

9-2005

Havel, Vaclav

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Recommended Citation

Howell, Yvonne. "Havel, Vaclav." *Encyclopedia of Literature and Politics: Censorship, Revolution, and Writing*. Edited by M. Keith Booker. Vol. 2. Westport: Greenwood Press, 2005.

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Encycloepdia of Literature and Politics edited by M. Keith Booker.
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HAVEL, VACLAV (1936–), Czech playwright, dissident writer and human rights philosopher, statesman, president of Czechoslovakia, and first president of the Czech Republic. Havel was born into a prominent business family in Prague during the interwar period of Czech independence. When Czechoslovakia came under Soviet domination after 1948, Havel's bourgeois origins barred him from enrolling in a university. From 1960 to 1968, he worked in Prague's famed Theater on the Balustrade, where his most important plays were produced. *The Garden Party*, *The Memorandum*, *Largo Desolato*, and three one-act plays featuring the same hapless intellectual Vanek (*Audience*, *Unveiling*, and *Protest*) all reveal an apathetic pseudo-reality that can only be exploded—and reconnected to genuine meaning—by forcing the audience to confront loss of meaning in the absurd. After Soviet tanks put an end to the process of social regeneration and liberation known as the Prague Spring (1968), Havel's plays were banned. Subsequent essays and analyses delineated a philosophy of dissidence that reflected a fundamental critique of twentieth-century trends in both bourgeois and socialist societies. At the center of Havel's analysis is the idea that something he calls "living in truth" can rupture the dehumanizing force of modern totalitarian and mass consumer societies. According to Havel, "living in truth" is as simple as exercising one's individual responsibility and integrity as a citizen of the planet (not just of one club or country or religion). In the practice of real life, as Havel experienced it first as a victim of one regime and then as the political leader of another, living in truth is an unpredictable and demanding enterprise but one on which his hope for averting the environmental and social destruction of the future rests. His essay "The Power of the Powerless" stands at the center of his thought and as a companion piece to the Charter 77 Human Rights manifesto, which he coauthored in 1977.

In 1979, Havel was arrested and spent almost four years in prison, where he recorded his intellectual and more mundane meditations in a series of intricately structured letters to his wife (*Letters to Olga*). Havel's role as an intellectual and moral leader in the subterranean spread of Czech opposition culminated in the Velvet Revolution of 1989 and Havel's election to the presidency of a newly independent Czechoslovak nation. Under his rule, frequently described as the reign of a "philosopher king," the Czech and Slovak Federation split into two separate countries, and Havel served as first president of the Czech Republic. His speeches and addresses as president and as recipient of many international honors comprise an ongoing series of essays about the relationship between politics and spiritual values in the modern world. His most important writings are edited and translated by Paul Wilson in *Open Letters: Selected Writings, 1965–1990*; *Summer Meditations*; *The Art of the Impossible*:

Politics as Morality in Practice; and Toward a Civil Society: Selected Speeches and Writings, 1990–1994.

Selected Bibliography: Goetz-Stakiewicz, Marketa, and Phyllis Carey, eds. *Critical Essays on Vaclav Havel*. New York: G. K. Hall, 1999.

Yvonne Howell

HEART OF DARKNESS (1899, 1902)—originally serialized in *Blackwood's* magazine and later published as part of a collection of stories—is Joseph Conrad's best-known and most controversial work. Drawing on protomodernist techniques such as multiple narrators, chronological confusion, and impressionistic narrative, *Heart of Darkness* is based on Conrad's journey to the Belgian Congo in 1890–1891. It tells the story of Charlie Marlow, a sailor who takes a post as captain of a steamship plying the Congo River. Marlow's mission is to pilot the riverboat up to the Inner Station and retrieve an ailing ivory trader named Kurtz. Overcoming many obstacles, Marlow eventually makes it to the Inner Station, where he finds Kurtz installed as a warlord. Corrupted by the power afforded him by his status as a white man and access to firearms, Kurtz has gone morally mad; the local chieftains crawl before him, and he participates in "unspeakable rites" held in his honor. Marlow himself feels the pull of the "dark continent" and nearly gives in to its temptations. Ultimately, his commitment to his work on the boat saves him, and he brings Kurtz safely away from the Inner Station. On the trip back downriver, Kurtz sums up the knowledge he has acquired in the famous whispered cry, "The horror! The horror!" and then dies. Marlow, too, becomes deathly ill but recovers, and in the novel's conclusion, he visits Kurtz's betrothed in Brussels, where he tells her that Kurtz's last words were her name rather than a damning indictment.

In the first six decades after its original publication, *Heart of Darkness* was routinely thought of as a moral tale only, an account of humanity's feral nature and the role culture plays in keeping that nature under wraps. In the wake of the decolonization movements of the 1950s and 1960s, though, literary critics began to reconsider *Heart of Darkness* for its commentary on late-nineteenth-century imperialism. Perhaps the most famous of these reevaluations came in 1975, when Nigerian novelist Chinua Achebe called Conrad "a bloody racist." Achebe charged that *Heart of Darkness* is a racist text because it minimizes African culture and reduces Africa to a backdrop against which the implicitly more important drama of European consciousness happens. Other critics, such as Edward Said, took a more moderate view, arguing that while there are certainly racist moments in *Heart of Darkness*, these are not reason to ban it from university English courses. Still other critics maintain that *Heart of Darkness* is a damning critique of European imperialism, and that it should be celebrated for its effort to point out the rapacious brutality of the 1890s "scramble for Africa." The debate has spawned many variations on these basic positions, and the question remains open, though no one is likely again to mistake *Heart of Darkness* for a pure psychological novel that holds itself distant from questions of political engagement.

Selected Bibliography: Achebe, Chinua. "An Image of Africa." *Research in African Literatures* 9.1 (1978): 1–15; Firchow, Peter Edgerly. *Envisioning Africa: Racism and Imperialism in Conrad's "Heart of*