Aleksandra Kamińska

Jagiellonian University

Faculty of Philology

**‘This is the way the world ends’: the apocalyptic tone in selected plays by Caryl Churchill and Samuel Beckett**

It has been diagnosed by critics that ‘an apocalyptic tone has recently been adopted in British theatre.’[[1]](#footnote-1) Its roots supposedly lie in the contemporary playwrights’ disillusionment with capitalism, dating back to the 1990s. The dissertation suggests that the apocalyptic tendencies can be traced back further, identifying the apocalyptic tone in the works of Caryl Churchill and Samuel Beckett, spanning the period of 1952–2016. Despite the fact that Churchill is one of the most extensively studied contemporary British dramatists, and even though especially in recent criticism she is often compared to Beckett, the available research into the parallels between the oeuvres of the two authors is surprisingly sparse. The aim of the dissertation is to add to the growing body of comparative research dedicated to Beckett and Churchill, utilising the apocalyptic tone as defined by Jacques Derrida[[2]](#footnote-2) as the main tool for comparison. In view of this, the dissertation focuses on answering the following questions: first, can the apocalyptic tone be viewed as a dominant in Beckett’s and Churchill’s oeuvres, or is it only a recurring theme? In other words, can it be traced beyond the texts making explicit verbal references to the end of the world? Second, what varieties of the apocalyptic tone can be identified in Churchill’s and Beckett’s plays? And finally, is the apocalyptic tone a valid tool for comparing Beckett’s and Churchill’s divergent playwriting strategies?

The first chapter of the dissertation is dedicated to different guises of apocalypticism, from the Book of Revelation to the Doomsday Clock of the *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*. Referring, among others, to religious, romantic, modernist, historical, nuclear, postmodern, environmental, capitalist, feminist and posthuman apocalypticism, it traces the significance of the representations of the end times in the Western literature and culture as well as introduces the category of the apocalyptic tone as defined by Derrida. It also refers to the postmodern view of the discourses of the end as represented by Jean Baudrillard in ‘Anorexic Ruins.’[[3]](#footnote-3)

The remaining four chapters are analytical. They include theoretical introductions, dedicated to different varieties of the apocalyptic tone, followed by sections providing an overview of the employment of the given variety of the apocalyptic tone in the works of both playwrights; finally, each of the chapters includes the analysis of four selected plays (two by each playwright)—with the exception of Chapter 3, in which two plays are analysed.

Chapter 2, discussing Churchill’s *Far Away* and *Escaped Alone*, as well as Beckett’s *Come and Go* and *Act Without Words I*, is dedicated to the dominant apocalyptic narrative of the present era, namely environmental apocalypticism. It demonstrates how in her environmentally-focused plays Churchill depicts apocalypse through extinction as a fast approaching reality of entire ecosystems and cultures with their agentic assemblages. Ever sensitive to the traps of abusive capitalism, she posits this apocalyptic perspective as a political statement, encouraging the readers/viewers to redefine their perception of agents and agency, and the role of nonhuman actants. In contrast, while Beckett seldom brings environmental apocalypticism to the fore, his plays nonetheless provide ripe material for environmentally informed interpretations, forcing the readers/spectators to confront the dying world both inside and outside of the theatre—contrary to the tendency to treat the Beckettian decaying landscapes merely as metaphors, reflecting the withering inner landscapes of his characters.

Chapter 3 focuses on women and apocalypse, relying on the environmental feminist perspective and examining the ways in which environmental damage threatens the survival of humanity through impacting the female body and its reproductive potential. The plays discussed in this chapter—Beckett’s *Happy Days* and Churchill’s *The Skriker*—show how the female body becomes the stage of apocalyptic processes. In both texts female bodies are embedded in nature; moreover, they are porous and permeable, experiencing the potential apocalyptic consequences of what Stacy Alaimo[[4]](#footnote-4) theorises as trans-corporeality—proving that the Beckettian womb–tomb continuum is strongly aligned with contemporary environmental feminist apocalypticism.

Chapter 4 focuses on the post-apocalypse, drawing on different interpretations of the concept as discussed by James Berger.[[5]](#footnote-5) It analyses the post-apocalyptic dimension of the figure of the witness and of the ghost as well as post-apocalyptic themes related to the body, such as sexuality and the abject. Finally, it refers to the postmodern outlook on the post-apocalypse, in which the post-apocalyptic condition is defined as the realisation of ‘having overextended our finalities.’[[6]](#footnote-6) The plays analysed in this chapter are Beckett’s *That Time* and *Rough for Theatre I* as well as Churchill’s *Cloud Nine* and *A Number*.

Chapter 5 focuses on contrasting Churchill’s and Beckett’s divergent playwriting techniques, using the framework of the two competing predictions for the ultimate end of the universe (endless expansion, known as ‘the Big Rip,’ or implosion, labelled as the ‘Big Crunch’) as well as the distinction between creative and hermeneutic playwriting strategies as proposed by Eli Rozik.[[7]](#footnote-7) Discussing Churchill’s *Blue Heart* and *Love and Information* opposite Beckett’s *Come and Go* and *Breath*, the chapter focuses on Churchill’s and Beckett’s antithetical views on the relationship between the playtext and the stage, deeply ingrained in their respective playwriting strategies and techniques.

The discussions and analyses conducted in the dissertation prove that the apocalyptic streak runs deep in both Beckett’s and Churchill’s works for the stage, informing not only their topics and philosophies, but also their form. Arguably, few other playwrights are as attentive to the dramatic form as the two authors under discussion, albeit their explorations lead them towards different models and conventions. While for Beckett formal explorations are a path to the growing condensation of the body, text and the use of space, Churchill is relentlessly inventing new models and forms, only to cast them aside and replace with new ideas in subsequent texts. The common ground, however, remains both authors’ apocalyptic desire to reveal, discard the masks, lay bare the essentials, while rejecting everything that is repetitive and empty.

For Beckett, the apocalyptic tone is inextricably linked with the essence of humanity, which consistently drives him to portraying a dwindling world, crawling towards the end at a hopelessly slow but steady pace. The Beckettian character must face growing immobilisation and decomposition, but above else the awareness of the inevitable, irreversible decay both of the human and the surrounding world. In Beckett’s texts, the approaching apocalypse is part and parcel of human existence on earth; as a result, the crucial duty involved in being human is to keep vigil before the apocalyptic event. For Churchill, in turn, the apocalypse seems to be less related to metaphysics; instead, she views it as a part of history. Rather than an inevitable event resulting from the nature of the world, it is a direct consequence of historical—social, political, economic—processes. In contrast to Beckett’s plays, in which the inevitable apocalyptic event occurs to the generic human character, often unnamed and/or disembodied, Churchill’s apocalypses always concern specific social groups and could be averted or avoided through profound political change.

Overall, it seems that the apocalyptic tone offers a productive frame for contrasting Churchill’s and Beckett’s works, not only revealing interesting points of connection, but also opening up spaces for new or broadened interpretations of individual works.

1. Dan Rebellato (2017). ‘Of an Apocalyptic Tone Recently Adopted in Theatre: British Drama, Violence and Writing,’ [in:] *Sillages Critiques* [online], vol. 22, n. p., http://journals.openedition.org/sillagescritiques/4798, (access: 23 August 2019). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Jacques Derrida (1982). ‘Of an Apocalyptic Tone Recently Adopted in Philosophy,’ [in:] *Semeia*, vol. 23, pp. 63–95. ATLA (access: 24 March 2018). [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Jean Baudrillard (1989). ‘The Anorexic Ruins,’ [in:] *Looking Back on the End of the World*, eds. Christoph Wulf and Dietmar Kamper, New York: Semiotext(e), pp. 29–45. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Stacy Alaimo (2008). ‘Trans-corporeal Feminisms and the Ethical Space of Nature,’ [in:] *Material Feminisms*, eds. eadem and Susan Hekman, Bloomington—Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, p. 238 (237–264). [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. James Berger (1999). *After the End: Representations of Post-apocalypse*, Minneapolis—London: University of Minnesota Press. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. J. Baudrillard, op. cit., p. 34. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Eli Rozik (2010). *Generating Theatre Meaning: A Theory and Methodology of Performance Analysis,* Brighton—Portland—Toronto: Sussex Academic Press. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)