

# *Polish Journal of Political Science*

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Volume 5 Issue 4 (2019)



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# *Polish Journal of Political Science*

Volume 5 Issue 4

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**Ministry of Science  
and Higher Education**

Republic of Poland

eISSN 2391-3991

Original version: e-book

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Karolina Zakrzewska

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## **Human condition in the *tragedies of fate* by Ancient Greeks, Wyspiański and Sartre**

### Abstract

In the article I introduced selected concepts of fate expressed in the dramatic works by authors of different cultural backgrounds, at various stages of the development of civilisation. By analysing the selected literary works, I presented a multidimensional man's attitude toward metaphysics, the consciousness of the aim of his life and death, based on the works of great artists who are both sensitive observers revealing the spirit of their own times and educators promoting their courageous outlook on the stage. The works of chosen artists showed that there is certain connection between the way of understanding the human fate and formation of the mentality model and the degree of moral and social activity of man, thus the condition of the entire community, and consequently the nation.

### Streszczenie

W artykule przedstawiłam wybrane koncepcje losu wyrażone w twórczości dramatycznej autorów z różnych kręgów kulturowych, na różnych etapach rozwoju cywilizacyjnego. Analizując wybrane dzieła literackie ukazałam wielowymiarową postawę człowieka wobec metafizyki, jego świadomość celu własnego życia i śmierci w oparciu o dzieła wielkich twórców będących zarówno wrażliwymi obserwatorami oddającymi ducha swoich czasów, jak i wychowawcami wychodzącymi ze swoim śmiałym światopoglądem na scenę. Twórczość wybranych przeze mnie artystów pokazała, że istnieje pewna prawidłowość między sposobem pojmowania losu ludzkiego, a kształtowaniem

się modelu mentalności oraz stopnia społecznej i moralnej aktywności jednostki w świecie, a co za tym idzie kondycji całej wspólnoty.

**Słowa kluczowe:** metafizyka, patriotyzm, religia, wiara, sakrum, kerygmat, naród, teatr, tragedia, wspólnota

**Keywords:** metaphysics, patriotism, religion, faith, sacred, kerygma, nation, theatre, tragedy, community



## Introduction

It is a cliché to say that each attempt at a theoretical description of human condition is entangled in unresolvable axiological and epistemological disputes, and that it is dependent on cultural resolutions. However, it is hard to define unequivocally human condition, though for the needs of this article I shall adopt the line of thinking of Hannah Arendt, according to which it may be assumed that this is the way in which man exists in the world, perceives his place in the community, the sum total of values he professes, the attitude towards death, the way of conduct – whether he assumes an active attitude – gives meaning to life himself, creates the reality in which he lives or unreflectively succumbs to the authority. In a sense, it also describes man's attitude to comprehending fate, or otherwise: his role in the world. Throughout history, in different cultural circles, playwrights expressed diverse concepts of fate, and the writings of some exerted a strong impact on how the purpose of human life was perceived. Playwriting is a medium which owing to its popularity both in the Antiquity and in modern times shaped the world outlooks of groups which had a decisive impact on formation of religious, social and political views. In this article, I shall venture to put forth a thesis that there is a consistency between a cultural concept of fate entangled in eschatology, metaphysics<sup>1</sup> and social condition, and in consequence also existential human condition. In other words, the interrelationship between the way human fate is perceived and the degree

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<sup>1</sup> In this article, I use the word *metaphysics* in the classical, Aristotelian meaning – I understand *metaphysic* as something that exceeds physics and sensual experience, see Aristotle, transl. Ross (2005).

of social and moral human activity is translated into the condition of the entire community.

I shall present this relationship on the basis on the analysis of the artistic output of selected playwrights, who are important for and represent the spirit of their times. I selected such playwrights who presented a multidimensional man's attitude to metaphysics, his awareness of the purpose of his own life and death, his earthly and eschatological destiny; they identified the forms of behaviours, dilemmas, fears, hopes, anxieties, intellectual attitudes and human struggles with fate that were typical of their epochs. They were thus sensitive observers and at the same time philosophers, who were ready to go on stage and propose their clearly formed world outlooks as a universal moral foundation. Therefore, I focused on such tragedians as Aeschylus, Sophocles, Wyspiański and Sartre, who in their plays not only expressed their world outlook credos, but also carried a specific way of experiencing fate into their times. There is a clear-cut relationship between literature as an attempt to understand human motivations and the way human attitudes and activities are motivated depending on adopted national, ethnical or religious convictions. The destiny of a courageous, fearless and merciless Homeric warrior is one thing, while the destiny of a meek servant of God of the Middle Ages is quite another. It does not concern only a totally separate system of values, but also the way of completion and the purpose of existence of each of them. Fate may be perceived as a ruthless, callous cosmic force, in the face of which man turns out to be totally helpless, but also may be understood a punishment for violation of moral, religious or simply natural harmony.

The way fate is perceived is connected with the changes resulting from civilizational development. In archaic, mythical

Greece, where man did not understand the surrounding world, felt overwhelmed by it, helpless, fate is most primordial, identified mainly with gods, who personified the forces of nature. Zeus intervenes in human lives with the use of lightning; Demeter symbolizes earth's fertility; the rage of Oceanus explicates unpredictability of the sea that is so important for the Greeks; while Eros is responsible for uncontrollable passion. In the Classical world, the era of Aeschylus, Sophocles and Euripides, when people grew out of the folk tales about Olympic gods, fate assumes the form of an abstract notion, a force that permeates the cosmos, impersonal though equally overpowering. It has a character of almost a philosophical notion, not much short of the arche of Ancient Greek philosophers, such as the fire of Heraclitus or the number of the Pythagoreans.

In the period of Christian Europe fate was obviously associated with the will of God, whereas in modern times the French Enlightenment replaced Him with the laws of nature, or the laws of history in the later period – for example in Hegel's philosophy. Science gained in importance to the extent that its nature became religious.<sup>2</sup> It started to be treated as an instrument of cognizance of the eternal mystery of existence. In the times of the French Revolution, even the Festival of Reason was set up in the form of a public parade headed by the Goddess of Reason – a beautiful young woman selected for that event.

Also important is the fact that even if the Supreme Being deciding about human life is not personified as a deity, it may be a subject of faith and cult. In such case it may assume a form of an overwhelming and overpowering superior force

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<sup>2</sup> Migasiński (2011).

as the unchangeable and universal moral law or the laws of human history. In each of the above cases man's freedom becomes extremely problematic, while an alternative to faith in the supreme order most frequently turns out to be fearsome chaos or nihilism, which offer no protection against the vision of awe-inspiring fate. However, it is not connected with the impossibility of realizing of a moral or religious idea, but expresses the weakness and solitude of man, who sees an enormous contrast between the sense of his own freedom and associated dignity, and the actual possibilities of shaping one's own fate. In this context, of special interest in the vertical relationship: man – heaven, regardless of whether it uncovers the existence of a supreme force or discloses emptiness.

### The Greeks

Greek tragedies were the first to present man subjugated to impersonal necessity – the were based on myths filled with the sacred, at the times when attempts were made to reconcile the world of yesteryear legends about gods and heroes with the idea of a modern civil state. Owing to their popularity and universality, in the Antiquity they shaped the world outlook of the entire community, reconciling man with the fall of the safe fairy-tale world, adding more profound sense to his life as a citizen.<sup>3</sup> This is connected with the fact that in the classical ancient Greek culture nature ceased to offer a safe and soothing environment linking man with the realm of gods, as it had been in archaic Greece. People aimed at gaining control over nature and its forces through development of *poiesis* – material production. Human activity ceased to be

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<sup>3</sup> Artaud (1958).

instruments but was aimed at purposeful creation of a being which could not be reduced to a product of nature. Obviously *poiesis* takes place in the context of *logos* and *polis*, was a technique of creating things (from Greek *poiesis* as the poetic art, creation, production). Aristotle named it *ergon*, that is the production of the pure world of artefacts; it was one of the methods used by the Greeks to subdue defiant nature.<sup>4</sup> The Hellenes also believed that there was a set of constant traits that is possessed only by humans, which described two basic categories: *zoon logon echon* – a rational, reasonable creature, and *zoon politikon* – a political creature. According to that concept it was believed that “it is evident that the state is creation of nature, and that man is by nature a political animal”, and a creature living outside of its *polis* is either a god or an animal,<sup>5</sup> so that barbarians, slaves and women – as creatures deprived of both politics and philosophy, involved in imitative work or subject to the need of biological maintenance of the species – were excluded from the life of a *polis*.<sup>6</sup>

Greek democracy and philosophy have their roots in mythology, so when the might of the gods and heroes passes to oblivion, the law they set becomes an impulse for creating human laws, sanctioned and formed by informed and voluntary conclusion of agreements within the arising democratic community. The precursors of the genre, Aeschylus

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<sup>4</sup> Siemek (2002): 17–18.

<sup>5</sup> Aristotle, transl. Ross (2005a): 446, (Politics, I, 1253a)

<sup>6</sup> Siemek (2002): 19. I consistently refer to the interpretational tradition of the notion of politics and citizenship in the political culture of ancient Athens, which was initiated by Hegel and was continued by Hannah Arendt and Marek Siemek. With a view to the size of a scientific article, it is obviously impossible to take into account all other interpretational currents.

and Sophocles, were the first to try to resolve the problem of fate, which it to realise catharsis, and in consequence bring about consolation in the world deprived of gods. That is why the tragic play touches the core of the dilemmas, discloses the cruelty of the world, and the gods that are present seem to be powerless, just like in the case of Prometheus, indifferent or only apparently present as in *Antigone*,<sup>7</sup> *Oedipus the King*,<sup>8</sup> *Electra*.<sup>9</sup> Sophocles' heroes are led to the extreme, alien to people and themselves, they discover that the heaven is empty or revolt against absurd existence in order to give sense to life. Supplications, making offering to gods turn out to be of no use: in less than an hour after having offered her payers Jocasta commits suicide; Clytemnestra is deluded during the libations by the false and fatal for her information by the Servant that Orestes is dead; Creon in vain pays homage to the body of Polynices to fulfil divine laws. It may be said that gods' indifference is merely the reverse side of their instrumental treatment by the protagonists of Greek tragedies. In the tragedies of Aeschylus or Sophocles there is no room for the sacred; man can live in accordance with his nature as it is a reflection of the divine, which has been created for human needs.

Therefore, the origin of the Greek tragedy should be linked with its therapeutic function of reconciling man with the fact that the realm of gods and heroes has passed away and has been replaced by the laws set by man. The freedom to set laws involves the need to assume responsibility for decisions concerning the social dimension of human life. Gods are present therein as guarantors of the law they conferred, but their

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<sup>7</sup> Sophocles, transl. Kitto (1998).

<sup>8</sup> Sophocles, transl. Kitto (1998a).

<sup>9</sup> Sophocles, transl. Kitto (1998b).

intervention is not needed to fulfil it because deities are made redundant by the heroes' faith in the Olympic realm and its verdicts. Friedrich Nietzsche also discerned the reconciliatory function of the tragedy which unites the spectator not only with the fellow man but also with the entire cosmos, allows to sense existence as the sole living creature.<sup>10</sup> In his opinion, the Dionysia was an event strictly connected with *polis* – already democratic, so it did not only represent archaic myths but provided an opportunity to discuss current problems of the city.<sup>11</sup>

In ancient Greece the tragedy played a very important role in reconciling people with the cultural breakthrough. The presence of gods confirms the law they conferred, on the other hand, however, their intervention is no longer needed to fulfil it – with their faith in the divine decrees the tragic figures make gods redundant. Therefore, Greek tragedy writers such as Aeschylus and Sophocles, did not promote the visions of man totally subjugated to the whims of gods, helpless and passive, but showing the possibility of self-determination of the free individual not dependent on the supreme forces, contributed to the growth of credibility of the democratic system, elevating civic freedom above Middle Eastern despotism. In this way they educated the people ethically, socially and politically, at the same time familiarizing them with the incomprehensible, brutal, and sometimes simply overpowering world. It was also noticed by the researcher of the tragedy Jan Kott: "The contemporaneity of the Greek tragedy is the cruelty of fate it presents, the cruelty of life, the cruelty of the world. And refusal of consent for this world and those

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<sup>10</sup> See: Nietzsche (1968): 47.

<sup>11</sup> Baran (2001): 10.

that set it up and control it: gods and rules.”<sup>12</sup> That is why such a frequent motif in the ancient tragedy is a revolt against the authority, a dissent against the world that is or the immovable, intransigent supreme forces relentlessly intervening in the affairs of tragic mortals.

It is also important that the poets, who in those times were treated as teachers of morality, in their plays presented rebels without condemning them. In a tragic situation there are always two basic solutions: the hero either revolts or accepts the existing situations. Acceptance results from affirmation of the existing order or fear of change; that is why it is either an ethical or intellectual choice. *Oedipus the King* perhaps puts forth a fundamental question: what attitude should be assumed towards life when the world is reigned by coincidence or fate – determined by gods. Jocasta suggests that Oedipus defies this choice in the name of carefree existence: “live at random, live as best one can.”<sup>13</sup> Nietzsche, in turn, sees the fate of Oedipus as an attempt to extort its own mysteries from nature through victorious resistance against it – commitment of an unnatural deed such as incest.<sup>14</sup> Oedipus is downgraded by what the forces of nature have led him to and by his ignorance of own blood ties; this Greek initially full of vital forces eventually regrets to be alive. “For had I died that day less ruin had I brought on me and mine.”<sup>15</sup> The world of this tragedy is saturated with suffering; traps are set everywhere and caught in them are also those who want to avoid evil fate at any price. In the opinion of Odo

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<sup>12</sup> Kott (1986): 6; this quotation is found only in the preface to the Polish edition, and has not been included in the English edition.

<sup>13</sup> Sophocles, transl. Kitto (1998a).

<sup>14</sup> Nietzsche (1986): 75.

<sup>15</sup> Sophocles, transl. Kitto (1998a).



Marquarda: “Thus what man has to fear is not determination, but the undividedness of its power.”<sup>16</sup>; in this context Oedipus’ obsession with the prophecy and inability to tolerate accidentality were the underlying causes of the catastrophe, an impression of being totally enslaved by fate. *Oedipus the King* could be summed up as follows: “if the accidental were only the arbitrarily optional, this would indeed have ruinous consequences, both for usual practices, which are indeed accidental, and for human life, for which usual practices are unavoidable.”<sup>17</sup>

Without doubt, Greek heroes, alienated from society and deprived of friends, suffered from solitude. The greatest punishment for them was life in exile, individually, without the understanding and compassion of others. In this light it is important that the death of a rebel not only gives sense to his life, but also leads to improvement of the life of others. The death of Antigone or Prometheus<sup>18</sup> are something more than individual events since their lives gained sense in the world of other people. Hellenic heroes incessantly needs an audience not only to ensure their immortality through granting fame, but also in order to set in motion and uplift the lives of others. The praise of courage, unfettered speech and public action is of an educational character – it teaches than man exerts an impact on the state and society, and that is also on politics.

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<sup>16</sup> Marquard (1991): 125.

<sup>17</sup> Ibidem: 119.

<sup>18</sup> It refers to Antigone, the title heroine of Sophocles’ tragedy [Sophocles, transl. Kitto (1998)] and Prometheus, the title hero of Aeschylus’ tragedy [Aeschylus, transl. Scully (1989)].

“For Sophocles’ characters, life is disaster, and their heroic choice is to give meaning to their own defeat.”<sup>19</sup> – in the Greek tragedy the picture of inescapable annihilation of everything is to inspire the desire for living – a tragic liberation. Since the tragic play represents life in the entirety of its cruelty and at the same time encourages existence by showing its indestructability. Man escapes from the horror of Dionysian, bare life into the Apollonian deception, while truth becomes symbolised<sup>20</sup>; it has a cathartic dimension on metaphysical grounds – it brings consolation. Aristotle believed that to played a very important function in the already very much democratic, urban, classical culture of Greece, where shattering events were much rarer in everyday life. Identification with the heroes allowed them to experience their own existence more fully – in this sense death, incest, crimes, redemption were of a religious nature.<sup>21</sup>

### Wyspiański

In later culture, it was Christianity that offered an opportunity for experiencing deeply existential states, such as identification with God, death, betrayal, which give an unearthly, noble character to everyday life. One may be an ordinary man and at the same time live in friendship with Christ, partake in the mystery of redemption, transformation, salvation; betray, cleanse, add heroism to one’s life. That is why it was in the Greek tragedy that Wyspiański found a certain pattern for his plays; although his classical plays maintain the ancient form, but apart from adorning them with Slavic

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<sup>19</sup> Kott (1974): 160.

<sup>20</sup> Baran (2001): 10–12.

<sup>21</sup> Siemek (2002): 8.

ornamentation the author totally deprived them of their vitalistic dimension, turned them into an attractive medium for expounding his religious views. He noticed that it could serve culturally diverse – Christian, Messianic, Slavic purposes. What massively distinguishes the classical tragedy from Wyspiański's late tragedies is the fact that he made common people the heroes of his plays against the views of Aristotle ["For no man can practise virtue who is living the life of a mechanic or labourer"<sup>22</sup>] as well as the precursors of the genre whose heroes were people of noble descent. They also showed to their audience that "Forze naturali calate in forme umane idealizzate, sono aspetti dell'uomo sublimati, ipostatizzati; sono forze dell'uomo cristallizzate in bellissime sembianze. In somma: gli Dei della religione naturale greca non sono nient'altro che *uomini amplificati e idealizzati*, sono, quindi, *quantitativamente* superiori a noi, ma non *qualitativamente* differenti."<sup>23</sup> Against any appearances, making simple man the hero of his tragedies Wyspiański did not grant him autonomy as he had to accept the authoritatively imposed system of values, because the author of *Klątwa (The Curse)*<sup>24</sup> and *Sędziowie (The Judges)*<sup>25</sup> did not believe that a peasant or craftsman (like an Aristotelian slave) had any capability of growing up to accept freedom which forces one to become responsible for one's own deeds. That is why he considers it appropriate that a model of morality has been imposed thereon, which makes him an infantile and passive creature.

Insofar as in the classical Greek culture dangerous nature deprived of a metaphysical dimension was tamed with

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<sup>22</sup> Aristotle, transl. Ross (2005): 475, (Politics, III, 1278a).

<sup>23</sup> Reale (1987): 24.

<sup>24</sup> Wyspiański (1959).

<sup>25</sup> Wyspiański (1920).

material production, in his literary output Wyspiański presents it as an instrument with which God punishes man for his misdeeds. Restoration of harmony, which is indispensable for man's life, depends exclusively on His will; therefore, man has to demonstrate faith, respect and humility in fulfilling divine laws. Any violation of this fixed moral order – sacrilege causes automatic punishment. At the same time, there is always a chance for redemption, which requires intervention of the supreme force, which has to accept this offering.

The faith in the existence of a moral order constituted by the Decalogue and the possibility of redemption through an offering causes that death becomes but another stage in spiritual development. In all of his plays Wyspiański evaluates people's attitudes, decisions and deeds through the lens of Christian ethics by creating negative figures such as Samuel, Natan and Dziad (in *Sędziowie*), Odysseus (in *Achilleis*<sup>26</sup>). One may get an impression that he simplifies the construction of the classical tragedy, in which there are no mean, mediocre, hypocritical figures that purposefully harm others, devious, wicked and cowardly creatures that cannot even live by the rules they profess. Nevertheless, it seems that Wyspiański does it on purpose in order to show in full the existence of a single universal ethics in conformity with human nature; a single truth to which all are or should be subjected. The possibility and necessity of expiation in the eschatological perspective, connected with human weakness in sinning and greatness in redemption, seems to be totally alien to the Greeks. The classical tragedy discloses the community character of Greek culture and ethics, as opposed to Christian individualism. In Wyspiański's plays, despite

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<sup>26</sup> Wyspiański (1984).

the fact that violation of divine laws by an individual brings a curse onto the community, ultimately man stands before the Creator alone, incurring individual punishment for individual guilt – the community serves only as a background or temptation to do evil. Otherwise than in the Greek plays, where redemption results in restoration of the natural order for the good of the community, which constitutes the audience, partner, advisor or critic of the tragic hero, frequently as a chorus.

Despite the fact that in Wyspiański's plays fate touches man alienated from the society, there is a possibility of overcoming it, and therefore his output is devoid of the fatalistic dimension characteristic for other Polish modernist artists experiencing a world outlook crisis – non-dogmatism, nihilism. Against the trends of his epoch Wyspiański sought a resolution for ethical and existential problems in the Bible. He distinguishes heroes who represent definite archetypes of man's attitude towards God. If a figure from his play follows the principle of moral relativism, later on in the plot become a tragic hero. Since he believes that this principle leads to negation of morality in general, it turns out to be a source of a dramatic fall and suffering. Hence man, as a free-willed creature should be aware of the threats that emanate from breaking inviolate norms of conduct (compliant with the Decalogue). In *Meleagrze*, *Protesilas i Laodamia*, *Powrót Odysa* (*Return of Odysseus*), *Achilleis*, *Klątwa* (*The Curse*), *Sędziowie* (*The Judges*) the order breaking culprit is a man who succumbs to lust, resigns from sanctity, commits sacrilege.

In his works, Wyspiański tries to show that man can reach sanctity through vocation, which is tragic but at the same time makes salvation possible. God is a harsh, but also merciful and generous judge. Ethics, laws of nature, life and death

assume existential dimensions – apparently independent human plans are irrevocably intertwined with those of God. The interpenetration of the sacred and the profane causes that the everyday human life assumes solemnity, emanates the hidden, sometimes barely perceptible out of this world mystery. This allows him to create a great tension in his tragedies, arouse extreme emotions in surprising places to show, to remind the existence of the supreme force which bestows significance onto even apparently trifling matters. In *Klątwa* and *Sędziowie*, showing the substance and principles of Christianity against a broad religious and cultural background, he confirms the metaphysical dimension of earthly reality.<sup>27</sup> Transcendence, verticalism, interpenetration of divine and earthly things characterise all of his tragedies. They touch upon issues considered in all religions: the sacred and the profane, the image of God and His vocations, world, human fate and nature, the problem of guilt, punishment and responsibility. This is what the universal character of Wyspiański's dramas consists in, while the fact that the key point of reference for him was Christianity and the Bible, partially shared with the Jewish Faith, prejudices the answers the author finds to the problems connected with the major dimensions of human existence. This is evidenced by the fate of the heroes of all of his tragedies, both those taking place in Polish realities (*Klątwa* and *Sędziowie*), as well as those taking place in the realities of Ancient Greece (*Meleager*,<sup>28</sup> *Protesilas i Laodamia*,<sup>29</sup> *Powrót Odysa*,<sup>30</sup> *Achilleis*), who transgressed the model of decent and worthy life imposed by Christian religion.

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<sup>27</sup> Kaczmarek (1999): 105.

<sup>28</sup> Wyspiański (1858).

<sup>29</sup> Wyspiański (1958a).

<sup>30</sup> Wyspiański (1984).

## Sartre

Changing slightly the perspective, I would like to remind that in Sigmund Freud' opinion success in earthly life causes that man focuses on daily affairs, trusts the world and easily finds sense for his creative activity, but when he encounters failures and loses faith in the possibility of improving his fate by himself, the conditions become ripe for moving the value of life beyond life. When fate becomes cruel it starts to be perceived as a punishment for the deeds done or for omissions; it is then perceived as a surrogate of parental authority and hence a conviction that if one suffers a misfortune it means that the supreme power ceased to love him, and thus one humbles oneself before this authority to win its favours again. "This becomes especially clear where Fate is looked upon in the strictly religious sense of being nothing else than an expression of the Divine Will."<sup>31</sup> This mechanism is obviously seen in the works by Wyspiański – misfortune is always conceived as God's punishment, which at the same purifies, erases guilt. On the other hand, free will is used to make a correct choice in accordance with the will of the Creator and the Judge.

Alike Freud, Sartre believes that people deprived of inner morality seek an external one in the form of providence or God. In light of his philosophy, a weak man, intellectually and morally immature, is unable to make life choices by himself, resigns from individual assessment leaning on an outside authority. It may be God, the Church, or a political campaigner. Sartre tries to prove that man's dignity is based on his freedom which he realises when his deeds are not determined

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<sup>31</sup> Freud (1961): 82

by secular or religious authorities. It is worth reminding that the philosopher makes a distinction between *being-in-itself* and *being-for-itself*. The former is predictable, finished, devoid of any potential, stands no chance for freedom, in the being of things. In turn, *being-for-itself* is the centre of the consciousness of man, who is doomed to the need of taking decisions and making choices.<sup>32</sup> The essence of human existence is what has been given by nature: sex, sexual orientation, sensitivity, abilities, courage, etc., and what we have been taught, what has been internalized by man by living in the society and within the boundaries of its culture, that is: values, attitudes, convictions, the way of perceiving oneself and others, one's duties, destiny. Since the essence is everything what man is, existence may be called a gap, the absence of definitiveness, which makes it possible to freely define what will a man become, what will he be.

In Sartre's opinion, the major source of threat to dignity is another man who perceives, evaluates, ascribes to another a given set of characteristics, motivations – treats him like an object. The possibility to negate one's own image created by others offers a possibility to preserve one's dignity and the sense of one's life. Desiring his own freedom, non-conditioning, man also strives for the good of Others, since only among free people one can consider oneself truly free.<sup>33</sup> What is important, man cannot enjoy the peacefulness of free choice since responsibility resting on this choice causes anxiety and the sense of accidentality of existence – hence reaching of "godlike" existence is excluded. Therefore, individuals look for objective justifications of their choices, and the efforts they

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<sup>32</sup> See: Sartre (2004): 4–15.

<sup>33</sup> Ibidem: 15.



use to escape responsibility are called *bad faith* by Sartre.<sup>34</sup> It is an attitude consisting in escaping freedom, negating one's existence. Defining oneself for example as a Catholic, conservative, libertarian, representative of the middle class, man or woman is tantamount to reducing the richness of one's life and existence to a product of culture. Each of such attributes conceals an assortment of strictly defined social meanings meant to create a discernible scheme of life. It is then understandable, while man easily find his place in the social system when he knows what is to be expected from others and assuring them of his own credibility. In Sartre's opinion "Since we have defined the situation of man as one of free choice, without excuse and without help, any man who takes refuge behind the excuse of his passions, or by inventing some deterministic doctrine, is a self-deceiver."<sup>35</sup>

As a consequence, the above concepts of *good* and *bad* have a sense different than the commonly accepted one. The good is the one who can and wants to realize the social role that has been intended for him, trusts the myths, traditions, authorities, culture. The bad, in turn, is the one who undermines universal social good, dares to make a choice out of compliance with his assigned role or actually challenges the commonly accepted convictions concerning good and bad. In other words: negativity is bad – a manifestation of freedom, while positivity is good – a sign of enslavement. According to Sartre as a domain of freedom negativity should be the goal of man's pursuit, since it is the only factor which may make life concretely and truly sensible. In the manner Sartre undermines the sense of the traditional dualism

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<sup>34</sup> Ibidem: 10.

<sup>35</sup> Sartre (1957): 307.

of good and bad, at the same time revealing the naïve and also hypocritical character of such notions as *malefactor*, *offender*, the society makes room for – delineating an opposition between honesty and dishonesty.

Sartre believes that “man’s dignity requires him to be the only creator of values and his own fate. If man is to live as a free and autonomous creature, God must die.”<sup>36</sup> In his opinion, existentialism is a extremely optimistic doctrine, since it makes man realise that he himself controls his fate, he is what he wants to be. He shows, at the same time, that of great importance is the activity which determines life, and man reaches fullness thanks to responsible deeds. Totally differently than in Wyspiański’s tragedies, where deeds lead to errors and sin, and the desired form of shaping one’s consciousness is self-reflection.<sup>37</sup>

In Sartre’s opinion, myths recount the entirety of human condition,<sup>38</sup> they are manifestations of *bad faith*, remnants of religious thinking; that is why in his plays he demythologises them and gives them a new dimension uncontaminated by existentialism. In his drama *The Flies*,<sup>39</sup> he desacralizes the story of Orestes and Electra to a greater degree than Sophocles; he does the same to *The Trojan Women*.<sup>40</sup> In contrast with the classical approach, the hero of Sartre’s *The Flies* Orestes determines his own life himself, coolly weighs the consequences of his own deeds, gets to know

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<sup>36</sup> Gromczyński (1969): 268.

<sup>37</sup> It can be seen in Wyspiański’s tragedies such as: *Meleagier*, *Protesilas i Laodamia*, *Powrót Odysa*, *Achilleis*, *Klątwa*, *Sędziowie*.

<sup>38</sup> Puszko (1997): 229.

<sup>39</sup> Sartre (1948); *The Flies* is an adaptation of the mythical story, which in the Antiquity was dramatized by Sophocles and Euripides, and was entitled *Electra*.

<sup>40</sup> Sartre (1967).

the world through action and making decisions, for which he takes full responsibility. He says to God frankly: "I am no criminal, and you have no power to make me atone for an act I don't regard as crime."<sup>41</sup> He discovers that he is free and therefore he can choose the path on his own without being forced to fulfil the family revenge. With his revolt he destroyed the until then applicable law of two tyrants: God and King. When Zeus offers him atonement, like Aeschylus' Prometheus Orestes rejects it with disdain. Moreover, he gets involved in the fate of the oppressed party: Electra and the inhabitants of Argos, since involvement on the side of Aegisthus and Zeus would be the same as for Sartre choosing the side of fascism of the Church, that is declaring oneself against freedom, putting oneself to fate, that is resigning from the path of freedom.<sup>42</sup>

Sartre believes that it is impossible to enslave man if he becomes conscious of his ontological freedom; from the viewpoint of a tyrant he then reminds a spreading plague: "He knows he's free? Then, to lay hands on him, to put him in irons, is not enough. A free man in a city acts like a plague-spot. He will infect my whole kingdom and bring my work to nothing. Almighty Zeus, why stay your hand? Why not fell him with a thunderbolt?"<sup>43</sup> says Aegisthus to Zeus, fully aware of the seriousness of the situation. In *Trojan Women* he also exposes the fact that moral laws are pure fiction of a political nature, while people overlook existential problems, reject their potential of consciousness. They are a manifestation of the author's unacceptance of segregating people into those that deserve respect and those who are denied fundamental

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<sup>41</sup> Sartre (1948): 113.

<sup>42</sup> Simon (1966): 226.

<sup>43</sup> Sartre (1948): 102.

rights; dividing nations into civilised and barbarian ones.

Unlike in Wyspiański's tragedies, in *The Flies* and *Trojan Women*, when the heroes demand a lightning as a sign of punishment, the skies are silent, disclose emptiness. There is no human nature inscribed into the cosmic order; man becomes only when he creates himself. Through investigating his essence and the choices he makes man will be what he wants to be, what he desires to be after he has gained consciousness. He shows how important is the action which determines life, since in Sartre's opinion the only thing that ensures fullness is action.<sup>44</sup> He believes that we cannot choose evil. Making a choice we choose not only what is good for us, but also for people at large. If we would like to create a model of man in our existence, that model is applicable for all people and our epoch. We create a model of man we believe we should be like, that is choose the values that are positive for us. "In fashioning myself I fashion man,"<sup>45</sup> says Sartre claiming that if man honestly thinks about what he should be like, he creates a universal rather than individual ideal, and since there is no God it is us that have to give value to the world. The French philosopher perceives this attitude as an opportunity to create a human community based on mutual respect. He makes Orestes utter the following words: "What do I care for Zeus? Justice is a matter between men, and I need no god to teach me it."<sup>46</sup>

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<sup>44</sup> Ibidem: 58.

<sup>45</sup> Sartre (1957): 292.

<sup>46</sup> Sartre (1948): 103.

## Conclusion

The analysis of human fate in the above discussed plays clearly shows that there is a constant regularity between the perception of human fate in the literature of a given epoch and the shaping of the type of mentality and degree of social and moral activeness of its recipients, which undoubtedly affects the community life of man. In Greek tragedies, stripping the gods of their omnipotence, showing the need for own determination, teaches man how to live responsibly, take autonomous decisions in a democratic state. Wyspiański's creative output was a revolt against sacralisation of science and desacralisation of faith. An attempt to restore metaphysical dignity to the notion of human fate. In turn, Sartre's philosophy and dramatic plays express a revolt against seeking the mystery of creation outside of creation itself. It is a protest against subjugating man to a supreme power, regardless of what character or form it was to assume in a given epoch. Sartre exposes the inferior character of a concrete form of faith in fate, finding mechanisms which shape the character of each.

According to Wyspiański, waiving the rules proclaimed in the Decalogue pushes man towards misfortune, since departure from the will of God always brings about fatal consequences. This is evidenced by the tragic fate of the heroes of all of his plays, who transgressed the model of decent and valuable life imposed by the Christian religion. Each of their actions carries a danger of opposing God, while negation or renunciation of one's needs is considered a virtue. Creation of this type of mentality may lead to the consolidation of a passive or fearful attitude. Even in a situation of threat, oppression, utter injustice, the man who has been brought up in such a conviction may be not able to respond actively and

oppose the situation that is undesirable for him or his fellow men, for instance coercive authorities, oppression, injustice, aggression, suffering because humility vis-à-vis the status quo has been instilled in him.<sup>47</sup>

Without doubt, Greek dramas what put their tragic heroes in a situation from which there is no one good way out, and also throwing upon them responsibility for the choices they make, show the need to justify moral norms on one's own. It turn out to be salutary for making the citizen of *polis* realize that he is a fully autonomous individual who is expected to take mature and responsible decisions. Such an attitude contributed to full consolidation of civil democracy. Similar ideas are present in Sartre's concept of fate – his literature, which is also an exponent of philosophy, promotes the attitude of man liberated from the dominion of God, creating a moral system which corresponds with the good of the public.

In the classical tragedy, the hero gets redemption during his lifetime, whereas the tragic hero of Wyspiański only upon death. It indicates, among other things, a significant difference in the comprehension of human destiny, that is the perception of the place and role of main in the life of the community he is a member of. A characteristic feature of Greek tragedies, differentiating them, *inter alia*, from Wyspiański's dramas (even those which intentionally refer to the classical tradition) is that the events, motivations of the heroes, moral overtone retain full sense even when we put aside their religious dimension. In other words, the divine decrees come to the fore as a result of the deeds of man, who turns his faith in fate into actions that give a real dimension to it. What is connected with all this, depending on the cultural context man's attitude

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<sup>47</sup> See: e.g. Freud (1961) and Freud (2001).

to death changes and translates into respect or no respect for life. In Wyspiański's works the affirmation of life determined by the divine will leads to disrespect its value as such, is merely but another stage in the development of the soul on the path towards salvation. Suffering is desirable – it constitutes a path towards redemption.

Summing up: the relationship of man with the Absolute determines how the purposes of existence of human communities are perceived, also the modern ones, functioning with the framework of democratic states. The Christian notion of God, the Creator and Lawgiver, deciding the fate of not only an individual but also an entire nation, has become an ideological background and an ideal model for all forms of the authoritarian regime. The decline of the authority of the Roman Catholic Church, enhanced by the development of science, spread of education, as well as political and industrial revolutions, resulted in the emergence of socio-political systems the metaphysical background of which has become hardly discernible, but very influential.<sup>48</sup> The undoubted mer-

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<sup>48</sup> Such interdependencies were noted for example by Max Weber, who noted a relationship between the professed religion and the political system of the state or the form of economic activity. He believed, for instance, the Protestantism was strictly related with the emergence of the spiritual background of capitalism. Asceticism of the Protestant religion supported the duty of industrious work, which was to lead to reaching financial benefits and wise management of wealth. Work was treated as a moral duty, constituting a value in itself. According to the Protestant religion, ethical behaviour consisted in carrying out everyday duties rather than fruitless rattling off prayers in church and renunciation of earthly life. Weber noticed a relationship between Protestant self-discipline, individual initiative, enterprise, honesty, timeliness, industry and the development of capitalism, for which the above-mentioned "virtues" constitute a necessary background. See e.g. Weber (2012) or Weber (1978). The impact of the metaphysical background on

it of Sartre is the exposure of permanent mechanisms of giving the world the metaphysical background, independent from the secondary and accidental ways of its justification. In this light, the Christian faith in the moral order pervading the world of interpersonal relations not much differs from the democratic belief in the existence of universal and unalterable human rights. The foundation of Sartre's criticism of culture is the exposure of a chasm between the meaning giving freedom and the thoughtless cult of the law which relieves man from maturity and responsibility. The notion of human nature, fate, man's place in the world permeated with incomprehensible forces, but also man's attitude towards them, present in the literary output, constitute an inexhaustible source of inspiration for seeking relationships between self-consciousness of man and the world he co-creates. However, there is a clear-cut relationship between literature as an attempt to understand human motivations and the way human attitudes and activities are motivated depending on adopted, sanctified and mythologised, national, ethnical or religious convictions.

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the community was also noted by such thinkers as Mircea Eliade [Eliade (1987)] or Emil Cioran [Cioran (2015)].



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