ‘the French Theatre of the Absurd’, and the existence of the Theatre of the Balustrade, all created the right canvas on which Havel could write.¹⁰⁴ In August 1968, however, all this was to change at the violent climax of the Prague Spring.

August 1968... was something more: it was the end of an era; the disintegration of a spiritual and social climate, a profound mental dislocation. The seriousness of the events that caused this transformation and the profound experiences that came with it seemed to alter our prospects completely... The fun was definitely over.¹⁰⁵

After the absurdity of the 1960s, the end of the decade up to at least 1976, was suddenly ‘too serious, too dramatic and tragic’.¹⁰⁶ These dramatic shifts in the socio-political climate had huge impact on Havel. Less than three years after writing this he would be imprisoned for his longest stint and a further dramatic shift in his writing style can be seen again. I have divided this dissertation into three chapters, each marking a change of style in Havel’s writing brought about by changes in the political and personal environment around him. Through three complicated decades of Czech history, I will attempt to show the shifts from tragedy to absurdity and back again, and how Havel’s theatre can be seen as modern tragedies.

¹⁰³ Havel *Second Wind* 6.

¹⁰⁴ Havel *Second Wind* 5-6.

¹⁰⁵ Havel *Second Wind* 8-9.

¹⁰⁶ Havel *Second Wind* 9.

PART ONE: 1963-1968

The rise and fall of Alexander Dubček

Communism in Czechoslovakia was different to that in other countries in the Eastern Bloc. Throughout the 1950s a process known as de-Stalinisation was occurring in the wake of the death of USSR General Secretary Josef Stalin. This meant a lessening of the more “hard line” aspects of Soviet socialism including the culture of fear and show trials. Yet, whilst countries such as Poland and Hungary were experiencing periods of “liberalisation”, in Czechoslovakia the Communist Party (KSCĚ) still maintained a harder lined approach. KSCĚ First Secretary Antonín Novotný kept a close relationship with the USSR and hardly distanced his party from Stalin. Two years after Stalin’s death, for example, they constructed a monumental statue of Stalin in Letná Park in Prague which overlooked the city. According to H. G. Skilling, Novotný’s stand was to pursue ‘a minimum of de-Stalinization [sic] and avoid any serious relaxation of the system’.¹⁰⁷ This was a stand that he would keep well into the 1960s, a stubborn persistence and refusal to adapt or reform is what led to his eventual downfall in 1968.

The decade saw economic decline as well as discontent among both the general population and higher up Party members. Liberal writers and journalists began to criticize the government more openly which lead Novotný to retaliate saying that only the Party were allowed to give a voice to the ‘conscience of the nation’.¹⁰⁸ This uncompromising approach was generally supported, however there was growing opposition within the Party, with František Vodsloň stating that writers are a mirror of society and that it was ‘unwise’ to break the mirror for being at fault, thus blaming Novotný for the problems with the country.¹⁰⁹ To use an Aristotelian term, it is Novotný’s “hamartia”, so to speak, which brought about downfall. That is, his refusal to concede, to make changes, or reform created conflicts within the Party and between himself and the general public was his fatal flaw.

Slovakian Party member, Alexander Dubček, opened up the floodgates for criticism of Novotný with a speech that voiced his concerns for the Party, saying that a government should ‘lead, not direct society’.¹¹⁰ This inspired other Party members to voice their own concerns. Eventually Leonid Brezhnev, Soviet Union Communist Party General Secretary himself,

¹⁰⁷ Skilling 1976: 36.

¹⁰⁸ Skilling 1976: 65.

¹⁰⁹ Skilling 1976: 164.

¹¹⁰ Skilling 1976: 166.

suggested Novotný resign. On January 5th 1968 Novotný resigned as First Secretary of the KSČ and Dubček took up the position. In his first major speech, Dubček spoke of the need for adapting new methods and introducing 'real democracy', whilst also maintaining that he is not 'changing the general line' of Soviet style rule.¹¹¹ Thus beginning the period known as the Prague Spring.

The most significant change that Dubček brought about was the increased freedom of expression and the greater value of public opinion. The success of this can be best seen in the fact that Novotný eventually resigned as President after mounting public pressure for him to do so.¹¹² According to Skilling the general mood throughout the Prague Spring was one of 'high hopes blended with scepticism'.¹¹³ Whilst there was generally more freedom of expression both in public and in the press, this was also mixed with uncertainty as to what exactly was allowed, exactly how free they were. This is reflective, I think, of Dubček's own standing, and also Moscow's. Initially after the January assembly it did not appear that Dubček's appointment and policies were causing much controversy within the Soviet Union, however, as 1968 wore on Soviet leads began to express worries. Tensions between Brezhnev and Dubček began to grow. Warsaw Pact leaders met in Warsaw and Čierna nad Tisou in Slovakia to discuss the situation in Czechoslovakia. Soviet leaders such as Stepan Chervonenko, Soviet Ambassador to Czechoslovakia, wrote 'damning' reports about Dubček's personal manner to Moscow.¹¹⁴ Increasingly the Soviet Union became concerned with Dubček's abilities as a leader. On the 13th of August Brezhnev telephoned Dubček and chastised him for his failure to control his Presidium and accused him of deception of the true state of affairs in Czechoslovakia.¹¹⁵ This unsettled Dubček and he began to talk of resigning his post which Brezhnev dismissed. As Kieran Williams writes in his book on the subject, Dubček 'had... created an image of himself as unstable and the Presidium as not in control of events'.¹¹⁶ Czechoslovakia had lost the trust of the Soviet Union, so it suffered the consequences.

On the 20th-21st of August a coalition of Warsaw Pact armies invaded Czechoslovakia to take back control of the country to the Soviet Union. This led to the death of 137 Czechoslovak citizens and the eventual downfall of Alexander Dubček. The Prague Spring was crushed. Fellow Slovakian, and successor of the Communist Party of Slovakia, Gustáv Husák, gave a speech that

¹¹¹ Skilling 1976: 187.

¹¹² Skilling 1976: 205.

¹¹³ Skilling 1976: 192.

¹¹⁴ Williams 1997: 104.

¹¹⁵ Williams 1997: 107.

¹¹⁶ Williams 1997: 107.

spoke of how a 'leader should not cry with the nation in its hour of darkness' but 'give them hope for life'.¹¹⁷

The Garden Party (*Zahradní slavnost*):

The relationship between theatre and politics.

Václav Havel wrote political theatre. At least, he wrote theatre about the world in which he lived and breathed. 'Drama, in a unique way, always mirrors what is essential in its time'.¹¹⁸ The stage of life on which Havel played was one of huge political overtones. It was a world in which the politics of the time hung like a cloud over the very day-to-day activities of the citizens.

Havel is far from the first to do so; writers have been doing this since antiquity. Out of the democratic politics of 5th century BC Athens came one of the most interesting examples of political commentary in drama: Aeschylus' *Oresteia*. Here we have another playwright who is writing in a politically charged environment. In these three plays we are shown what the world was like before the political changes and the effect the changes had on his world.

The first play, *Agamemnon*, starts with Agamemnon returning from the Trojan War, only to be murdered by his wife, Clytaemnestra, for the sacrifice of their daughter ten years previous. The second, the *Libation Bearers*, concerns their son, Orestes, who has been away, returning to the House of Atreus upon orders by Apollo to avenge Agamemnon. Unrecognised by Clytaemnestra, he is invited in as a guest, before murdering her and her new husband. In the final play, the *Eumenides*, the Furies, deities of vengeance, angrily pursue Orestes for his act of matricide. Orestes goes to Athena for help, and she sets up a trial in Athens, with Apollo as defence, the Furies as prosecutors, twelve Athenian citizens as the jury, and Athena as the judge. Ultimately a vote is held which results in a tie. Athena has the final verdict and decrees that Orestes will be saved. She persuades the Furies to stay in Athens as it has become 'justly entitled, glorified forever'.¹¹⁹

¹¹⁷ Williams 1997: 152.

¹¹⁸ Havel *Disturbing the Peace* 200.

¹¹⁹ Aeschylus *Eumenides* 891.

According to Christopher Rocco, it is with the arrival of Greek tragedy that the heroes of 'old myths' became humanised, 'considered from the point of view of a citizen'.¹²⁰ Therefore in that respect, as a citizen, Aeschylus uses the old myths to put forward his own political viewpoint. Rocco states: 'In the context of a democratic celebration, the *Oresteia* celebrates democracy'.¹²¹ Nevertheless, others such as Paul Cartledge, do not see Aeschylus' work as being quite so blatant in its political standing. He writes:

Although a strong preference for due legal procedures of dispute-resolution over the pursuit of private blood-feud emerges clearly enough from the plays' internal movement and final plot-resolution, it is surely among other things a tribute to Aeschylus' subtlety and indirection that scholars are still divided over the playwright's own political attitude to the major constitutional changes.¹²²

Fagles and Stanford write in their introduction for the trilogy that 'the *Oresteia* is our rite of passage from savagery to civilisation'.¹²³

Aeschylus' rite of passage is our own. The final act of mimesis is our re-creation of his world. We may see the house of Atreus become the house of Athens and the city of mankind.¹²⁴

Fagles and Stanford's description might help to explain the trilogy's use across different political ideologies. Individuals can see their own views reflected within it. For example, the *Oresteia* was used by the Nazis to promote their fascist propaganda in the 1936 Olympic Games. The work was then also used by Jean-Paul Sartre as a, potentially, anti-Nazi piece during the German occupation of France. Furthermore, there were performances of it in the USSR.¹²⁵ This highlights the political ambiguity of the play, as well as showing just how important politics is to drama, even in its earliest form.

As David Wiles writes, 'It is no coincidence that democracy and tragedy were born at the same historical moment'.¹²⁶ He points out that the theatre allows the people to come together as one. The *ekklesia*, the democratic assembly in ancient Athens, allowed the common man to have his say on how the *polis* should be run and who should run it. The common man's voice, however, would only be heard by the select few, the Athenian male citizens. On the other hand,

¹²⁰ Rocco 1997: 138.

¹²¹ Rocco 1997: 138.

¹²² Cartledge 1997: 22.

¹²³ Fagles & Stanford 1979: 19.

¹²⁴ Fagles & Stanford 1979: 97.

¹²⁵ Trubotckin 2005: 255.

¹²⁶ Wiles 2000: 48.

the Theatre of Dionysus provided a stage on which a common man's view could be heard by thousands.

Theatre can still perform such a role in the modern age. Václav Havel's *The Garden Party* was first performed in 1963 and details absurd bureaucracy. It tells of the rise of a young man, preferring to play chess than work despite his parents' best wishes, to a successful business man, in charge of the liquidation of the Liquidation Office. Hugo Pludek's parents are keen for him to get a job with Kalabis, the Deputy Chairman at a Liquidation Office. They sit in their flat waiting for him to arrive and become increasingly anxious as the hours roll on and still he does not come. It eventually emerges that he is attending a garden party. Hugo's parents then send him to the party to find Kalabis. Instead he encounters different sections of the Liquidation Office who speak in a bureaucratic, illogical manner. Hugo adapts and copies this manner and uses it to his advantage by working his way up the ranks of the Office. Eventually, after having overseen the liquidation of the Inauguration Service and the Liquidation Office, becomes the head of the new Central Committee for Inauguration and Liquidation.

Havel took inspiration from, whilst gently mocking, the absurdities of the Communist regime. At the play's beginning the parents, Oldřich and Božena, worry that their other son Petr 'looks like a bourgeois intellectual' which could get them in trouble.¹²⁷ Oldřich complains about the injustice of it because he has a 'poor' and 'proletarian' background.¹²⁸ This satirises the communist ideology, whilst also acknowledging a sore point for Havel, whose family suffered for being "bourgeois". Furthermore, as Robert Pynsent indicates, within the dialogue Havel also parodies 'ordinary turns of phrase of the socialist period'.¹²⁹ Nevertheless, the play was put through the censor by the Chief Authority for Script Supervision (HSTD in Czech) and clearly deemed it acceptable to be performed.¹³⁰ At face value the play could be understood as an advertisement for the communist way of life as a means of personal success, which would explain why the HSTD approved it. While avoiding an outright political pastiche, he develops a philosophical, Sisyphean, Kafkaesque study of the loss of a person's identity through superficial bureaucracy. Havel believed in the power of theatre to enable philosophical thought and debate. He writes that the theatre is more than just a 'factory for the production of a plays' but a 'living spiritual and intellectual focus'.¹³¹

¹²⁷ Havel *Garden Party* 3.

¹²⁸ Havel *Garden Party* 3.

¹²⁹ Pynsent 2018: 340.

¹³⁰ Žantovský 2014: 69.

¹³¹ Havel *Disturbing the Peace* 40.

As well as having elements of tragedy, *The Garden Party* could also be compared to Old Comedy, the other theatrical genre performed at the City Dionysia. Martin Esslin mentions the Old Comedy playwright Aristophanes as part of the ‘kaleidoscopic patterns of changing tastes... [Absurd theatre] is made up of’.¹³² In his book *Aristophanes and his Theatre of the Absurd*, Paul Cartledge argues that Aristophanes ‘used populist comedy to discredit the political system’.¹³³ The idea of parody and comedy being used to attack a political system can be seen to echo the motives of Havel. In his essay *Aristophanes and the Discourse of Politics*, Malcom Heath explores to what extent Aristophanes had an impact on the Athenian political scene. He makes reference to scene from the *Archarnians* in which Aristophanes responds to Athenian politician Cleon’s prosecution ‘with a parody of the way in which a politician would justify himself’.¹³⁴ The comedian’s mockery of politician’s speech is comparable to the way in which Havel uses political parody. Old Comedy allowed non-political speakers, such as Aristophanes, to comment on politics, quite openly, and on a large scale, to the crowd in the fairly expansive Theatre of Dionysus.

Whilst there is a relation between politics and tragedy, if the drama of tragedy was too close to home it would not be popular. Euripides’ first version of *Hippolytus*, for example, was set in Athens and the audience reportedly received the play badly. Thus, when Euripides attempted to adapt the myth again, he set it far away, in Troezen. It would appear that the audiences of tragedy and comedy reacted very differently to the action they saw. For the latter, Athens and its politicians were open to attack, whereas for the former, the playwright had to be careful to present Athens positively and keep the horror of the play far away from its gates. Havel, like Aristophanes, used comedy to get political parody past the “censors”, so to speak.

The Garden Party uses parody to critique Czech communism and the Communist Party, although the criticism appears much more evident in his later plays. Nevertheless, as Pynsent writes, Havel ‘spent his politically aware life criticizing [*sic*] and making fun of the Czechoslovak establishment, old and new’.¹³⁵ Havel was writing an Absurd drama about an absurd time. Jonathan Bolton discusses this in detail in his book *Worlds of Dissent* which explores what life was like for those in Communist era Czechoslovakia who were given the “dissident” label, such as Havel. Bolton writes how the Party’s early days of power, in the 1950s, which were characterised by Stalinist terror, evoked ‘existentialist themes of guilt, isolation, objectification, and the

¹³² Esslin 2014: 271.

¹³³ Cartledge 2001: 46.

¹³⁴ Heath 1997: 234.

¹³⁵ Pynsent 2018: 334.

confrontation with death'.¹³⁶ During the dawn and the extent of the 1960s, however, Bolton argues that this evolved into a 'lighter form' of existentialism, one of 'tragicomedy' instead of tragedy, namely in the form of absurdism.¹³⁷ This could perhaps be due to the appearance of Western Theatre of the Absurd plays that began to be performed on Prague stages, such as Beckett and Ionesco, that perhaps Czechoslovak citizens saw as analogous to their own situations. Bolton gives further accounts of two Czech writers, Jaroslav Putík and Jiří Lederer, in the immediate aftermath of the 1968 Warsaw Pact invasion. Both write about seeing a man leaning out of a taxi, either at Náměstí Republiky or Václavské náměstí in Prague, and playing the violin as an absurd act of defiance.¹³⁸ According to Bolton, 'an absurd moment in the midst of great historical events' is what sets the tone for the following decade.¹³⁹

The role of "recognition" in Aristotelian tragedy and *The Garden Party*, and its role in absurdist literature.

Václav Havel's letters from prison to his wife, Olga Havlová, see him pondering philosophical questions, such as the role of "Being" and a person's "I", as well as some highly personal problems.¹⁴⁰ In particular he contemplates the philosophy of the theatre, including a reference to Aristotle.

In *Letter 117*, Havel discusses the role of 'human identity' and "recognition" in theatre, as the former being 'intrinsically related to the phenomenon of theatre'.¹⁴¹ Recognition is the moment at which the protagonist, or antagonist, realises something that changes their situation, or even their very nature. In the *Poetics*, Aristotle describes 'ἀναγνώρισις', a term translated as "recognition" by Heath. .¹⁴² This is a change from ignorance to knowledge, the moment in which the character becomes self-aware of their actions, their personality, their flaws – or, as Havel puts it, they become aware of their own human identity. Often this recognition comes too late for them and leads to a *περιπέτεια*, "reversal", another Aristotelian term referring to a change in

¹³⁶ Bolton 2012: 81.

¹³⁷ Bolton 2012: 81.

¹³⁸ Bolton 2012: 83.

¹³⁹ Bolton 2012: 83.

¹⁴⁰ Havel *Letter 9* 35.

¹⁴¹ Havel *Letter 117* 290.

¹⁴² Aristotle *Poetics* 1452a.

fortune.¹⁴³ This use of “recognition” is particularly fundamental to ancient Greek tragedy, it is the climax of the drama, the cathartic moment in which the hamartia has been revealed to them, as described by Aristotle. He writes that “recognition”, coinciding with “reversal”, ‘will evoke either pity or fear... and will serve to bring about the happy or unhappy ending’.¹⁴⁴ For some examples one can look to Clytaemnestra in the *Libation Bearers*, she experiences this “recognition” at the moment she realises that the stranger in her house is her son, Orestes. Or, similarly, when Agave realises she is holding her son’s severed head in the *Bacchae*. Havel himself mentions, of course, Oedipus in *Oedipus the King*: ‘Jocasta recognises that Oedipus is Oedipus, Oedipus recognises that Jocasta is Jocasta’.¹⁴⁵ This example is also employed by Aristotle, who uses the play many times as an example of a good tragedy.¹⁴⁶

This then takes us to Havel’s own use of “recognition” in his plays, his use of Aristotle’s structural technique. In the same letter Havel says that he tried it himself at the end of *The Garden Party*.¹⁴⁷ At the play’s end Hugo Pludek returns home to his parents having made his way to the top position and is no longer himself. His father says to him: ‘Listen, who are you, in fact?’¹⁴⁸ Here the moment of “recognition” is reversed, changed to “de-recognition”. As discussed, the fundamental moment in a tragic play comes when the protagonist, the tragic hero, realises their very existence, and is forced to either live with the consequences or to take their own life. In Havel’s play, however, this concept is turned on its head as Hugo loses his existence. Hugo is no longer Hugo, to the extent that his family do not recognise him and he does not recognise himself.

BOŽENA: Yes, of course, as soon as our darling Hugo arrives.

HUGO: He’s not home yet?

OLDŘICH: He was probably delayed by that liquidation.¹⁴⁹

Therefore, the question to be considered here is to what extent does “de-recognition” relate to “recognition” and is it then still a component of the make-up of a tragic play? Havel’s early subtitle to the play, *Tragédie o čtyřech jednáních. Divadlo Na zábradlí 1962*, “*The Garden Party*. A

¹⁴³ Aristotle *Poetics* 1452a.

¹⁴⁴ Aristotle *Poetics* 14512a-1452b.

¹⁴⁵ Havel *Letter* 117 291.

¹⁴⁶ Aristotle *Poetics* 1452a.

¹⁴⁷ Havel *Letter* 117 291.

¹⁴⁸ Havel *Garden Party* 4.49.

¹⁴⁹ Havel *Garden Party* 4.45.

tragedy in four acts. Theatre on the Balustrade 1962” is from a year before the play was performed.¹⁵⁰ Thus, this play was at one point considered a tragedy.

Albert Camus also discusses this “recognition” in relation to tragedy in the final chapter of his essay *The Myth of Sisyphus*, entitled *Appendix*. He writes that Sisyphus’ myth is ‘tragic only at the rare moments it becomes conscious’.¹⁵¹ It is the moment Sisyphus recognises the hopelessness of the task ahead of him that he becomes a tragic figure. This, however, is what also makes him an absurd figure. ‘If the descent is thus sometimes performed in sorrow, it can also take place in joy’.¹⁵² Whilst he does recognise the tragedy of his situation at times, it is the fact that he is able to overcome this and see the “joy” too in his situation that makes Sisyphus the absurd hero. Camus also mentions the character of Oedipus in Sophocles’ play. He writes, similarly, that ‘from the moment he knows [what he has done and who he is], his tragedy begins’.¹⁵³ If Oedipus’ “rock” is his attempt to solve King Laius’ murder, then his “recognition” is his completion of the task. He does what Sisyphus never can do and pushes the rock over the hill. The tragedy lies in the fact that his success leads to his downfall. Meanwhile, according to Camus, Sisyphus “recognises” ‘the whole extent of his wretched condition; it is what he thinks of during his descent’.¹⁵⁴ Both characters become tragic, therefore, when they are no longer performing their tasks. Oedipus succumbs to the grief as he self-harms and wishes his own demise. Therefore, according to Camus, this “recognition” is not only fundamental to tragedy, but also fundamental to what separates tragedy from absurdity.

Hugo Pludek, at the denouement of *The Garden Party*, goes through what Havel calls a “de-recognition”. Therefore, if we take what Camus writes, that tragedy occurs at the point of recognition or consciousness, how does this correspond with the idea that *The Garden Party* is a “tragédie”? In the course of the play, Hugo undergoes a “reversal”, both in terms of his fortune and his character. At the play’s beginning his father asks him if he thinks ‘anybody will form [his life for him]’, to which he replies: ‘Yes, Dad’.¹⁵⁵ Whereas, as the play develops, he takes charge of his own fate by taking charge of the company. He undergoes “reversal” from an uninspired character to achieving ‘outstanding success’ in constructing a ‘Central Commission for Inauguration and Liquidation’.¹⁵⁶ Whilst comical, this “reversal” shows a serious change of

¹⁵⁰ [KnVH]

¹⁵¹ Camus *Sisyphus* 117.

¹⁵² Camus *Sisyphus* 117.

¹⁵³ Camus *Sisyphus* 118.

¹⁵⁴ Camus *Sisyphus* 117.

¹⁵⁵ Havel *Garden Party* 6.

¹⁵⁶ Havel *Garden Party* 49.

character. What is lacking, however, from the Aristotelian view of tragedy is “recognition” of this “reversal”. Hugo asks who is ‘actually in charge’ and he is told it is Hugo Pludek, so he announces he will ‘go and see him now’.¹⁵⁷ Hugo does not actually recognise his success as his own. *The Garden Party* then becomes an anti-tragedy. Despite the subtitle, this play appears to have more influence from the Theatre of the Absurd than tragedy. Hugo is an absurd hero, as opposed to a tragic, simply because he fails to recognise his fate.

The argument could be made that the play also cannot be a tragedy since it has a “happy ending”. This would, however, be an incorrect argument since tragedy does not need require an “unhappy ending” to be a tragedy. Aristotle himself writes that the outcome of “recognition” and “reversal” will be either ‘τὸ ἀτυχεῖν καὶ τὸ εὐτυχεῖν’, “bad fortune and good fortune”.¹⁵⁸ Euripides’ plays *Ion*, *Iphigenia at Aulis* and *Helen* are examples within the repertoire of Athenian tragedy which have a “happy ending”, in that there is no occurrence of death or self-harm. A third component mentioned by Aristotle is ‘πᾶθος’, “suffering”.¹⁵⁹ Despite the “happy ending” this component is still present in both plays.

In *Ion*, a woman named Creusa is raped by Apollo and leaves her resulting child to die to prevent shame from her family. Despite this, it transpires that the child, named Ion, is alive and living in Delphi. Creusa and her husband, Xuthus, travel there with the aim of curing their impotency. She meets Ion, and after some mistaken identity, reunite as mother and son. Xuthus, however, believes the boy to be his and Creusa does not tell him otherwise in order to keep him happy. The play ends with Athena telling Ion to ‘Assume [his] seat upon [his] ancient thrones’, as he becomes a prince of Athens.¹⁶⁰ Here, despite the “happy ending”, there is “recognition”, “reversal”, and “suffering” in the form of agony.

In *Iphigenia at Aulis* and *Helen*, Euripides alters the Trojan War myths to give them a “happier ending”. The former myth tells of Iphigenia, daughter of Agamemnon who is brought to Aulis under the pretence of marrying Achilles. In fact, Artemis has made it that the Greeks cannot sail due to the lack of winds, and this can only be remedied by the sacrifice of Agamemnon’s eldest daughter. In the original myth Iphigenia is killed and the Greeks are able to sail on to Troy. In Euripides’ version, however, the girl is saved at the last minute when Artemis replaces her with a deer upon the altar. Again, despite the “happy ending”, the characters of the play are made to suffer. In Euripides’ *Helen*, he adapts a version of the myth in which Helen

¹⁵⁷ Havel *Garden Party* 42.

¹⁵⁸ Aristotle *Poetics* 1452b.

¹⁵⁹ Aristotle *Poetics* 1452b.

¹⁶⁰ Euripides *Ion* 1617.

herself did not actually go to Troy, rather it was a phantom. The play ends with Menelaus rescuing the real Helen from where she has been held captive.

“Recognition” is also present in absurdist literature. The writer Franz Kafka, like Havel, lived in Prague, however he was predominantly German-speaking and wrote all his works in German. Both Havel and Kafka wrote similarly about this theme of human identity and “recognition”. In Kafka’s *The Castle* the protagonist, K., is informed that he has been given a job working for the mysterious Castle but he is never granted access and never told what it is he should be doing. It transpires that the whole village is in awe of the Castle and yet no-one really knows anything about it. Another Kafka novel, *The Trial*, the protagonist, Josef K., is caught up in a trial for a crime he does not believe he has committed. The whole novel details Josef’s struggle to declare his innocence and it becomes apparent that, whatever he does, he will be on trial for the rest of his life. Both of these novels can be referred to as “pre-absurdist” since they are written before the philosophy became mainstream with Camus’s writings. Both the protagonists can be seen as Sisyphean characters, struggling to complete an ultimately unachievable task, potentially for eternity. Kafka was a troubled man, as extracts from his diary prove. He often writes about his unhappiness: ‘I write this very decidedly out of despair over my very body and over a future with this body’.¹⁶¹ This shows a man who feels self-hatred, or even disgust. He found the very act of “Being” a struggle. The ending of *The Castle* is entirely ambiguous for the book was unfinished. *The Trial*, however, ends with Josef being taken to a quarry by two nameless men who stab him to death. Whilst this episode appears tragic, it is with a single line that proves Josef’s absurdity. He sees a man in a window and wonders: ‘Who was it? A friend? A good man?... One who wanted to help? Were there still objections which had been forgotten?’.¹⁶² Thus, even at the point of death, a point at which he is given the chance to be free from the absurdity of his life, Josef still keeps hope that he could live, he still wishes to remain in the Absurd.

This divergence to discuss Franz Kafka is relevant as Havel discussed Kafka’s influence on him and his plays.¹⁶³ The plot of *The Memorandum* evokes the plot of *The Castle*; Gross’ futile attempts to have his memorandum translated blocked by layers of office bureaucracy is similar to K.’s futile attempts to send a message to the Castle. Jonathan Bolton discusses the contribution of Kafka to the absurd atmosphere of the time. The author was banned by the Communist Party

¹⁶¹ Kafka *Diaries* 10.

¹⁶² Kafka *Trial* 178.

¹⁶³ Havel *Disturbing the Peace* 6.

initially, being considered 'ideologically undesirable', a pessimistic writer which went against the Party's initial optimistic propaganda.¹⁶⁴ During the country's "liberalisation" period of the 60s, however, Kafka was "rehabilitated" ... for a socialist audience'.¹⁶⁵ According to Bolton, this rediscovery of Kafka, particular *The Trial* was, for the Czechoslovak people who opposed the regime, an amusing analogy of their own lives. It could have been during this period that Havel first read Kafka and found himself inspiration for his plays, such as *The Garden Party* and *The Memorandum*. Furthermore, both *The Trial* and *The Castle* bring to mind the restrictive, paranoiac nature of the Olympian gods in Athenian tragedy, with the judges and the Castle officials respectively.

The Memorandum (*Vyrozumění*):

The tragic and absurd attitudes towards despair: relinquish and revolt

Despite the discussion on "happy endings", the "suffering" in tragedy usually occurs after the "recognition". It is the response to the "recognition" that distinguishes the tragic and the absurd hero.

To be, or not to be; that is the question:
Whether 'tis nobler in the mind to suffer
The slings and arrows of outrageous fortune.¹⁶⁶

This line from Shakespeare's *Hamlet* is so often quoted that it almost becomes itself a cliché. Nevertheless, it is a defining statement of the human state of Being, on whether being alive is worth it all. It is a test of the absurd man to retain his nature. To carry on the painful journey that he walks, each step more difficult than the last, and simply Being because he can see the beauty in the very state of it. Or to simply stop. To return then to Camus' writings, it would be as if Sisyphus saw his rock fall to the bottom of the hill, and, instead of happiness, he relinquishes and gives into despair. That is what Camus would term 'philosophical suicide', the

¹⁶⁴ Bolton 2012: 84.

¹⁶⁵ Bolton 2012: 84

¹⁶⁶ Shakespeare *Hamlet* 3.1.

rejection of the Absurd is in itself absurd.¹⁶⁷ As Camus puts it: ‘The struggle is eluded’, that is, the struggle is not over but rather avoided.¹⁶⁸ Avoiding the Absurd is a ‘divorce’ from the acceptance of one’s situation.¹⁶⁹ Raymond Williams’s book, *Modern Tragedy*, discusses in a chapter titled “Tragic Despair and Revolt”, Camus’ attitude towards tragedy and the absurd hero’s reaction to despair. He writes, in summary: ‘The condition despair... occurs at the point of recognition of what is called “the Absurd”’.¹⁷⁰

Camus discusses suicide extensively in *The Myth of Sisyphus*. He says that suicide comes after the “recognition” of the tragedy. The “recognition” in this case is the realisation of the Absurd, and, instead of acceptance, the person will ‘turn away from it’, and will wish to end his Being, finding it to be unbearable.¹⁷¹ In many ways, suicide is the ultimate extreme reaction to this realisation, it is a permanent solution. I would argue that even the mere act of self-harm is also a rejection of the Absurd. There is a famous example of such a rejection in classical tragedy. At the denouement of Sophocles’ *Oedipus the King*, Oedipus “recognises” the consequences of his actions, as a realisation of the Absurd. He realises that he has become entangled in an inescapable situation which results in the death of his father by his own hand, his marriage to his mother, and her eventual suicide. Understandably, his reaction to this is one of sheer despair. ‘The agony! I am agony – where am I going?... My destiny, my dark power, what a leap you made!’.¹⁷² He then proceeds to stab out his eyes so as to be blind from the ‘pain [he] suffered, [and] all the pain [he] caused’.¹⁷³ In the context of the Absurd, according to Camus, this is the moment at which Oedipus stops being an absurd character and becomes a tragic one. It is his abandonment of the Absurd that makes him tragic.

Havel appears to be himself an absurd man, in the philosophical sense. He has said that it is not theatre itself in general that interests him, it is in fact solely the Theatre of the Absurd. In *Letter 102*, Havel writes: ‘I am definitely not what we call a “*divadelník*” [a professional theatre person], someone for whom theatre is the only imaginable vocation. When I was involved in theatre it was always with a specific theatre’, meaning Theatre of the Absurd.¹⁷⁴ Furthermore, in the same letter, in which he discusses Absurd theatre, he says himself that he found the plays of famous absurdist Samuel Beckett, Eugene Ionesco, and others to be ‘extremely close to [his]

¹⁶⁷ Camus *Sisyphus* 39.

¹⁶⁸ Camus *Sisyphus* 34.

¹⁶⁹ Camus *Sisyphus* 34.

¹⁷⁰ Williams 2001: 175.

¹⁷¹ Camus *Sisyphus* 53.

¹⁷² Sophocles *Oedipus* 1310-1312.

¹⁷³ Sophocles *Oedipus* 1270-1271.

¹⁷⁴ Havel *Letters* 102.

own temperament and sensibility'.¹⁷⁵ Despite this, he was not immune to an 'attack of the melancholy'.¹⁷⁶ This "melancholy", is the test of the absurdist to maintain his absurd Being. Havel was often honest about these moments of melancholy and self-doubt, particularly in relation to his terms in prison and as president of his country. In the book *Disturbing the Peace*, his interviewer, Karel Hvizdala, asks Havel if he has even considered committing suicide. He replies: 'Is there anyone who has never thought of suicide?'.¹⁷⁷ This suggests that Havel believes that among the definitive components of Being is the lingering desire to not be, or at least a flirtation with the idea. At that rate, life for every human is a battle to survive. Unlike Camus, Havel considers suicide in an almost positive light. He says he respects those who commit suicide for their 'courage' and that instead of being someone who has wasted their life, they 'think that life is too precious a thing to [live]... without love, without hope'.¹⁷⁸ For Havel, rather than a morbid end to desperation, suicide stands as an option should he ever need it, 'a rope... which I can grab whenever I don't have the strength to go on'.¹⁷⁹ In this sense it is the fact that he knows he has the ability to turn to a tragic end, and chooses not to, that makes Havel an absurd man. He says: 'I wish to go on living despite everything'.¹⁸⁰ The argument could be made here that Oedipus also chooses to go on living "despite everything". Whilst this is the case, his act of self-harm becomes in itself a rejection of the Absurd.

Despair in *The Memorandum*

In *The Garden Party* Havel explores the themes of absurdism and the Theatre of the Absurd, however at the end of *The Memorandum* he makes clear reference to Albert Camus' writings. This 1965 play is set in a Kafkaesque, bureaucratic world in which language used within the organisation is replaced with a new one called "Ptydepe". The idea is that Ptydepe will 'make office communications more accurate and introduce precision and order in their terminology', thus preventing misunderstandings.¹⁸¹ At the play's opening, Josef Gross, the Managing Director, is confused reading a memorandum written in Ptydepe for he has not been informed of its

¹⁷⁵ Havel *Letters* 102.

¹⁷⁶ Havel *Letters* 108.

¹⁷⁷ Havel *Disturbing the Peace* 187.

¹⁷⁸ Havel *Disturbing the Peace* 188.

¹⁷⁹ Havel *Disturbing the Peace* 187.

¹⁸⁰ Havel *Disturbing the Peace* 187.

¹⁸¹ Havel *Memorandum* 58.

introduction. Through the course of the play Gross struggles fruitlessly to get his memorandum translated, which is difficult since Ptydepe is nearly impossible to learn and one may only do a translation once one has passed one's exams. Eventually Marie, the translation secretary, breaks the rules and translates the memorandum which suggests that Gross 'liquidate[s] with the greatest possible resolution and speed any attempt to introduce Ptydepe into [his] organisation'.¹⁸² Nevertheless, Marie is fired for going against the rules. She is distraught and pleads with Gross, now again as Managing Director, to 'reverse [the] decision'.¹⁸³ It is whilst she is in this state of despair that Gross explains the absurd world that they live in and, using Camus' arguments, why that is not a bad thing. He says: 'Our life has lost a sort of higher axle, and we are... profoundly alienated from the world, from others, and from ourselves'.¹⁸⁴ "Sort of higher axle" is Vera Blackwell's translation, the original Czech is "*jakýsi vyšší úběžník*" which is better translated as "some higher perspective".

Here Gross is explaining the existential state of mind, in that life has no meaning. It is at this point that one can either succumb to total despair and choose to hurt or kill oneself, or to see the positivity in that. To use a simile, it is as if one goes to work one day and is told that for that day one can do whatever one pleases and at the end of the day one will still get paid. One can choose to work or choose not to. The lack of purpose to that day would appear a good thing to the average worker. Then that is how absurdists see life; without purpose they can do whatever they please and will still die along with everyone else.

To return to *The Memorandum*, Gross explains to Marie that he would like to help her, but due to the Absurd, bureaucratic nature of the company he cannot, which makes him 'frightened'.¹⁸⁵ He is frightened because he considers her to be 'the last remnants of Man's humanity', in that she has not been consumed by the Absurd, and that in saving her would enable him to escape it. He is frightened because he simply cannot.¹⁸⁶ Here Gross realises he is faced with a decision; to give into despair or to merely accept his situation, and as the absurd hero he chooses the latter. He could leave the company, but that would be philosophical suicide, in Camus' sense.

Havel most directly references Camus with a reference to Sisyphus. In explaining the absurdity of the world to Marie, Gross says: '*J sme jako ten Sisyfos*' – "We are like that Sisyphus".¹⁸⁷

¹⁸² Havel *Memorandum* 115.

¹⁸³ Havel *Memorandum* 128.

¹⁸⁴ Havel *Memorandum* 129.

¹⁸⁵ Havel *Memorandum* 129.

¹⁸⁶ Havel *Memorandum* 129.

¹⁸⁷ Havel *Vyrozumění* 44.

Considering the themes Gross discusses in this scene, this evidently refers to Camus' essay rather than the character from Greek mythology. Gross says: '*zděšen hledí jako cizinec na sebe sama, bez možnosti nebyť tím, čím není, a být tím, čím je*'.¹⁸⁸ This certainly complicated Czech sentence is translated by Vera Blackwell as: 'horrified, [Man] stares as a stranger at himself, unable not to be what he is not, nor to be what he is'.¹⁸⁹ This is another example of Havel's interest in the dramatic notion of the "recognition" of Being, "*být*". In both tragedy and absurdity, the protagonist is faced with this recognition, either of what they are and what they are unable to be. Oedipus, for example, is forced to realise that his attempts at being a 'good' man are in fact in vain, for such attempts reveal what his true "Being" is, as a fundamentally 'depraved' man.¹⁹⁰

In demonstrating the Absurd to Marie, Gross has presented her with that ultimate choice herself: tragedy or absurdity. He tells her there's no point '*tragizováním svých perspektiv*', which translated literally means "tragedising [her] perspective", so having a tragic perspective on her situation.¹⁹¹ She could make her situation tragic and give in to the Absurd, or she could see the positives. Gross tells her how she can now take other, perhaps better, opportunities, that she must not lose her 'hope, [her] love of life and [her] trust in people! Keep smiling!'.¹⁹² This demonstrates how the fundamental point of absurd thinking is to see the beauty in simply living despite the absurd nature of life. Besides, she has all these opportunities whereas Gross is stuck within the company, stuck rolling Sisyphus' rock up the same hill. He says: '*Vím, že je to absurdní, drabá Marie, ale musím teď na oběd*', "I know that it is absurd, dear Marie, but I must now go to lunch".¹⁹³ He recognises the absurdity of his situation, and yet he cannot escape it. In this scene he turns Marie's despair on its head, by making her see that she is, in fact, in a better situation by being fired, and it is he who should be in despair. Yet through the absurd philosophy both revolt against it. Raymond Williams describes Camus' humanism as 'a refusal to despair' which summarises Gross' attitude here.¹⁹⁴

The final stage directions of the play further evoke Camus' *The Myth of Sisyphus* essay. Havel writes that Marie exits the stage '*dojata*', "touched",¹⁹⁵ I read this as an evocation of the final line of Camus' essay on Sisyphus: 'One must imagine Sisyphus happy'.¹⁹⁶ Despite being fired

¹⁸⁸ Havel *Vyrozumění* 44.

¹⁸⁹ Havel *Memorandum* 129.

¹⁹⁰ Aristotle *Poetics* 1452b-1453a.

¹⁹¹ Havel *Vyrozumění* 44.

¹⁹² Havel *Memorandum* 130.

¹⁹³ Havel *Vyrozumění* 44.

¹⁹⁴ Williams 2001: 183.

¹⁹⁵ Havel *Memorandum* 130.

¹⁹⁶ Camus *Sisyphus* 119.

and exposed to the maddening absurdity of life, Marie also becomes the absurd hero, rather than the tragic, by remaining happy. As Havel says; 'I wish to go on living despite everything'.¹⁹⁷

Despair in *The Garden Party*

To discuss the idea of despair within *The Garden Party* is a strange idea, since this is a play almost devoid of any emotion at all, in particular with its protagonist. I include it in this section, however, since it is a good example of Theatre of the Absurd's attitude towards despair. The play is an alienating, confusing, and humorous experience though saying it is devoid of emotion is incorrect. Unlike Havel's later plays, the emotion is hidden amongst the absurdity.

Hugo's parents wait for Oldřich's colleague, Kalabis, to arrive, however it gets increasingly late and he still does not turn up. They react to this in a comically tragic manner. Božena cries: 'Nobody will come! Nobody will write! Nobody will call! We're alone! Alone in the whole world!'.¹⁹⁸ Similarly Oldřich says: 'He won't come! We're finished! Nobody cares for us...!'.¹⁹⁹ In the confusion of the world the one bit of hope they cling to is Kalabis' arrival, and without this they turn to despair. In that case, these outbursts are a reaction to, and an expression of, the Absurd. The idea of two people waiting hopelessly, and thus absurdly, for someone to arrive who never will, bears similarities to Samuel Beckett's 1953 play, *Waiting for Godot*. Havel writes about turning twenty in 1956 and being equipped with 'the experience of Franz Kafka and the French Theatre of the Absurd'.²⁰⁰ Furthermore, Beckett's play being performed alongside his own during the 1960s.²⁰¹ Therefore, it is likely that the comparison was intentional.

The Pludeks' outburst is also similar to similar cries of grief in classical tragedy, albeit intended to be comical. For example, Agaue in Euripides' *Bacchae* when having been exiled for dismembering her son cries: 'Oh, where am I to turn, now I am banished from my country?'.²⁰² Or when Creon in Sophocles' *Antigone* discovers how his stubborn actions caused the deaths of Antigone, his son, and his wife, he succumbs to despair and cries: 'Wailing wreck of a man,

¹⁹⁷ Havel *Disturbing the Peace* 187.

¹⁹⁸ Havel *Garden Party* 8.

¹⁹⁹ Havel *Garden Party* 9.

²⁰⁰ Havel *Second Wind* 5.

²⁰¹ Havel *Disturbing the Peace* 48.

²⁰² Euripides *Bacchae* 1366.

whom to look to? Where to lean for support?'.²⁰³ In both these cases the characters have been forced to face the Absurd as the gods have abandoned them.

The Increased Difficulty of Concentration (*Ztížená možnost soustředění*):

Personal absurdity and the abandonment of tragedy

Havel's later play, *The Increased Difficulty of Concentration*, is a much more personal piece. The play was first performed in April 1968, a mere four months before the Prague Spring would come dramatically to an end. Despite this, however, unlike *The Garden Party* and *The Memorandum*, this play was not based in politics. Havel continues to develop the Theatre of the Absurd style he experimented with in his previous two plays. It is in this play, however, that Havel's own style of the Theatre of the Absurd starts to emerge, a style that continues for the rest of his 20th century plays. He departs from a traditional Beckett-esque structure, to a more personal and disconnected one. Whereas *The Garden Party*'s Hugo was a typical absurd hero, with Eduard Huml Havel bases the hero on himself and his life. Huml is a social scientist who has confusing interactions with his wife, the women he is dating, and a group of scientists with a malfunctioning robot. The structure of the play is deconstructed and reconstructed in the wrong order, hence the difficulty of concentration referenced in the title. This creates an anxious atmosphere in which the protagonist operates, the audience experiences the confusion and anxiety of his life from the way the play is structured.

Without the existence of a linear plot, the Aristotelian notions of "recognition", "reversal", and "catharsis" become irrelevant. Despite fourteen years later writing about 'the importance of structure' in theatre, here structure is abandoned.²⁰⁴ Therefore, this play gives way entirely to absurdity.

²⁰³ Sophocles *Antigone* 1341.

²⁰⁴ Havel *Letter 115* 286.

PART TWO: 1975-1978

I have already discussed how the life for “dissidents” in Czechoslovakia changed from existential dread to existential humour in the 1960s. This absurdity would continue into the 1970s, even though the decade following the Prague Spring gave way to tougher policing and greater censorship. It did not, however, ever return to the evil of the Stalinist era. Bolton writes the crucial sentence regarding how the post-1968 regime treated its opponents; it strived to make their lives ‘difficult, rather than impossible’.²⁰⁵ Even “dissidents” could still easily find property, Havel himself owned a flat on the banks of the Vltava and a summer cottage in Hrádeček, in northern Bohemia. Bolton mentions that ‘one of the regime’s main targets’, Luděk Pachman was able to obtain a disability pension from the Party after being banned from work.²⁰⁶ More commonly, disgraced Party members who were banned for political activity were punished by being given work, for instance, as a taxi driver.²⁰⁷ Havel, although not a Party member, was punished by the regime by being made to work in a brewery. His time working for the brewery was semi-autobiographically dramatized in the first of his Vaněk plays which I will discuss in this chapter.

During the latter end of the decade in 1979, a few months before he was arrested, Havel was very closely monitored by the Party’s Secret Police. Havel wrote about this period of his life as *Reports on My House Arrest* in which he discusses how the police would go with him everywhere he went, following either in a car or on foot. The absurdity of the situation perhaps comes to its peak when Havel recounts how ‘they have even taken a sauna with [him]’.²⁰⁸ He also mentions how the police built ‘a peculiar guardhouse on spindly legs’ in his Hrádeček garden.²⁰⁹ A BBC documentary from 2009 entitled *The Lost World of Communism* includes a clip recorded during this period in which Havel comments on this “peculiar guardhouse”. In English he describes it as ‘the dream of... George Orwell’, as well as joking how they are his ‘new neighbours’.²¹⁰ Furthermore, in his report, Havel describes how when taking ‘the dog for a walk... a policeman always went with [him]’.²¹¹ This is also shown in the documentary with Havel speaking in 2009 describing how his freedom of movement was restricted to the point that he ‘couldn’t leave the house’, not even

²⁰⁵ Bolton 2012: 87.

²⁰⁶ Bolton 2012: 86.

²⁰⁷ Bolton 2012: 87.

²⁰⁸ Havel *House Arrest* 216-217.

²⁰⁹ Havel *House Arrest* 218.

²¹⁰ BBC Two 2009: 48:10-48:50.

²¹¹ Havel *House Arrest* 216.

to go shopping.²¹² He notes how ‘today that might seem funny, but back then it wasn’t pleasant at all’.²¹³ This, I believe, sums up well the absurd experience of the time. Whilst the events, or perhaps lack of “events” and the actions of the Party’s Secret Police may appear amusing and bizarre, for the people who lived it, their absurdity was tested. Therefore, to discuss the Absurd one needs to discuss the other existentialist philosophy that concerns itself with it; nihilism.

Nihilism

I have discussed the absurdist approach to tragedy and how Havel uses such an approach in his plays. There is, however, an alternative approach to tragedy, that is the other existential philosophies. An absurdist can look at the despair suffered by the characters in tragic drama and, through a philosophical study of the character’s situation in relation to theirs, can see the positives in the outcome. Other existential philosophers, however, could see the characters’ downfalls as representative of the negative aspects of the world.

Nihilistic approach to tragedy

There are several types of nihilism, however I will primarily continue with the type known as “existential nihilism”. In his book, *The Specter of the Absurd*, Donald A. Crosby sums up existential nihilism.

An existential nihilist judges the human existence to be pointless and absurd. It leads nowhere and adds up to nothing. It is entirely gratuitous, in the sense that there is no justification for life, but also no reason not to live. Those who claim to find meaning in their lives are either dishonest or deluded. In either case, they fail to face up to the harsh reality of the human situation.²¹⁴

Nihilism is a different approach to the Absurd. Both philosophies explore the response to being confronted with the Absurd, with the fact that life has no meaning and to seek it out is a futile and unnecessarily arduous task. They also share the similarity that this experience is gratifying and frees one from the restraints of life. Nihilists, however, see this to mean that to attempt to do

²¹² BBC Two 2009: 49:20-50:00.

²¹³ BBC Two 2009: 50:06-50:11.

²¹⁴ Crosby 1988: 30.

anything worthwhile is pointless for whatever one does, one will still suffer and still ultimately die. Absurdists see this to mean that we should attempt to do anything because life is meaningless therefore there are no real consequences.

In his book *Reason's Grief*, George W. Harris discusses the what he calls “the problem of tragedy”. He says that this is ‘the problem of coping with loss... Making sense of the bad, even horrible, things in life and resolving how to feel’.²¹⁵ He asserts in this chapter that the ancient reception of tragedy was one of nihilistic value, that it reflects ‘a tragic view of human existence’ that the ancient Greeks held due to their fear of the gods.²¹⁶ He argues that the monotheistic religions, particularly Christianity and Islam, present a much more optimistic view on life as there is always some consolation to catastrophe, in that they offer forgiveness and paradise in the ultimate case. This presents the idea that, in writing and performing the tragedies, the ancient Athenians were confronting their fears head on. Perhaps, viewing the Dionysian festivities as a strictly religious festival, the purpose of tragedy was to present a pessimistic affair warning the citizens to respect the gods or else. This is an interesting take on the idea of catharsis as a frightening device, as the “purification” of negative thoughts.

Harris goes on to write that this nihilism is present in both the original ancient Greek setting of tragedy and the Romanticism of the nineteenth century, something he argues to be close to tragedy.²¹⁷ He writes about ‘the problem of tragedy from [a] secular perspective’.²¹⁸ In this he writes that it is about the very structure of a beginning, middle, and end; the structure that Aristotle sets out and Havel praises as an ‘extremely important consequence of the special nature of the theatre’.²¹⁹ Harris writes that this structure starts out with the ‘realization [*sic*]... that there is a problem of tragedy at all’.²²⁰ That is, the initial human experience of the confrontation of the Absurd. The next realisation is the final part, that everything that has ever existed ‘will perish without a trace’.²²¹ This then leads to the final realisation that human existence sits with the centre of this, in amongst the Chaos. This interpretation appears to suggest that tragedy is a nihilistic representation of human existence from realising the Absurd, to accepting that life is meaningless, to seeing the pointlessness of human existence.

²¹⁵ Harris 2009: 19.

²¹⁶ Harris 2009: 19.

²¹⁷ Harris 2009: 33.

²¹⁸ Harris 2009: 23.

²¹⁹ Havel *Letter 115* 285-286.

²²⁰ Harris 2009: 23.

²²¹ Harris 2009: 23.

In my opinion, as I have attempted to outline in this thesis, tragedy does not follow such a structure of despair. I agree with Havel, that catharsis is fundamentally a feeling of optimistic emotions that are created by the end of catastrophe. Harris' "secular perspective" of tragedy suggests that Aristotle's structure resembles a person being confronted with the "problem of tragedy". That is, they realise that eventual non-existence is inevitable, and thus seeing that the existence of humanity is precious in the fact it exists at all.

Although Harris identifies a 'close connection between nihilism and... Romanticism'²²² in the nineteenth century, he goes on to explain that the purpose of his essay is to show why one must lose this view of tragedy as pessimistic.²²³ That is, the philosophical view of tragedy needs revising to better suit our times, a more optimistic viewpoint is needed.

Existentialistic approach to tragedy

In his book *Existentialism and Humanism*, Jean-Paul Sartre describes and defends the philosophical teachings of existentialism. Existentialism is considered one of the three main branches of existentialist philosophy along with nihilism and absurdism. What all three philosophies have in common is the belief that human existence has no inherent, predetermined meaning to it. All three discuss how humanity deals with the realisation of the Absurd. In nihilist and absurdist teachings, however, one must accept this fact and live, or not live, with it. On the other hand, according to Sartre, the existentialist teaching says that one can create one's own meaning. In *Existentialism and Humanism*, Sartre writes about the example of a 'paper knife', that this item was created with a purpose in mind and exists entirely to do said purpose, that is cutting paper.²²⁴ Therefore, its "essence", its meaning, precedes its existence. Sartre then writes that the theistic belief that god has created humanity means that, same as humanity has created the paper-knife, humanity is created for a reason, not that we know what that reason is. Nevertheless, this means that humanity's essence would then precede its existence. Finally, Sartre writes that in atheistic existentialism, the philosophy 'of which [he is] a representative', humanity is created without purpose, thus humanity's existence precedes its essence.²²⁵ 'Man is responsible for what

²²² Harris 2009: 33.

²²³ Harris 2009: 41.

²²⁴ Sartre *Existentialism* 26.

²²⁵ Sartre *Existentialism* 27.

he is'.²²⁶ That is the essential teaching of atheistic existentialism, that one must create meaning through living, through the actions he takes in life. There is no predetermined destiny, 'in fashioning myself I fashion man'.²²⁷ Essentially, each person who lives creates the destiny of humanity. What Sartre is keen to assert is that this philosophy does not mean that because there is no purpose there is no reason to do anything, he combats the nihilistic approach. He writes: 'existentialism is optimistic, it is a doctrine of action'.²²⁸ Unlike nihilism, existentialism teaches that one must do things, one must act to create one's own existence. Life is worth living only if one creates a life worth having lived. Sartre writes that 'there is no reality except in action', one's love does not truly exist unless he commits 'deeds of love'.²²⁹ One should live according to oneself, not follow the fixed footsteps of another.

The idea of a person having a predetermined destiny is prevalent in ancient Greek tragedy; therefore, to what extent can tragedy be considered existentialist? Sartre finds the idea that someone can be "born a hero" (consider Achilles or Odysseus for example) 'rather comic'.²³⁰ He writes: 'if you are born heroes you can... be quite content; you will be heroes all your lives, eating and drinking heroically', no matter what one does.²³¹ Within Greek literature there are several characters whose destiny precedes their birth, sometimes in the form of a curse. There is, for example, Paris from the Trojan Cycle of myths. Before he was born, his mother, Hecabe, dreamt of Troy burning. A seer declared that her child will bring ruin to the city and that he should be killed. When the child is born, however, Hecabe is unable to do it. She entrusts the task to a herdsman named Agelaus, who also being unable to kill the child exposes him on Mount Ida. Agelaus, however, returns and raises the boy as his own, calling him Paris. Eventually Paris returns to Troy and is recognised by his parents who let him remain in the city. This proves to be their ruin as Paris steals Helen, wife of Menelaus, thus starting the war that ends with the destruction of Troy, as Hecabe once dreamt.

An aspect of existentialist thinking is the concept known as "anguish". It is, Sartre writes, 'well known to those who have borne responsibilities'.²³² Ultimately, it is the fear one experiences at being entirely responsible for one's own actions, the frightening realisation that no one will help or guide you. Similar to the mental confrontation between tragedy and absurdity. The

²²⁶ Sartre *Existentialism* 29.

²²⁷ Sartre *Existentialism* 30

²²⁸ Sartre *Existentialism* 56.

²²⁹ Sartre *Existentialism* 41.

²³⁰ Sartre *Existentialism* 43.

²³¹ Sartre *Existentialism* 43.

²³² Sartre *Existentialism* 32.

characters of tragedy could be said to experience the opposite of this. Within the world of Greek myth, the gods will either help and guide you, or destroy you. So, from an existentialist point of view, the existence of the gods would somewhat provide a comfort. In fact, Sartre writes: ‘the existentialist finds it extremely embarrassing that God does not exist’ because that therein means that ultimate good also does not exist.²³³ On the other hand, the character in ancient Greek myth would perhaps feel a fear, similar to this “anguish”, when they realise that fate and the gods are truly against them. Consider Eteocles in Aeschylus’ *Seven Against Thebes*, he realises that the gods have determined that he must fight against his brother and die. He proclaims: ‘The gods, it seems, have already abandoned us’.²³⁴ Eteocles shows his realisation of his fate and his reaction to this anguish is to accept it. Ironically, he is a tragic hero who does not give in to his tragedy and merely accepts it.

Nihilist versus absurdist reading of a Greek tragedy

In this next section, I will undertake a commentary on the *Prometheus Bound*, ascribed to Aeschylus to illustrate possible nihilist or absurdist readings. I have chosen this particular tragedy as it is one of few from the ancient canon that takes a more absurd approach.

Aeschylus’ *Prometheus Bound* presents a character who is fated to eternal torture by gods because he has angered them. Therefore, it can be compared to the myth of Sisyphus. Whilst Sisyphus has to push his rock, Prometheus is chained to his. This immediately sets it up as problem of absurdism. Being immortal he cannot commit suicide. Albert Camus writes in his *The Myth of Sisyphus* that the hero’s ‘myth is tragic... because its hero is conscience. Where would his torture be, indeed, if at every step the hope of succeeding upheld him?’²³⁵ In *Prometheus Bound*, Aeschylus makes it immediately clear that Prometheus is conscious of his misfortune and his fate: ‘Alas, I groan for my present suffering and for that which is coming: where can one fix a limit for those sorrows’.²³⁶ Immediately Prometheus is shown to be having an internal battle with his tragedy. His desire to “fix a limit” for his despair show him to be yearning for an absurdist approach to his situation, to see the optimism in the tragedy. The nymph chorus make a point of

²³³ Sartre *Existentialism* 33.

²³⁴ Aeschylus *Seven* 700.

²³⁵ Camus *Sisyphus* 117.

²³⁶ Aeschylus *Prometheus* 97-99.

noticing his absurdist outlook. They tell him that he is ‘audacious and yielding in the face of these bitter pains’.²³⁷ He riles against Zeus, showing his defiance despite his situation.

He proceeds to tell the Chorus what crimes he committed to be chained to the rock. Rather intriguingly one of these such crimes was to prevent the mortal humans from ‘foreseeing their death’ and replacing that by planting ‘blind hopes within them’.²³⁸ Here Aeschylus seems to make a comment on the nature of Being. He seems to suggest that, due to the actions of Prometheus, human nature is to have a futile hope of life, perhaps kept satisfied because we do not dwell on our deaths, but on our hopes. It is perhaps then, according to Aeschylus, that despair comes when that one does indeed foresee and dwells on death, thus in the process removing the “blind hope”. Prometheus later says: ‘Why should I be afraid, when death is not in my destiny?’²³⁹ With the removal of death comes the removal of fear.

The theme of suffering relentless, arduous trials is prevalent in the play. Prometheus tells Io of the journey ahead of her, as he knows her fate; ‘a stormy sea of ruinous sorrows’.²⁴⁰ Io responds with despair and wishes to commit suicide for ‘it is better to die once for and all than to suffer terribly all days of [her] life’.²⁴¹ Prometheus, however, reminds her that he cannot die, he does not have that ‘release from [his] sufferings’.²⁴² Here that philosophical problem of suicide and the purpose of Being is confronted head on. Io, in despair at problems she will suffer in the future, sees no point of going on, in doing her mind becomes that of a nihilist. On the other hand, Prometheus shows the signs of an absurdist personality, realising, like Sisyphus, that he must be happy and remain optimistic. He tells Io: ‘You would certainly find it hard to endure *my* trials’.²⁴³ Io is not of an absurdist mind, hers is much more nihilistic in that respect. Prometheus consoles her by telling her that ‘Zeus will one day fall from power’.²⁴⁴ Both their toils are not in vain because in the end everything must end. This is a vital point in the discussion of existentialism as that fact becomes the one universal truth. For nihilists and absurdist both, this fact is a guiding light in the meaningless of existence. It is the only fate. Furthermore, Prometheus’ line bears similarity to what Havel writes about suicide: ‘I think of it... as a rope... which I can grab whenever I don’t have the strength to go on’.²⁴⁵ In these cases suicide is

²³⁷ Aeschylus *Prometheus* 187-188.

²³⁸ Aeschylus *Prometheus* 248-250.

²³⁹ Aeschylus *Prometheus* 934.

²⁴⁰ Aeschylus *Prometheus* 747.

²⁴¹ Aeschylus *Prometheus* 750-751.

²⁴² Aeschylus *Prometheus* 755.

²⁴³ Aeschylus *Prometheus* 753.

²⁴⁴ Aeschylus *Prometheus* 757.

²⁴⁵ Havel *Disturbing the Peace* 187.

presented, to the absurd thought, as something that we, as mortals, are lucky to possess the ability for, but taking that option would be absurd.

When Hermes arrives to chastise Prometheus, he says how Prometheus' crime was 'giving privileges to beings who live for a day', that is the mortal humans.²⁴⁶ Here Aeschylus seems to present the meaningless of human existence, that one is so insignificant to be part of a race that only lives for what feels like a day to a god. Hermes cannot comprehend that Prometheus has done this for something so insignificant. There, however, is where the positive lies, in that despite humanity's apparent insignificance, it has caused a stir amongst the gods, and Prometheus cares for humanity.

Despite Zeus' threats to increase his punishment, including the famous example of the eagle that will eat his liver for eternity, Prometheus remains resilient. 'So let the double-ended tress of fire be hurled against me... let him cast my body headlong into black Tartarus, whirling down in cruel compulsion: come what may, he won't kill me'.²⁴⁷ He remains the absurd hero, despite everything Zeus has and will put him through he refuses to give in to despair at his personal tragedy. Once again, however, his immortality is a vital factor in that. This could suggest that we as humans are lesser off, our existence matters less, because we will die. Prometheus can afford to be absurdist about his situation because the outcome does not matter. It also means, however, that there is no escape for him, as aforementioned, he simply has to accept his situation because there is no alternative.

The play ends with Prometheus' rock opening up and he falls into it. It is a tragic ending; the tragic hero succumbs to his fate due to his persistent hamartia. It is, however, also not the ending of the story, for a sequel was written entitled *Prometheus Unbound* which is now lost.²⁴⁸ It could be argued that there is a lack of catharsis, due to it not being the real ending. This is not the relief felt after the struggle, this is not the beginning of something new or better. A nihilistic reading of this play could assert that the ending demonstrates the hopelessness of existence, it ends with the hero unresolved and with many tasks ahead. Saying, therefore, that life is like that; unresolvable with horrendous things yet to come. I would argue, however, towards a more absurdist reading, that he demonstrates positivity in the face of horrendous things to come. As discussed, Prometheus remains resilient despite his trials, he does not give up on his

²⁴⁶ Aeschylus *Prometheus* 946.

²⁴⁷ Aeschylus *Prometheus* 1040-1055.

²⁴⁸ Sommerstein 2009: 199.

determination. This undeniably makes him the absurd hero, like K. in Kafka's *The Trial*, like Gross in Havel's *The Memorandum*. For better, or for worse, the determination remains.

Prometheus Bound, however, presents a god as the primary protagonist. Within other tragedies the heroes are often prone to nihilism. In Euripides' *Medea*, the eponymous protagonist laments at her situation, expressing suicidal desires: 'Oh, I am wretched, pity me for my sufferings! Oh, if only I could die!'.²⁴⁹ In Sophocles' play, Ajax ponders on humanity's struggle for the will to live: 'It shames a man to wish his life prolonged when life is dogged by unrelenting pain. Day follows day; it's one move forward, one move back from death. What joy is there in that?'.²⁵⁰ Both these characters commit acts of "suffering"; the former kills her children, the latter does, in the end, kill himself.

This does not mean, however, that tragedy is inherently nihilistic. Havel sums what he believes Theatre of the Absurd to be in his conversation with Karel Hvižd'ala. 'Absurd theatre does not offer us consolation or hope. It merely reminds us of how we are living: without hope'.²⁵¹ I believe this is the same as tragedy. There is an inherent pessimism in both, however the pessimism exists to show the audience their optimism, through the acceptance of the Absurd.

Nihilism and existentialism in the works of Václav Havel

In his essay *Stories and Totalitarianism, Příběh a totalita*, Havel writes about a social and historical 'zničitelnost', "withering", in communist ruled Czechoslovakia.²⁵² The staleness of life created by the communist party reduced the Czech population to adopt a nihilist view on life. For instance, Havel writes how there became no point in making 'personal plans' due to the huge amount of almost impenetrable bureaucracy to do so.²⁵³ Thus the mere wish to live an individual life by travelling abroad or organising an amateur event becomes tiring, therefore it is nihilistic.²⁵⁴ Under the communists, life itself could be said to represent Camus' example of Sisyphus. Life itself becomes dull, repetitive, and tiring. Havel writes: 'History was replaced by pseudo-history, by a calendar of rhythmically recurring anniversaries, congresses celebrations, and mass gymnastic

²⁴⁹ Euripides *Medea* 96-97.

²⁵⁰ Sophocles *Ajax* 473-480.

²⁵¹ Havel *Disturbing the Peace* 54.

²⁵² Havel *Příběh* 1.

²⁵³ Havel *Stories* 344.

²⁵⁴ Havel *Stories* 344.

events... a predictable self-manifestation... of a single, central agent of truth and power'.²⁵⁵ The communist government came to manifest the Absurd.

Havel's biographer Michael Žantovský writes about the 'existentialist mythology' that grew out of the political times of the 1960s.²⁵⁶ He writes that the hangover from the still recent Second World War and the prevalent threat of a nuclear war being triggered at any moment had meant people lost meaning in life. From this, however, came the 'rebelliousness and sense of abandon that characterised the sixties'.²⁵⁷ According to Žantovský, it seems to suggest that, in general, culture adopted an absurdist approach to this existential anguish that society was feeling. On the other hand, twenty years on, Havel writes how society, particularly in Czechoslovakia, became nihilist.

Nevertheless, out of both these absurd and nihilist times, respectively, Havel continued to write about absurdism. Havel at one point says: '[absurdism] was not merely transmitted through particular artistic influences; it was, above all, something that was "in the air". That's what I value most in Absurd theatre: it was able to capture what was "in the air"'.²⁵⁸ I believe this resonates with what Havel writes in his essay, *Stories and Totalitarianism*. The lifestyle created by the Czechoslovak Communists initiated a nationwide confrontation with the Absurd.

There were also a collective of people who chose to fight against the social "withering" and the corruption of the Communist government. These people, who included Havel himself and Patočka, formed, in 1977, *Charta 77*, an 'informal and open association of people of various shades of opinion, faiths and professions united by the will to strive individually and collectively for the respecting of civic and human rights in our own country and throughout the world'.²⁵⁹ The *Charta 77* document was first drafted by Havel, though later finalised as collective work.²⁶⁰ The aim of the *charta* was, as Williams puts it, to point out 'the many ways in which the Czechoslovak government violated its covenant obligations'.²⁶¹

Havel makes it very clear that 'the plays are not – and this is important – nihilistic'.²⁶² Instead the overall message is meant as one of absurdism. An optimistic, or at least not pessimistic, view on the hopelessness of life. That does not mean, however, that his work is lacking in nihilistic aspects. For example, Žantovský writes that the character of Baláš in *The*

²⁵⁵ Havel *Stories* 333.

²⁵⁶ Žantovský 2014: 77.

²⁵⁷ Žantovský 2014: 77.

²⁵⁸ Havel *Disturbing the Peace* 54.

²⁵⁹ CHNM (accessed 03 Mar 2018).

²⁶⁰ Williams 2016: 119.

²⁶¹ Williams 2016: 118.

²⁶² Havel *Disturbing the Peace* 54.

Memorandum is 'coldly nihilistic'.²⁶³ Furthermore, his so-called "Vaněk plays" all present Vaněk, a semi-autobiographical Havel, dealing with nihilistic characters. In *Audience*, for example, the character Sládek, "brewer" or "foreman", reveals he has been informing on Vaněk to the authorities, that is he has submitted to the Absurd, rather than rebelling against it. In *Protest*, the character Staněk refuses to sign a protest document against the authorities, being too fearful and abandoned to rebel. Thus, as in Havel's life, the absurdity of existence is a result of the paranoia installed by the government. As Žantovský writes, in the world of Havel's plays 'it is the society, or rather the totalitarian control of the society, that drives [the protagonists] to isolation', as opposed to the absurdity of human existence as it is in other absurd dramas.²⁶⁴ It is as if the society of communist Czechoslovakia creates the absurdity.

The Vaněk trilogy:

The Vaněk plays are staples of the Theatre of the Absurd, in that they present a circular, inescapable situation which the protagonist, Ferdinand Vaněk, must either accept or deny. They display different aspects of this acceptance of the situation; *Audience* offers an example of informing, *Unveiling* shows the fallacy of everyday life, and *Protest* presents a character refusing to oppose the regime. In his essay "*Dear Dr. Husák*", Havel writes about how it is not conformity, or a love of the regime that drives the Czech people to accept their situation, it is 'fear', "*strach*".²⁶⁵ But what prevents the situation becoming tragic is the acceptance of it.

Audience

In 1975's *Audience* Vaněk, a former playwright who, after being in prison, is forced to work in a brewery, interacts with an unhinged foreman character. This is autobiographical of Havel who did just the same. In the first scene the foreman invites Vaněk to 'Come in... take a seat... Want a beer?', Vaněk is described as timid and refuses the beer.²⁶⁶ As the play continues

²⁶³ Žantovský 2014: 94.

²⁶⁴ Žantovský 2014: 95.

²⁶⁵ Havel "*Dear Dr. Husák*" 52.

²⁶⁶ Havel *Audience* 185.

his attitude and his constant refusal of the beer causes the foreman to break down and cry. The foreman falls asleep and Vaněk leaves and subsequently re-enters. The scene then plays out similarly to the first, the foreman says: ‘Come in... Take a seat... Want a beer’.²⁶⁷ In this instance, however, Vaněk accepts the beer and is straight with the foreman. Thus, he becomes an archetype of the absurd hero, he accepts his situation and, like Hugo, like K., uses it to his advantage, just as Camus writes that one should. This can be seen as reflective of the situation in 1970s Czechoslovakia, the reformers are defeated, the Spring is over and now there is only “normalisation”. It is the acceptance and the “happiness” of the situation that distinguishes this period. As I have previously identified, the Absurd was in the air.

The submission to the authorities reflects the *zničující*, “withering”, that Havel wrote about in his essay. The nihilist submission to that which makes life unliveable. The foreman is shown to have nihilistic tendencies throughout the play. He is self-deprecating and prone to self-pity. At the play’s denouement he is shown to display despair at his situation.

What about me? I ain’t got nowhere to go back to, have I? Where can I go?
Who’ll take notice of me? Who cares what I do? What has life to offer me?
What about *my* future?²⁶⁸

He then sobs on Vaněk’s shoulder. Here the foreman gives in to the absurdity of his condition, he “tragedises” his situation, the way Gross tells Marie not to in *The Garden Party*. His relinquishing to despair in comparison to Vaněk’s acceptance defines each as absurd and tragic heroes respectively. He is also upset that Vaněk will not bring the famous Czech actress Jiřina Bohdalová to the brewery. He despairs that that ‘one evening’ would mean his ‘fucking life hasn’t been completely wasted’.²⁶⁹ This demonstrates his nihilism, as he believes that nothing else could make him happy. Furthermore, this play shows that Havel sees the nature of fear as being the power that teaches people to conform. The foreman has been given orders by “they”, unnamed but clearly referring to the Party, to inform on Vaněk whilst he’s working for the brewery. He fears for his job since he has nothing to report on and asks Vaněk to inform on himself. Additionally, he is also concerned about the job of his friend, Mašek, to whom he has been informing. Ironically the foreman’s job rests in Vaněk’s hands, and Vaněk’s job rests in the foreman’s. Keen to keep his job, Vaněk eventually accepts his situation and goes along with the

²⁶⁷ Havel *Audience* 210.

²⁶⁸ Havel *Audience* 209.

²⁶⁹ Havel *Audience* 210.

foreman. This shows Havel demonstrating the absurd way in which it is fear that drives conformity.

Another example of the foreman's nihilistic tendency is his excessive drinking of beer. This is demonstrated from the start 'several empty beer bottles' being described scattered about office.²⁷⁰ As soon as Vaněk arrives the foreman asks him if he wants a beer, and when Vaněk refuses he states: 'We'll teach you to drink beer all right. You'll soon get used to it around here. We all drink it around here'.²⁷¹ This could be seen existentially as philosophical suicide, refusing to accept the Absurd and use the intoxication of alcohol to escape it.

It is insinuated that the foreman has depression. Frequently throughout the play, as part of Havel's absurd repetitive dialogue, the foreman tells Vaněk that he should not be '*smutný*', "sad or depressed".²⁷² This could be seen as the foreman reflecting himself onto Vaněk, the with Vaněk telling him 'Don't be depressed...' at the play's end'.²⁷³

Unveiling (*Vernisáž*)

In *Unveiling*, Vaněk is invited to a couple's house where they criticise his, and his wife's, domestic lives, whilst showing off and revelling in their own. The couple, Michal and Věra, talk of being an 'ideal father' and children growing up 'in a nice environment', and being a 'good lover'.²⁷⁴ This represents the ideal of a perfect life, living comfortably whilst refusing to confront the real issues. Vaněk grows tired of them criticising his life and goes to leave which puts the couple into a panic. 'Ferdinand! You can't just leave us here!... What are we going to do here without you? Don't you understand that?'.²⁷⁵ Thus they are not happy in their lives, only happy showing it off to other people. The Czech title of the play, *Vernisáž*, in fact refers to private viewing of an art exhibition. The title is sometimes translated as "Vernissage". As with *Audience*, Vaněk restores the situation by behaving how they would like, in that he conforms, he sits down and listens to their '*vernisáž*'.²⁷⁶ Their lives are not real, just something put on display for others to admire. This point is punctuated with the curtain fall being accompanied by the playing of 'some

²⁷⁰ Havel *Audience* 185.

²⁷¹ Havel *Audience* 186.

²⁷² Havel *Audience* 3 (Cz).

²⁷³ Havel *Audience* 210.

²⁷⁴ Havel *Unveiling* 226-227.

²⁷⁵ Havel *Unveiling* 236.

²⁷⁶ Havel *Vernisáž* 15.

international hit', as the stage directions put it.²⁷⁷ As Camus' philosophy says, what initially prevents their situation from being tragic is the fact that they do not recognise their own tragedy. Their optimism is shown to be nihilistic and false. The tragedy of their situation is only revealed at the end with a use of Aristotle's "recognition" technique. Michal despairs to Vaněk: 'Who do you think we're doing all this for? For ourselves?'.²⁷⁸ It is revealed that their own lives and house is, in fact, not designed to keep them happy as they suggest, but to give the impression of happiness. There is absurdity in their situation, which is made even more absurd by their ignorance of it. Vaněk and his wife, Eva, meanwhile are content to 'living out of boxes', as Michal puts it.²⁷⁹ They only make love every 'now and then' and 'tend to have cold dinners'.²⁸⁰ Vaněk, being an absurd hero, is happy with, what Michal and Věra see as, a mediocre life.

The couple's exhibited delusion could be seen as analogous to the propaganda created by the leaders within the Soviet Bloc which aimed to present a positive view of the regime, whilst withholding truths. Havel's significant 1978 essay, *The Power of the Powerless*, discusses the realities of living in a world of lies.

The regime is captive to its own lies, it must falsify everything. It falsifies the past. It falsifies the present, and it falsifies the future. It falsifies statistics. It pretends not to possess an omnipotent and unprincipled police apparatus. It pretends to respect human rights. It pretends to persecute no one. It pretends to fear nothing. It pretends to pretend nothing.²⁸¹

The regime's falsification is intrinsic to its survival, it presented a fictional idea of their power through show trials and military parades. Havel writes that the citizens of a regime such as the Communist Party's 'need not believe all these mystifications' but must tolerate them for the survival of the regime and of their careers.²⁸² Within this essay is the famous parable of the greengrocer who puts up a poster bearing the slogan "Workers of the world unite", taken from the last line of Marx and Engel's *The Communist Manifesto*. The meaning of the parable is that the greengrocer is conforming, not because he believes in the message, he is in fact indifferent to it. He is conforming because putting that poster up in one's shop is what one *does*. The poster and

²⁷⁷ Havel *Unveiling* 237.

²⁷⁸ Havel *Unveiling* 236.

²⁷⁹ Havel *Unveiling* 218.

²⁸⁰ Havel *Unveiling* 228 &

²⁸¹ Havel *Power of the Powerless* 136.

²⁸² Havel *Power of the Powerless* 136.

its slogan are simply part of the ‘panorama’, as Havel puts it, of life.²⁸³ It then, however, plays into the lie of life under the Party’s regime, in that, on the surface, it appears that everyone is conforming. This situation is typical of the absurdity of life in Communist Czechoslovakia.

Havel discusses a situation in which the greengrocer ‘rejects the ritual and breaks the rules of the game’ by one day deciding to stop putting up the posters in his shop.²⁸⁴ He argues that, despite the apparent simple nature of the offence, the greengrocer would have his, and his family’s, life ruined by the regime’s sanctions. That is because his simple act has broken the rules of the game and thus ‘exposed it as a mere game’.²⁸⁵ It is this way of thinking that explains Michal and Věra’s breakdown at the end of the play. The greengrocer, by exposing the absurdity, has forced the regime to undergo a “recognition” to which they react in a nihilistic way. Similarly, Michal and Věra have also been forced to “recognise” their absurdity. They chastise Vaněk harshly, calling him a ‘disgusting, unfeeling, inhuman, egotist’, thus both Vaněk and the greengrocer become punishees for exposing the flaws in the punishers.

Protest

The final play of Havel’s Vaněk trilogy, *Protest*, deals with television writer Staněk inviting Vaněk to his study for a conversation. He tells Vaněk that the father of his daughter’s unborn baby is a pop star, Javůrek, who has been arrested by the authorities. He wants him to help him write a protest statement to get him released. Vaněk, however, has already written such a statement and has his own ulterior motive to have Staněk to sign it. After a long speech, full of a series of illogical thought, Staněk declares he cannot, in fact, sign the protest document, before it is revealed that Javůrek has already been released anyway.

This play, once again, follows the circular Theatre of the Absurd structure, whereupon at the end of the play the whole events of the play became redundant. The play differs, however, in that – unlike the previous two plays – Vaněk does not represent an archetypal Absurd hero, in fact no characters do. Both Vaněk and Staněk are unhappy with their situation and both are fighting against it. The absurdity here is purely contained within the events of the plot. On the other hand, as Vaněk’s opposite, Staněk is made out to be nihilistic in his outlook.

²⁸³ Havel *Power of the Powerless* 138.

²⁸⁴ Havel *Power of the Powerless* 146.

²⁸⁵ Havel *Power of the Powerless* 147.

He is pessimistic about the situation in Czechoslovakia and its government, referring to the ‘selfishness, corruption and fear wherever you turn’.²⁸⁶ He despairs that things are not what they used to be, recalling the past as a ‘beautiful dream’.²⁸⁷ Whilst admiring people like Vaněk for their protests, he does not, however, have any desire to do anything about it himself. He glorifies and praises him saying:

If everybody did what you do, the situation would be quite different! And that’s a fact. It’s extremely important there should be at least a few people here who aren’t afraid to speak the truth aloud, to defend others, to call a spade a spade!²⁸⁸

Here he shows nihilistic hypocrisy, the fact that he himself will do nothing and believes the job is not up to him. His speech comes to a hyperbolic peak when he refers to Vaněk and his friends, the so-called “dissidents”, as ‘superhuman’, “*nadlidsky*”.²⁸⁹ This grandiose term is similar to what German philosopher, Friedrich Nietzsche, writes about as the ultimate goal for humanity, “*der Übermensch*”. This could be what Havel was referring to, by exaggerating the sheer extent of the pedestal people would put him on. Staněk talks about the ‘responsibility’ Vaněk has to the people who ‘trust... [and] rely on [him]’.²⁹⁰ In his later 1984 play, *Largo Desolato*, Havel would explore this in greater detail with the protagonist facing pressure from both the authorities and his supporters. Havel also discusses the approach to so-called “dissidents” in *The Power of the Powerless*. My reasoning for putting quotation marks over the word “dissident” is simply due to the fact that Havel does the same, and I agree with his own reasons for doing it. Essentially the term is not a term that Havel has labelled himself, rather it is a label assigned to a particular group of people within the Soviet Bloc by ‘Western journalists’.²⁹¹ In that sense, they are not necessarily the largest face of opposition with their native countries, rather they are people who have made themselves known to the “West”. In his essay, Havel sums up what he believes in means to be a “dissident” with five numbered points. I will briefly summarise these points.

1. Expressing their nonconformity ‘publicly’, something they cannot do with ease in their own country thus their “public” opinion is expressed to the “West”.²⁹²

²⁸⁶ Havel *Protest* 245.

²⁸⁷ Havel *Protest* 244.

²⁸⁸ Havel *Protest* 246.

²⁸⁹ Havel *Protest* 246.

²⁹⁰ Havel *Protest* 247.

²⁹¹ Havel *Power of the Powerless* 167.

²⁹² Havel *Power of the Powerless* 167.

2. Having ‘esteem’ from even their government despite not officially able to publish in their country, thus any form of persecution causes ‘complications’ within the government.²⁹³
3. Concerning themselves with ‘more general causes’, as opposed to their ‘immediate surroundings’ thus appearing political to outsiders.²⁹⁴
4. Generally “‘writing’ people’, in that the written word grants them attention in ways that other forms of opposition would not.²⁹⁵
5. Becoming separated by the West from the work that apparently granted them “dissidence”, that is to say, Havel becomes a “dissident” ‘who almost incidentally... happens to write plays as well’.²⁹⁶

Therefore, Havel’s general disregard for the term “dissident” can be understood. Furthermore, he goes on to write how the term, paradoxically, separates the “dissident” from the very people who they are defending in their “dissent”, the “other people”.²⁹⁷ It puts people like Havel and the other *Charta 77* signatories on a pedestal that somehow makes them better people than the “other people”, perhaps to the extent that the people not “dissenting” are just as bad as the totalitarians.

This is the nihilistic view that Staněk takes in the play *Protest*. Vaněk, in the semi-autobiographical role as Havel himself, is defensive of Staněk’s high praise.

VANĚK: You exaggerate –

...

VANĚK: Surely our hope lies in all the decent people –

STANĚK: But how many are there still around? How many?

VANĚK: Enough –²⁹⁸

Vaněk’s defensiveness here clearly echoes what Havel writes in *The Power of the Powerless* and his discomfort with the attitude towards “dissidents”.

The Vaněk plays present a balance between two different forms of existentialist philosophy; nihilism and absurdism, whilst being staples of the Theatre of the Absurd. Vaněk himself is not a tragic hero or character, he remains passive and somewhat indifferent throughout. It is, however, the other characters of the plays who with their nihilistic attitudes become tragic. In *Unveiling*, for example, Michal and Věra, are forced to “recognise” their

²⁹³ Havel *Power of the Powerless* 168.

²⁹⁴ Havel *Power of the Powerless* 168.

²⁹⁵ Havel *Power of the Powerless* 168.

²⁹⁶ Havel *Power of the Powerless* 168.

²⁹⁷ Havel *Power of the Powerless* 171.

²⁹⁸ Havel *Protest* 247.

absurdity and react with despair. Yet, unlike Oedipus, it is not so much that they are unaware, rather they are pretending, they are hiding from the truth. Furthermore, there is no payoff to their “recognition”, beyond a brief display of despair, rather they return to their previous state once Vaněk conforms to their wishes. Thus, there is no Aristotelian “suffering” nor “reversal”, rather an absurd circular plot.

PART THREE: 1984-1989

Prisoner to President

The 1980s saw the eventual end of the Communist Party rule over the country despite years of political stagnation. The 1980s marked a change. As previously discussed, Havel's interpretation of Aristotle's "catharsis" is the exposition of evil and 'the beginning of hope'.²⁹⁹ I argue that it is in three of his post-prison plays, *Largo Desolato*, *Temptation*, and *Redevelopment* that Havel, whilst still writing absurdist plays, starts using more traditional, Aristotelian theatrical techniques. There is, however, an anomaly amongst his plays. *Tomorrow!* is very different from anything Havel has written before, where Aristotle is abandoned altogether.

From the 7th of January 1980 to the 8th of February 1983 Havel served his prison sentence for his involvement in the formation of *Charta 77*. In the words of Žantovský, 'the regime had its revenge'.³⁰⁰ It was during this period that Havel read and meditated on the philosophies of Jan Patočka, Emmanuel Levinas, and Aristotle, as reflected in his letters to his wife Olga Havlová. Within the letters Aristotle himself is only mentioned once, in *Letter 115*, however with this reference is the statement that he hit on an 'extremely important consequence of the special nature of the theatre'.³⁰¹ Whilst he does not make specific mention of in fact reading the *Poetics*, Havel shows proficient awareness of the ideas discussed within Aristotle's work, such as catharsis, *anagnorisis*, and the importance of structure. Whilst Havel was using references to "tragédie" in his earlier work, particularly in reference to *The Garden Party*, it is in the plays written after his prison term that he truly utilises Aristotle's theories. The characters of Havel's 1960s and 1970s plays, overall, react to the Absurd with general acceptance. In his post-prison plays, however, the protagonists show greater depictions of despair.

²⁹⁹ Havel 1992: 201

³⁰⁰ Žantovský 2014: 218.

³⁰¹ Havel *Letter 115* 285-286.

Largo Desolato:

Absurd despair

Havel came out of prison suffering from the effects of prison life. In *Disturbing the Peace*, he admits that he was ‘constantly depressed’ and suffering from ‘a bad case of nerves’, ‘obsessive neurosis’, and ‘despair’.³⁰² It is in this state, in 1984, that he wrote *Largo Desolato*. The protagonist of this play, Leopold Kopřiva, is a dissident intellectual who has written papers opposing the state. At the play’s opening, however, he is shown to be paranoid, living in constant fear of arrest.³⁰³ Havel believes that *Largo Desolato* ‘was inspired by [his] own experiences, certainly more directly than any other play [he has] written’.³⁰⁴ This is not so much in the autobiographical sense, rather as a depiction of himself and the paranoia he himself was feeling.

The play’s plot follows various different people who enter Leopold’s flat, all with different purposes. This includes three different women: his wife Zuzana, his girlfriend Lucy, and Markéta, a philosophy student who admires him. There are also two working men, both called Lád’a, who try and encourage Leopold to write something for them, similar to Staněk from *Protest*. Leopold is with Lucy when two chaps, “*Chlapíci*”, arrive and suggest a proposition. Instead of being arrested, he can instead write a statement saying that he is not Leopold Kopřiva and therefore clearing his name from it. He, as a philosopher, sees this as a loss of his Being: ‘You want me to declare that I am no longer me’, and he refuses.³⁰⁵ Later he is visited by Markéta who has come for his advice as she is frustrated at the ‘general misery of life’, and the mundanity of ‘faces in the bus queues’, her parents ‘always watching TV’, the superficiality of her peers, and the lack of a boyfriend.³⁰⁶ She realises, however, that her hero is in need of help himself and, based on his own philosophy, believes he can be saved through love. She tells him so and they kiss, just as the two chaps reappear. Stirred by Markéta, Leopold happily accepts his arrest only to be informed that it will not be necessary. Since his neurosis has stopped him writing anything, he is no longer seen as a threat to the state and therefore his case is written off, for the time being. He is horrified at what he sees as his loss of identity, that is as a dissident philosopher. Leopold is

³⁰² Havel *Disturbing the Peace* 63.

³⁰³ Havel *Largo Desolato* 5.

³⁰⁴ Havel *Disturbing the Peace* 65.

³⁰⁵ Havel *Largo Desolato* 33.

³⁰⁶ Havel *Largo Desolato* 54.

described as collapsing to the floor and ‘banging his fists on it’.³⁰⁷ The play ends as it begins, with Leopold anxiously waiting the return of the chaps.

Leopold’s aforementioned display of anguish at his situation marks a change in terms of Havel’s protagonists. Prior to this, characters such as Hugo, Gross, Huml, and Vaněk, have not themselves shown despair. This shows a change from an absurd protagonist to one more alike that of tragedy. Although the plot does not obviously follow an Aristotelian structure, there are examples of the use of his ideas. The theme of “reversal” can be seen in Leopold’s fortunes with the arrival of Markéta. Prior to this, he has been in a ‘very bad way’, with none of the other characters able to help, despite their best intentions.³⁰⁸ By giving him her love, Markéta, to quote the words she uses, gives him back his ‘strength – courage – self-confidence’.³⁰⁹ So when the two chaps reappear he stands up to them and solemnly accepts his fate, no longer hiding from it; ‘Do your duty! I’ll get ready!’.³¹⁰ This “reversal” is, however, quickly reversed again as the chaps inform him that he will not be going “there”, rather the case has been adjourned. This second “reversal” is then coupled with a “recognition”. According to Aristotle, ‘reversal and [recognition] together will evoke either pity or fear’, through which “catharsis” is effected. From his philosophical viewpoint, Leopold recognises this “reversal” as a loss of his identity. Conscious of his tragedy, he gives in to despair: ‘I can’t go on living like this’.³¹¹

The Theatre of the Absurd’s circular plot structure is still present. The stage directions at the play’s beginning and end are, to the greater extent, word for word the same.³¹² This represents the fact that nothing has changed for Leopold. He has neither moved from good fortune to bad fortune, nor bad to good, instead he remains in bad fortune. Therefore, despite Leopold’s display of anguish, his tragedy is absurd.

³⁰⁷ Havel *Largo Desolato* 60.

³⁰⁸ Havel *Largo Desolato* 55.

³⁰⁹ Havel *Largo Desolato* 58.

³¹⁰ Havel *Largo Desolato* 58.

³¹¹ Havel *Largo Desolato* 59.

³¹² Havel *Largo Desolato* 5 & 60.

Temptation (*Pokoušení*):

Faust and tragedy

In 1977 Havel was imprisoned for the first time, which although much shorter than his second four-year imprisonment, was a 'difficult time' for him.³¹³ So, when given the opportunity for an early release to took it. His release, however, was a trap intended to discredit and disgrace him. A falsified statement was released in his name which stated his intention to remove himself as a spokesman, thus conforming to the Party.³¹⁴ In the period following his "statement" and his release Havel was self-purportedly 'miserable' as 'began to understand... that a trap was being laid' for him.³¹⁵ During this time he read two adaptations of the legend of Faust; Johann Wolfgang von Goethe's *Faust* and Thomas Mann's *Doctor Faustus*. The timing and situation of his reading of these texts hit home with Havel. He too felt that he had sold his soul to the Devil.

The legend, emerging for medieval Germany, goes that a man named Faust makes a bargain with the Devil, in the form of his representative Mephistopheles, in which he is offered magical powers in return for his soul. The story has been adapted many times, most famously as theatrical tragedies by Christopher Marlowe and Goethe.

In the tragedies of Shakespeare, a contemporary of Marlowe, the Christian god does not perform a direct role in the events of the plays.. Whereas early medieval plays dealt with religious subjects, due to the Protestant endorsed state censorship of the time Shakespeare could not base his plays on biblical stories, the way in which the ancient Greek playwrights based theirs upon their myths³¹⁶ Therefore the significant religious aspect of classical tragedy could not legally play a role in Elizabethan and Jacobean drama. In Marlowe's *Doctor Faustus*, however, divine intervention is used as a device, but under the guise of German folklore. The theme of a divine being directly influencing and tricking a mortal is similar to that of Dionysus and Pentheus in Euripides *Bacchae*.

In 1985's *Temptation*, sees Havel adapt the tale of Faust with Doctor Jindřich Foustka standing in for the titular character. Foustka works for a scientific institute, however he practises black magic, which he uses to summon the wizard, Fistula, performing the role of Mephistopheles. Much like the German legend, Foustka is given what he desires by Fistula, such

³¹³ Havel *Disturbing the Peace* 66.

³¹⁴ Havel *Disturbing the Peace* 142.

³¹⁵ Havel *Disturbing the Peace* 66.

³¹⁶ McEachern 2003: 87.

as the love of a woman he likes. Eventually, however, it is revealed that Fistula was working against him all along and the members of the Institute burn him alive.

Coming from a tragic tradition, the story's denouement contains all three plot elements of Aristotelian tragedy. "Reversal" and "recognition" occur together as it is revealed that the Institute Director, in the place of Goethe's Devil, knew about Foustka's experimentation in black magic all along and sent Fistula to help gain information on him. Thus, Foustka's fortune is reversed from good to bad as Fistula's trickery is revealed.³¹⁷ Furthermore Foustka is forced to discover his hamartia, his greed; 'You simply cannot serve all masters, and at the same time deceive them all. You can't just take and give nothing in return'.³¹⁸ Finally, Aristotle's third component, "suffering", is forced upon the protagonist as the characters set him on fire.

Here Havel is dealing explicitly with tragic themes, however the story is not entirely his own. Goethe's *Faust*, on which Havel based his play, borrows heavily from the themes of Greek tragedy, the author having had a 'classical education'.³¹⁹ In the Third Act of *Faust: Part II*, which John R. Williams calls a 'Euripidean tragedy', Helen of Troy herself appears along with Menelaus.³²⁰ The author even created a reworking of a Euripides' *Iphigenia Among the Taurians* in 1779.³²¹ Thus, the Aristotelian themes that Havel uses in *Temptation* are not necessarily from his own influence. Nevertheless, it is possible that his reading of Goethe inspired his later writing.

Redevelopment (*Asanace*):

Whilst containing the typical themes of Havel's plays, such as Being and human relationships, his 1987's *Redevelopment*, builds upon and deals more explicitly with them. With depictions of despair and suicide, it is his most dark play.

³¹⁷ Havel *Temptation* 133.

³¹⁸ Havel *Temptation* 133.

³¹⁹ Williams 2001: 141.

³²⁰ Williams 2001: 141.

³²¹ Boyle 1991: 321-326.

Love in tragedy

At the play's start, before the lights come up, the character Plechanov is playing "Dark Eyes", "Очи чёрные", a Russian folk song, on the violin. Those in the audience familiar with the song might know that the lyrics speak of the pains of love:

...Dark eyes, burning eyes

Frightful and beautiful eyes

I love you so, I fear you so...

...Without meeting you, I wouldn't be suffering so

I would have lived my life smiling

You have ruined me, dark eyes

You have taken my happiness forever away.³²²

The lyrics of the song foreshadow the themes of the play and the eventual fate of Plechanov. This could be seen to mirror the openings of Athenian tragedies in which the plot of the story is often hinted at through a song or a monologue. Furthermore, those in the Athenian audience who have a knowledge of the myths will know what is about to occur on stage. The theme of the Russian song is, as stated, about the pains of love. In *Redevelopment* this is a theme that affects and motivates the characters, even to tragic consequences. Love is a theme that appears frequently in Greek literature and is often bittersweet in nature. The use of the term "bittersweet" to refer to love was first used by Sappho, a 7th century BC poet from Lesbos. In a poem she makes reference to Eros, god of sexual attraction, calling him a 'sweetbitter [*sic*] unmanageable creature'.³²³ Anne Carson, the translator I have used, chooses to translate the ancient Greek word literally, "γλυκύπικρος". This shows how love in literature, even before tragedy, has been shown to be bittersweet.

In 1757 the Scottish philosopher David Hume wrote an essay entitled *Of Tragedy* in which he considers why we as people enjoy watching tragedy, but not experiencing it. It is similar to Aristotle's ideas in his *Poetics*, in that it outlines the 'unaccountable pleasure' received from

³²² Russmus (accessed 29 Sep 2017).

³²³ Sappho *Fragment 130*.

viewing a ‘well-written tragedy’, such as Aristotle believes *Oedipus the King* to be.³²⁴ Hume writes that the experience of falling in love is similar to that of experiencing tragedy. Love is not just part of tragedy, but the very act is like tragedy itself. Hume writes that the success of the tragedian is proven when his audience is afflicted by emotions of ‘sorrow, terror, [and] anxiety’ by observing such emotions performed by another.³²⁵ This, again, reflects the *Poetics*, although negating “pity”. Hume contemplates two arguments by two different French contemporaries of his, Jean-Baptiste Dubos and Bernard Le Bovier de Fontenelle, about the purpose and the enjoyment of tragedy. The former argues that the ‘passion’ from watching tragedy, no matter how ‘disagreeable’ is still less disagreeable than ‘insipid languor’.³²⁶ In other words, despair is more rousing than boredom. Hume rejects this, however, as he does not believe there is pleasure in simply observing pain, there is a difference in watching, say, Medea murder her children and someone being publicly executed. Instead, Hume takes what Fontenelle writes, that pain, in moderation, is pleasure; the idea that there is such a thing as ‘agreeable sorrow’. Again, this echoes the section Aristotle’s *Poetics* that I discuss in the Prologue chapter, that the tragedy is only agreeable if not too extreme. Hume argues that in tragedy the pain is softened further because the audience is aware they are watching an ‘imitation’, ‘fiction’.³²⁷ What inspired me to write about this particular author, however, is the way in which both he and Fontenelle relate these theatrical pleasures to real life. Fontenelle takes the example of tickling; that in moderation it is pleasurable, however, if “‘pushed a little too far’” it becomes painful.³²⁸ Hume takes this further by describing how, sometimes, pain can give way to pleasure. For example, the ‘sorrow’ a person feels for a friend’s death is a more passionate emotion than ‘the pleasure of his company’.³²⁹ So one’s feelings towards one’s friend becomes more pleasurable in light of the pain of their death. Furthermore, in greater relevance to the discussion here, is that ‘agreeable affection of love’.³³⁰ Hume writes that with the pleasure of love must come the pain of jealousy and separation. One’s love is felt more strongly, thus more pleurably, when one’s loved one is absent. He states that love without jealousy is not as powerful.

In the play *Redevelopment*, Albert is presented as a naïve but passionate young man, especially when it comes to his views of the company that he works for and the redevelopment

³²⁴ Hume *Of Tragedy* 20.

³²⁵ Hume *Of Tragedy* 20.

³²⁶ Hume *Of Tragedy* 21.

³²⁷ Hume *Of Tragedy* 25.

³²⁸ Hume *Of Tragedy* 22.

³²⁹ Hume *Of Tragedy* 26.

³³⁰ Hume *Of Tragedy* 26.

that is the focus of the play, which I will discuss later. Albert's naïvety also comes across with his approach to love. Despite the age difference, he falls in love with Luisa, a fellow architect almost twice his age. 'You're different. There's something special about you – if I got into trouble you'd be the one I'd come to...'.³³¹ Their age difference leads Luisa to believe he is referring to a mother and son connection, something which is perhaps coincidentally Oedipal.

It is within Sophocles' Theban plays, that the dangers of love, or “ἔρως” in ancient Greek, are truly shown. Youthful, naïve love in particular is displayed in his *Antigone* in which a young man's passion for a woman drives him to suicide. The play is set after a battle between two brothers, the sons of Oedipus, for the throne in which both are killed. One, Eteocles, was defending the city of Thebes, whereas the other, Polynices, was leading an offending army. Thus, after the battle Creon, Oedipus' uncle and brother-in-law, takes up the throne and decrees that Eteocles will be honoured with a burial and Polynices will not. This angers Antigone, who is Oedipus' daughter, and she rebels by burying her brother. She is caught, however, and the king reluctantly buries her alive in a cave. The king's son, Haimon, is due to be married to Antigone and, whilst initially on his father's side, eventually rebels against him. The king, however, is stubborn and it is only when the blind prophet Tiresias arrives and warns him that the gods are displeased that he relents. Upon arriving at Antigone's cave, however, they find that she has hung herself. In despair Haimon falls upon his sword, and consequently his mother also kills herself. Creon is left without his family and only with guilt and shame.

The consequences of tragedy are left as a result of a lack of, or an oversight of, rationality. It is when the dual states of madness and reason fight and madness wins. This is why something so potent as love or desire can be seen as a strong driving force for this battle. In Sophocles' play it is Haimon's passionate love that drives him to take his own life. Whilst he himself is not the main tragic focus, his irrational actions help to push his father's tragic outcome.

In Havel's play almost all the characters expose a flawed self which is driven by either love or desire. The character of Luisa presents a somewhat siren figure, to take an allegory from another aspect of Greek literature. Plechanov speaks of her as a dangerous figure who gets off from other people's love for her, but not in a malicious way, rather it is 'out of her very nature'.³³² She will 'keep your love alive without ever fulfilling it'.³³³ He reveals he himself was in Albert's position twenty years ago and has clearly never recovered from it. He warns Albert that this love

³³¹ Havel *Redevelopment* 161.

³³² Havel *Redevelopment* 178.

³³³ Havel *Redevelopment* 178.

will ‘drive [him] out of [his] mind’, which relates to the madness I refer to. Plechanov also predicts the outcome of this irrationality, warning that Albert’s unfulfilled love could lead to ‘tragedy’, “*tragédie*”, and warns him that he must either kill his love or end up killing himself.³³⁴ The irony of this statement is that it is Plechanov himself who commits suicide. Albert asks him if his feelings led him to tragedy, to which he replies: ‘*Na tom nezáleží, nejde ted’ o mě*’, “It doesn’t matter, it’s not about me”.

The pleasure gained from watching a *fictional* tragedy can be acquainted with the pleasures of love. More specifically, the pleasures gained from the pains. In the case of Luisa it is in her “nature” to desire the love of others whilst never being able to fulfil it. The relationship between love and pain can be seen strongly here. Luisa walks on the thin line between the two and is unable to commit either way. On the other hand, there is Albert and Plechanov who are both in love with her, and then Renata, the young secretary, who is in turn in love with Albert.³³⁵ All of them experience pain as a consequence of their love; Albert through dissatisfaction, and Plechanov and Renata through Luisa’s closeness to Albert. Each subsequently feel their love more strongly as a result. The noticeable irony of all this is that all are left dissatisfied, and therein lies the tragedy. The same is true of the love presented in this play, the idea that excess turns pleasure into pain, at least in the case of Plechanov and Renata. There is irony in the fact that both are left hurt by their jealousy of Albert, whilst Albert himself is left hurt. Perhaps, however, it is this possibility, this chase that keeps them happy, in the absurd Sisyphean way, and keeps them from tragedy. Their love is not excessive, and only becomes excessive when it is truly taken away. Renata, upon Albert’s arrest, tries to take her own life, much in the same way that in Sophocles’ *Antigone*, Haimon kills himself when Antigone’s body is discovered.³³⁶

All the characters of the play have toxic relationships with love or desire. Albert is naïvely and passionately in love with Luisa, Plechanov is suffering from unrequited love for Luisa, Bergman needs Luisa’s affection to feel validated, whilst Luisa herself requires affection but cannot ever return it, and Ulč only expresses desire when drunk. This play clearly deals with the tragedy of irrationality, that loss of rationality that comes from love and desire.

³³⁴ Havel *Redevelopment* 178.

³³⁵ Havel *Redevelopment* 163.

³³⁶ Havel *Redevelopment* 191-192.

"Suffering"

Many of the characters in *Redevelopment* are shown to possess hamartia, a repeated action or an error that eventually leads their demise. The word Aristotle uses, “ἁμαρτία”, is translated by Kenny and Heath as an “error”.³³⁷ In the context of the *Poetics*, he is writing in the same section in which he describes how the tragic hero should be neither “good” nor “wicked”. The translators’ use of the word “error” is then trying to convey that the character’s downfall should not be caused by a “wicked” action. In his notes, Kenny writes that “ἁμαρτία” ‘can cover both cognitive and moral error’.³³⁸ Thus hamartia is not so much an accident, rather it is something within a person’s Being.

In *Redevelopment*, Havel applies such an error, to the majority of the ensemble. The whole cast errs in their inability to listen to Plechanov or understand how he feels. One of the characters tells him that he should play something ‘more cheerful’ than *Очи чёрные*, refusing to acknowledge why he might be playing such a sad song. The main protagonist, Albert, is presented as youthfully ignorant of the real world, but passionate. He is against the mechanical destruction of the city which has been thus far ‘evolving historically’, and the mechanical construction of buildings and architecture as a ‘formula’.³³⁹ He believes in buildings which acknowledge the natural landscape and the collected experience of people. This leads to an older architect, Ulč, to patronise him to belittle his viewpoint, saying: ‘Good Lord, what did you do at college, Albert?’³⁴⁰ The older architects, such as Ulč, fail to see, or at are ignorant of, the views of others, both of Albert and the people of the village, whose petition to stop the project is cast aside. This ignorance of the human, a symptom of the “normalised” communist society being parodied here, acts as the overall moral of the play, in the form of the characters’ hamartia. This Aristotelian concept is use, not just for the protagonist, but for much of the cast, as well as for purposes of parody. Thus, Havel takes the tragedy and makes it absurd.

At the play’s denouement Plechanov kills himself by throwing himself from the tower. Bergman, the Project Director, gives a speech about how they ‘all carry a share of guilt in regard to his death... We’re callous, indolent, indifferent, deaf to the voices of those near and dear to us and blind to their pain’.³⁴¹ This reflective speech can be seen as comparable to closing speeches of

³³⁷ Aristotle *Poetics* 1453a.10.

³³⁸ Kenny 2013: 93.

³³⁹ Havel *Redevelopment* 156-157.

³⁴⁰ Havel *Redevelopment* 156.

³⁴¹ Havel *Redevelopment* 206.

the Choruses from various tragedies in which they sum up the message, such as in *Hippolytus*: ‘On all citizens together this grief has fallen, foreseen by none. In unbroken lamentation many tears will be shed. The end of great men, heard in song, compels our greater sorrow’.³⁴² But within this speech there is also a summary of Havel’s interpretation of catharsis. Bergman follows his negative, infective speech by saying: ‘But this bitter consciousness of our complicity has a positive side’, he talks of learning from the experience and changing their ways.³⁴³ This reflects what Havel says about catharsis being “the beginning of hope”. Hope following on from tragedy.

Despite all this, as with *The Garden Party*, Havel appears to both acknowledge but also counter the Aristotelian norms. This is true on the subject of the character of Albert. Conventionally Albert takes on the role of the tragic hero as well as being typical in the repertoire of Havel’s absurd protagonists. He is placed into an absurd situation which he does not understand nor agree with, as the new member of an architect corporation insisting on demolishing a medieval town. He spends the duration of the play resisting the Absurd and refusing to co-operate with his superiors which ultimately leads to him being imprisoned. Albert is a good but flawed character who undergoes unfortunate experiences, he is sent to the dungeon for example. He returns from prison a changed man, the youthful passion gone, he has been forced to join the machine. When he is released from the dungeon he runs off to the tower, followed by Plechanov, and the sound of someone falling is heard. It is not revealed to the audience who has died, Bergman’s speech is said whilst the audience is ignorant to the truth. Much like the protagonist of Sophocles’ *Antigone*, it is expected that Albert has killed himself, such would be the tragic convention. It appears that Albert, upon recognising the Absurd, has in fact rejected it instead of accepting it as it seemed. It then turns out that, in fact, another colleague, Plechanov, who went to help Albert, jumped from the tower instead. In doing this Havel pulls the carpet from his audience’s feet, so to speak, by revealing quite clearly the conflict between the tragic and the absurd within the play. This also echoes the play’s moral, as the other protagonists were also ignorant of Plechanov’s situation. This twist reveals that another man went unnoticed in the absurd situation, and because he was not speaking out, his own rejection of the Absurd went unobserved.

On the other hand, there is the character of Zdeněk Bergman who expresses despair and a desire to end his life: ‘My life is nothing but a tiresome duty, a source of endless suffering...

³⁴² Euripides *Hippolytus* 1462-1466.

³⁴³ Havel *Redevelopment* 206.

What's the sense in living a life that's lost its sense? Darkness, peace, eternal, endless peace...'.³⁴⁴ He expresses a "recognition" of the Absurd, a loss of "sense" and meaning in life, typical of a Theatre of the Absurd character. His character, unlike Plechanov, is not tragic, for his expressed despair is not a resignation, rather he is seeking attention, 'someone to console [him]', as Luisa puts it.³⁴⁵ This shows the unhappy difference between Plechanov and Bergman, the former's genuine expression of despair went unheard.

This play is a clear critique of the communist Czechoslovak government, as an absurd machine in which faceless individuals are forgotten. Albert describes the situation they are in as 'unreal', "*neskutečně*".³⁴⁶ 'Everyone here – I know exactly what they're going to say, what they're going to do – It's as if they're not people but characters in a play someone else is putting on'.³⁴⁷ Furthermore, when the architects are celebrating they shout out phrases which parody communist and Marxist slogans for example; 'Urbanism with a human face' referencing Dubček's "Communism with a human face", and 'Architects of the world, unite!' being a reference to 'Working men of all countries, unite!' from Marx and Engel's *The Communist Manifesto*.^{348,349}

Albert's imprisonment mirrors Havel's own imprisonments by the Communist Party for refusing to cooperate with their system. At the point of writing this play he had been to prison twice. The difference is, however, that Havel did not let prison get to him and continued to fight for his views and freedom after his release. At the denouement, Albert becomes the absurd man by choosing acceptance rather than suicide, unlike tragic characters. This is what keeps the play within the Absurd genre, merely borrowing Aristotelian traits. Despite the tragic circumstances the play ends with a piece of repeated dialogue, Renata comically stating: 'I have a sex drive too!'.³⁵⁰ There is further comic imagery as Luisa angrily drops the castle model on top of Bergman's head. Then the cast are told to turn and stare at the audience members in the eyes whilst the music becomes unbearably loud, driving them from the auditorium.

Redevelopment, or *Asanace* in the original Czech, was written at an important point in Czech history, something only seen in hindsight. The verb "*asanovat*", from which the play's title is drawn could also be translated as to 'decontaminate' or to 'demolish'.³⁵¹ In Czech politics, Havel's interpretation of catharsis, destruction leading to positive things, was two years off occurring.

³⁴⁴ Havel *Redevelopment* 149.

³⁴⁵ Havel *Redevelopment* 149.

³⁴⁶ Havel *Redevelopment* 161.

³⁴⁷ Havel *Redevelopment* 161.

³⁴⁸ Havel *Redevelopment* 172-173

³⁴⁹ Marx & Engels *Communist Manifesto* 52.

³⁵⁰ Havel *Redevelopment* 206.

³⁵¹ Slovník (accessed 02 Oct 2017).

Further on I will discuss Havel's final play prior to the Velvet Revolution, but *Redevelopment* was the last play typical of Havel's style. It comes at a point at which more citizens of Czechoslovakia were starting to fight back against their regime, as opposed to quietly accept it. Havel's writing of theatre that more explicitly resembles Aristotelian tragedy could be seen as a reaction to this attitude in society at the time. Perhaps the Czech people were no longer fearing their leaders, instead standing up against them.

Tomorrow! (*Zítřka to spustíme*):

On a possible experiment in non-Aristotelian theatre and Brechtian influences.

In this section I will discuss the extent to which 1988's *Tomorrow!* is a departure for Havel, moving from the more tenuous political parody of his previous plays to a more direct commentary on Czech politics. The play is not an attack but, as I will discuss, almost a plea to the Czech citizens for change.

Tomorrow! is a rarity in the repertoire of Havel's plays. I have written about the various allusions Havel makes to contemporary Czech history in his previous plays, however in this example he creates an adaptation of a crucial moment in said history; the founding of Czechoslovakia as an independent state. Allusions, however, are not hard to spot here either. Through the eyes of the man who organised the country's creation, Alois Rašín, Havel appears to create both an allegory and prophecy of his own life. Rašín was part of the independence resistance movement when the country was part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire and was, initially, sentenced to death for it in 1915. His sentence was eventually reduced to life imprisonment when Emperor Franz Joseph I died, however he was soon granted amnesty and released in 1917. Upon his release he led a revolution which saw the creation of an independent Czechoslovak nation, a major shift in Czech history and politics.³⁵²

It is often noted, that major events in Czech history seem to occur in a year ending in "8": 1918: Czechoslovakia is founded, 1938: Munich Agreement allows Adolf Hitler to invade the Sudetenland, 1948: Czechoslovakia is made a member of the Soviet bloc, 1968: Prague Spring and subsequent USSR invasion. Timothy Garton Ash, writing in 1988, notes that 'those "years of eight" ... have been turning points for Czechoslovakia and the whole of Europe in the twentieth

³⁵² Rocamora 2004: 271-272.

century'.³⁵³ Thus, Havel and likely others may have held hope that in 1988 something significant might happen again in Czech history, to end the stale 'asthma' of the "normalisation" period.³⁵⁴ Written to celebrate the 70th anniversary of the events of the play, this was the first of Havel's plays for almost 20 years to be performed on the Prague stage, albeit without his name which was banned by the government. Petr Oslzlý, the event organiser, managed to avoid the authority censors despite their restrictions, including disputing the use of a Czech flag which was not 'allowed'.³⁵⁵ In a sense, the play itself became a mini revolution, demonstrating a weakening of the tough restrictions placed on artists during the Communist rule. Finally, the revolutionaries were making ground. The closing lines of Act 2 of *Tomorrow!* seem to echo a sentiment and a longing of those fed up of their government.; "The Czech state is born at last, let us rejoice, Austrian majesty is past, let us raise our voice".³⁵⁶ 1988, however, passed by in Czechoslovakia uneventfully, Václav Havel did not quite yet lead his country to a seismic shift of history and politics. That had to wait until 1989.

In the play, it is not hard to see the parallels between Havel's imprisonment by the authorities and the eventual overthrowing of said authorities, and Rašín's own life. Of course Havel could not have known what the future held for either himself or his country, but the date of the play is noteworthy. Carol Rocamora makes note of the significance of the almost prophetic way Havel wrote about Rašín. 'It was the last play Havel wrote before leading his country through a revolution and into independence, and it is a play about a man who led that country through a revolution and into independence seventy years earlier... Life imitates art imitates life'.³⁵⁷ Her book, *Acts of Courage: Václav Havel's Life in the Theater* is based on the thesis that Havel's life is almost like the plot of a play itself, something that Havel himself also acknowledges. 'It is an inspiring story, one unlike any other in recent theater [sic] history. And it is not Václav Havel's story alone; it involves a large cast of characters, playing significant roles in a variety of settings'.³⁵⁸ In writing *Tomorrow!*, it was as if Havel had written the next act of his life himself.

Tonally it is a departure from his earlier absurdist plays. The actors are instructed to sit 'round the edge of the set' to await their turn to become the characters, and speak directly to the

³⁵³ Garton Ash 1999: 205.

³⁵⁴ Havel *Stories* 337.

³⁵⁵ Rocamora 2004: 276.

³⁵⁶ Havel *Tomorrow!* 12.

³⁵⁷ Rocamora 2004: 319-320.

³⁵⁸ Rocamora 2004:2.

audience: ‘As the more informed amongst you will already have realised...’.³⁵⁹ Thus it is almost more Brechtian in style.

In terms of political thought though, Havel and Brecht would have immediately disagreed. Brecht was a Marxist, an outspoken one who used his plays to express his political views and encourage them on others. He famously wrote what he termed to be *episches Theater*, “epic theatre”, which spoke out to the ‘wronged’ of society by the bourgeoisie.³⁶⁰ Havel, on other hand, was born into what he termed *velkoburžoazní*, “grand-bourgeois”, family; the Havel family owning large amount of property in Prague before the USSR “liberation”.³⁶¹ Thus, to Brecht, Havel would have been the antithesis of his writing. Brecht’s primary aim was to write theatre that counteracted the classical, bourgeois, Aristotelian theatre that dominated the 19th century. For Brecht, the act of watching a play should be intellectual instead of emotional, he in particular disagreed with the idea of catharsis. He describes a metaphorical dramatic performance of *Oedipus the King* in which the auditorium is ‘full of little Oedipuses’, that is the audience emphasise with him and feel his “suffering”.³⁶² Instead, Brecht believed the audience should be distanced from the action, aware that the action is separate from reality, and not be a mere passive observer. He calls this theatrical technique the *Verfremdungseffekt*, arguably translated as the “de-familiarisation effect”.³⁶³ Brecht wanted the audience to receive a lesson from the play they watch, to instruct them on how they should act. Not unlike that famous quote from *The Communist Manifesto*: ‘Let the ruling classes tremble at a Communistic revolution. The proletarians have nothing to lose but their chains. They have a world to win. Working men of all countries, unite’.³⁶⁴ Brecht dubbed his plays *Lehrstücke*, “learning plays”, that encouraged the audience to think.

In *Letter 115*, Havel writes that his opinion on Brecht is one of respect, despite fundamentally disagreeing with his theatrical methods.³⁶⁵ Furthermore, in *Disturbing the Peace*, he writes about the Theatre of the Absurd: ‘Absurd theatre is not here to explain how things are. It does not have that kind of arrogance; it leaves the instructing to Brecht’.³⁶⁶ Absurd theatre, as opposed to epic theatre, merely highlights the absurdity of human existence, it does not teach its audience how it should act. He similarly writes how ‘there is no philosophising’ in Absurd plays

³⁵⁹ Havel *Tomorrow!* 2-4.

³⁶⁰ Brecht 2015: 116.

³⁶¹ Havel *Dálkový výsledek* 1.

³⁶² Brecht 2015: 127.

³⁶³ Giles 2015: 5.

³⁶⁴ Marx & Engels *Communist Manifesto* 52.

³⁶⁵ Havel *Letter 115* 285.

³⁶⁶ Havel *Disturbing the Peace* 54.

either.³⁶⁷ That is not to say, however, that they are not philosophical in nature, they just do not assert their philosophy upon their audience. Carol Rocamora, in her biography on Havel, makes reference to a samizdat piece of writing where Havel actively complains about Brecht's impact on European theatre. He writes that it is 'full of Brecht's assistants... They want the play to be explained in a sociological and psychological terms... They don't understand that every play has its secret and it should be played as its written'.³⁶⁸ This shows the principle difference between Brecht and Havel's view on theatre; Havel's plays are not meant to be academic, they are essentially meant to be absurd – in the most literal sense of the word. In *Leaving*, for example, the Voice character says how a device in which one of the characters always bizarrely requests cinnamon in his beer has 'no psychological or any other explanation for it whatsoever'.³⁶⁹ Havel, as the Voice, summarises: 'The simple fact is, I like it and I feel it belongs there'.³⁷⁰

Brecht's stance of writing "non-Aristotelian" theatre comes to a somewhat oxymoronic point with his adaptation of Sophocles' *Antigone* in 1948, entitled *Die Antigone des Sophokles*. David Wiles writes that, in doing so, he 'politicised' the play.³⁷¹ The political reception of *Antigone*, however, is something that far pre-dates Bertolt Brecht. What differs from version to version is the exact nature of the political position. In Brecht's play Creon is presented as a tyrannical figure, a rather obvious allegory of Adolf Hitler. He is even introduced as '*mein Führer*' by one of his guards.³⁷² This play was performed in the immediate aftermath of the Second World War and thus makes strong links to its events. Wiles writes that the Chorus were meant to represent 'the German majority who complained but never rebelled against fascism', an example of Brecht's *Lehrtheater* technique.³⁷³ Therefore, in Brecht's adaptation Creon is the anti-leader, an example of a purely evil man with no morals. On the other hand, Sophocles' original was performed amongst the background of Pericles' command in power. According to David M. Carter, Sophocles became a general due to the success of *Antigone* and that the play has 'some relevance to Periclean politics'.³⁷⁴

Bertolt Brecht makes a very direct attack at the political force that oppressed him and forced him out of his country. He knew he would not be safe, as a communist, against the background of the rise of the Nazi Party, and he left Germany in exile soon after the Reichstag

³⁶⁷ Havel *Disturbing the Peace* 53.

³⁶⁸ Rocamora 2005: 251.

³⁶⁹ Havel *Odcházení* 12.

³⁷⁰ Havel *Odcházení* 12.

³⁷¹ Wiles 2000: 63.

³⁷² Brecht *Antigone* 186.

³⁷³ Wiles 2000: 63.

³⁷⁴ Carter 2007: 103-104.

fire in 1933.³⁷⁵ He wrote two plays which openly allegorised Hitler and the Nazi's rise to power: *Die Antigone des Sophokles* and *Der aufhaltsame Aufstieg des Arturo Ui*. To the south-east and thirty years later, Václav Havel was facing oppression from the Communist Party in Czechoslovakia.

Almost all of Havel's plays focus on the typically absurdist plotline of a man struggling with his own identity amongst the absurdities of complex and oppressive bureaucracy. As aforementioned, this plotline resembles the paranoid confusion of Franz Kafka's writings such as *The Trial* and *The Castle*. Havel himself says that Kafka had an 'impact' on the inspiration for his plays.³⁷⁶ The claustrophobic, impenetrable bureaucracy that the communist leaders put in place seems to parallel the Castle officials in Kafka's novel. Even 'personal plans' became impossible, or at least too complicated to even bother doing, due to the Communist Party's bureaucracy.³⁷⁷ Therefore all of Havel's plays have that politically allegorical element. The difference between Havel and Brecht's plays, however, is the lack of direct political allegory or attack. Havel did not adapt *Antigone* with Alexander Dubček representing the titular role, and Leonid Brezhnev representing Creon. He did not attempt to stir his audience to revolution as Brecht did in *Die Mutter*. Instead, his plays illustrate the struggle of the ordinary man trying to make his way as an individual in the absurd world and eventually relinquishing to acceptance. His plays written in the 1980s after his 1979-1983 prison spell were all performed in secret due to the communist's ban on his writing. Despite this, he does not directly attack the people who imprisoned him, he merely expresses sadness at the state of affairs. This is the ultimate difference between epic and absurd theatre's approach to politics. Brecht's plays attempt, through the emotional distancing of the audience from the characters, to stray away from the Aristotelian "pity and fear". On the other hand, Havel's plays do exactly that. Their approach to the political climate is to accept the tragedy of it, to experience pity and fear for themselves and their own situation.

Despite this, however, it cannot be said that Havel did nothing. Instead of actively fighting the regime with violent protest, Havel relied on the power of words. As well as his plays, Havel's essays and speeches made his opposition clear, not to mention his involvement with the formation and writing of *Charta 77*. It was these texts and his determination to see his country return to a policy of truth and love over lies and hatred that caused the Velvet Revolutionaries to shout: '*Havel, na Hrad*', "Havel to the Castle".³⁷⁸

³⁷⁵ Rosenhaft 2006: 20.

³⁷⁶ Havel *Disturbing the Peace* 6.

³⁷⁷ Havel *Stories* 344.

³⁷⁸ The Atlantic 2009.



Figure 3. *Havel na Hrad* poster (1989). V&A 23 Mar 2017.

Nevertheless, the idea of Havel experimenting with epic theatre techniques at this point is interesting as it suggests a non-Aristotelian drama. Bertolt Brecht's theatre encouraged his audience to act, to fight out against oppression. In an article written in 1935, Brecht writes about his *Lehrstücke* in comparison to Aristotelian plays. "The Aristotelian play is essentially static; its task is to show the world as it is. The learning play is essentially dynamic; its task is to show the world as it changes... [this type of theatre] holds that the audience is a collection of individuals capable of thinking and of reasoning".³⁷⁹ If Brecht's view is applied to Havel's plays, it could be argued that Havel's early plays perform a similar role. However, despite saying in 1985/6 that his theatre 'leaves the instructing to Brecht', it does appear that in 1988, with *Tomorrow!* Havel has created a piece of *Lehrtheater*.³⁸⁰ It can be seen that this play serves the role of reminding the Czech citizens of a heroic time in their history and potentially "teaching" them to think about their current situation. The play's title, *Tomorrow!*, or *Zítřka to Spustíme* in the original Czech which can be translated as "tomorrow's launch", seems itself to suggest a call to arms. "Tomorrow" in fact extended to the next year, but in a "year of eight", there may have been hope that the revolution could have been the very next day.

At the denouement of the play, the audience experiences Alois Rašín's dream in which audio clips are played of 'authentic speeches by various Czech and Slovak statesmen which seek to mirror both bad and hopeful times'.³⁸¹ Note the use of the word "hopeful", "*nadějně*" in the original Czech, perhaps displaying Havel's own hopefulness. This audio is played alongside the closing song from Bedřich Smetana's opera *Libuše* which tells the mythical tale of the founding of Prague. Much like Virgil's epic poem the *Aeneid*, which tells of founding of Rome from a hindsight view, Smetana's opera ends with a "prophecy" of Prague's future, which was the

³⁷⁹ Brecht 2015: 122.

³⁸⁰ Havel *Disturbing the Peace* 54.

³⁸¹ Havel *Tomorrow!* 26.

present audience's history. The theme of the opera is very nationalistic and tells of how the Czech people will resist and be victorious against all the oppress them. This all supposed to take place in Rašín's dream 'in the early hours of the 28th October 1918', but, as Actor C reminds the audience, the play is supposed to be a historical recreation of the events and there is no proof Rašín had such a dream.³⁸² Actress D then addresses the audience and exclaims, in the final line of the play: 'Then who did dream it?'.³⁸³ This suggests that the dream of a free, independent Czechoslovakia should be the audience's dream.

If *Tomorrow!* is Brechtian in style, as opposed to Aristotelian or tragic, it is through a light use of Brecht's *Verfremdungseffekt*. Havel uses the technique to distance the actor from the character, and the audience from the story. Nevertheless, a key part of the *Verfremdungseffekt* is the distancing of emotion from the audience, and this play, particularly in its denouement, makes a strong appeal to emotion. It could almost be seen as a positive catharsis. In his chapter on Brecht in his book on *Modern Tragedy*, Raymond Williams writes how Brecht attempts to show how pity and fear can 'deceive' and 'exploit' the audience.³⁸⁴ Therefore the end of this play is in fact very un-Brechtian. That is not to say that Havel did not draw from Brechtian theatre, for as he says in *Letter 115* to Olga, 'I respect Brecht, but... frankly, I only like his non-Brechtian moments, when the thing, as it were, becomes bigger than he is'.³⁸⁵

³⁸² Havel *Tomorrow!* 26.

³⁸³ Havel *Tomorrow!* 26.

³⁸⁴ Williams 1966: 192.

³⁸⁵ Havel *Letter 115* 285.

CONCLUSION

In this dissertation I have explored a way in which ancient Greek tragedy, in its Aristotelian depiction, can be created on the modern stage. I believe tragedy in its pure form cannot be produced anew. There are a number of reasons for this, the main one being that there is no longer belief in that from which tragedy was born: the pagan Olympian religion. Without that desire to worship and ritualise those ancient gods, tragedy cannot be produced in its as it was originally conceived. Furthermore, it is a genre built upon and around a society that no longer exists. It was written to be performed in a specific context; the Dionysian festival, and a specific location; below the sacred Acropolis hill, before the Dionysiac Sanctuary, looking over the city of Athens and its forests beyond. My exploration, however, demonstrates how tragedy's values *can* be produced anew. My dissertation argues that the plays of Václav Havel achieve this, through the Theatre of the Absurd.

Martin Esslin describes the Theatre of the Absurd as 'a return to old, even archaic traditions'.³⁸⁶ The oldest traditions in human artistic expression are linked to a search for meaning. The Babylonian *Epic of Gilgamesh*, one of the world's oldest known stories, 'tells of one man's heroic struggle against death... [and] of his despair when confronted with inevitable failure'.³⁸⁷ Tragedy is born out of this tradition, and so is the Theatre of the Absurd. It is this part of being human that connects those who wrote and watched tragedies in the 5th century BC and the people of today, still writing and watching theatre. This desire for meaning and existential question of the purpose of life is something that carries down the ages. In circa 442 BC Sophocles' Ajax despairs that 'life is dogged by unrelenting pain', and in 1963 AD Havel's Božena woes: 'We're alone! Alone in the whole world!'.³⁸⁸ Within the over 2,000-year difference humanity is still struggling with the same existential thoughts and philosophy. Yet it is, in fact, with those two quotes that the inherent differences between the ancient and the modern world, that is the difference between the age of the Olympus and the age in which "Olympus was completely abolished". Ajax's despair in the eponymous Sophoclean tragedy takes place within the backdrop of the gods; he blames Athena, 'the grim-eyed goddess, unsubdued daughter of Zeus', for his sufferings whilst grieving that he is 'detested' by the gods.³⁸⁹ Whereas, in Havel's play, the focus of despair is on the absence of anyone. Havel writes in his essay, *Thriller*, with the abolition of

³⁸⁶ Esslin 2014: 271.

³⁸⁷ George 2003: xiii.

³⁸⁸ Sophocles *Ajax* 473-480 & Havel *Garden Party* 8.

³⁸⁹ Sophocles *Ajax* 449-450 & 458-459.

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Olympus, there is no one left 'to punish evil', it can also be noted that there, therefore, is no one left to praise virtue.³⁹⁰ This theme of being lost in one's own freedom and how one should react to this is the basis of the absurd philosophy and theatre.

From 1963 to 1989, a Czech playwright named Václav Havel wrote a series of plays which, in my opinion, best play that line between the two genres. Throughout his life as a playwright his plays wavered from absurdism to tragedy and back, often within one singular work.

At the start of his career as a playwright Havel viewed the political situation as an 'amused observer "from below"', commenting on and critiquing the absurdities of the communist government. Thus, his first full length plays from the 1960s, *The Garden Party*, *The Memorandum*, and *The Increased Difficulty of Concentration*, are generally lighter hearted and tend towards absurdism. Despite this, these plays showed signs of something more, Aristotelian themes along with Camus.

Whilst *The Increased Difficulty of Concentration* differs from the two preceding plays, it is still clearly a piece of Absurd drama. The first major shift in his style, towards a more tragic approach, occurs after a major shift in the Czechoslovak political scene. Following the USSR's crackdown on the emerging "liberalisation" in the country, Havel found his works banned from the stage and he was forced to work in a brewery. These times were, for Havel, frustratingly nihilistic. His attitude towards this is shown in a trilogy of plays about a character named Vaněk, another thinly disguised parallel of Havel himself. In these plays, the characters exist in a world that is absurd but in a more solemn sense.

Another shift occurs in Havel's style after he serves two prison sentences, one in 1977, and another much longer one from 1979-1983. Unlike the change at the end of the 60s, this time it was not a political shift, rather it was a result of Havel challenging the political regime and suffering the consequences for it. After the two sentences, in which Havel suffered greatly, the Communist Party did not show much sign of weakening. His plays of the 1980s are darker than before, with plays about Faustian themes and suicide. It is only with a play written in 1988 that a greater positivity appears, a push towards a more optimistic future.

In 1989 Havel was inaugurated as president of Czechoslovakia after the Communist Party president, Gustáv Husák, was forced to step down. After forty-eight years of ever shifting forms, communism no longer ruled Czechoslovakia. Havel's life as a playwright was put on hold as tackled his new role as president. He held the position for fourteen years until 2003, although

³⁹⁰ Havel *Thriller* 287.

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after the separation of Czechoslovakia in 1992 he became the first president of the newly-created Czech Republic. He returned to the theatrical world in 2008 with a play entitled *Leaving* (*Odházení*). Inspired by Shakespeare's *King Lear* and Anton Chekhov's *The Cherry Orchard*, it describes a former chancellor being forced to move out of his home. Once again Havel explores the loss of Being and Aristotelian themes of "recognition", the play is also the least absurd of all the ones discussed.

Havel was an important figure in literary and political history, the story of the bohemian playwright turned president is fascinating enough alone. Therefore, understandably, many have written about him and his work, both within and after his lifetime. In her book, *Acts of Courage: Václav Havel's Life in the Theater*, Carol Rocamora provides a biography of Havel with his playwrighting as its focus. She discusses each of his plays in detail, describing their conception, production, and themes. John Keane's *Václav Havel: A Political Tragedy in Six Acts* presents Havel as a character in a Greek tragedy, 'an actor in a prose drama riddled with calamities, injustices, and unhappy endings'.³⁹¹ Whilst mentioning Aristotle's *Poetics* and some of its themes, such as "catharsis", he applies this only to Havel's life, not to his writing.³⁹² Robert Pirro also discusses tragedy in relation to Havel in his essay *Václav Havel and the Political Uses of Tragedy*. In this essay he refers to 'the frequency and occasional prominence of Havel's references to tragedy' within his writing and speeches.³⁹³ Pirro's focus, as the title suggests, is on Havel's political writing, however it provides an important discussion of the 'scattered' references to tragedy that Havel makes, helping to make sense of his understanding of tragedy.³⁹⁴ Pirro's essay attempts to show how tragedy makes sense of 'Havel's political thought', with this dissertation I have attempted to show how it can also help to understand Havel's theatrical works.³⁹⁵ His plays are often labelled under the Theatre of the Absurd genre, which is certainly correct, however I have shown that there is more to them than that. Havel clearly had an understanding of tragedy, either through reading classical texts or discussions with Jan Patočka. As I have shown, the themes present in the ancient plays and Aristotle's discussion of them can be found in Havel's own plays, to a greater or lesser extent.

There is also something to be said about the relevance of Havel to our own time, in 21st century society and politics. For him, truth and love were an important part of politics, and the

³⁹¹ Keane 2000: 10.

³⁹² Keane 2000: 11 & 15.

³⁹³ Pirro 2002: 236.

³⁹⁴ Pirro 2002: 252.

³⁹⁵ Pirro 2002: 252.

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politics of the communist Czech government lacked both. In a 1983 interview when asked about his role as an opposition spokesman, Havel replied: ‘I merely take the side of truth against lies’.³⁹⁶ This is particularly resonant at a time in which the Brexit vote won in the UK and Donald Trump was elected President of the USA. It has been argued that these events occurred due to the rejection of objective truth, resulting in the phrase *Post-Truth*.³⁹⁷ Robert Pynsent, in his 2018 essay entitled *Václav Havel: A Heart in the Right Place*, argues how Havel ‘unwittingly made way for the ochlocracy’, such as Brexit and Trump, by pushing for giving power to the people, the powerless.³⁹⁸



Figure 4. Havel @ 80 poster. (photograph: H. Mellish).

Havel’s legacy still holds much significance, particularly in his home country of the Czech Republic. I was living in Prague during the winter of 2016, whilst researching this dissertation. The 5th October of that year happened to be Havel’s would-be 80th birthday, he had died 5 years earlier in 2011, and Prague celebrated with a rock concert on Wenceslas Square, which I attended.

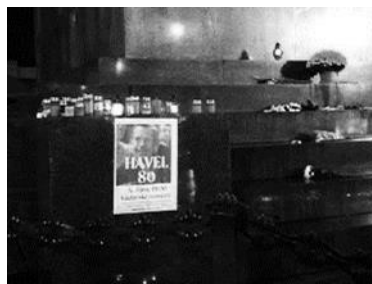


Figure 5. Václav Havel memorial and poster on Saint Wenceslas I monument in Prague. (photograph: H. Mellish).

³⁹⁶ Havel “I Take the Side of Truth” 248.

³⁹⁷ D’Ancona 2017: 7.

³⁹⁸ Pynsent 2018: 334.

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Even nearly 15 years after he left the presidency office, his image and legacy can still be seen across the Czech Republic. From street art:



Figure 6. Václav Havel street art. (photograph: H. Mellish).

To official portraits:



Figure 7. Václav Havel portrait in Český Krumlov. (photograph: H. Mellish).

As well as renaming Prague's international airport after him, in honour of his 80th birthday, what had previously been the National Theatre Piazzetta was renamed *Náměstí Václava Havla*, Václav Havel Square.



Figure 8. *Náměstí Václava Havla* street sign. (photograph: H. Mellish).

As his, mostly unsanctioned, career as a playwright progressed, Havel developed his theatrical voice as he pulled together influences from politics, his personal life, and the writing of others. Through his unique take of the Theatre of the Absurd, he created a new form of tragedy for the modern world. The Aristotelian concepts of “recognition” and “suffering” are adapted towards a different philosophy. Havel wrote that ‘Olympus was completely abolished’, and so

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with the abolition of the Olympians humanity is free.³⁹⁹ But as Eteocles, among many others, find within Greek tragedy, freedom is terrifying for they are forced to confront the Absurd. The characters of Havel's plays have not been abandoned by gods, rather they have already abolished them. Within this "free" world, the new tragedy is the absurd tragedy, and Václav Havel is an absurd tragedian.

³⁹⁹ Havel *Thriller* 287.

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