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## Major themes and their presentation in Christopher Fry's dramas = Naczelne motywy i ich przedstawienie w dramatach Christophera Fry'a

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**Major Themes and Their Presentation in Christopher Fry's Dramas**

**Naczelne motywy i ich przedstawienie w dramatach Christophera Fry'a**

**Основные мотивы драм Христофора Фрая и формы их выражения**

Christopher Fry started writing in the thirties but he did not become popular until a few years after the war. One can readily believe that his success was due to the contrast between his plays and the gloomy reality of the postwar years, further emphasized by the pervasive pessimism of naturalistic and realistic plays.<sup>1</sup>

His debut, 1937, *The Boy with a Cart*, published 1939, was a rather weak play. In this he had already chosen poetic drama as the means of his expression on the stage. Though the genre has a long-standing tradition in English drama<sup>2</sup>, it has not always succeeded in coming to terms with the theatre. Now Fry seems to have surmounted difficulties of this kind and to have created a highly personal style that enables him to achieve the reconciliation far better than the majority of his contemporaries.<sup>3</sup>

The plays, written in blank verse with alliteration and the line cut by a caesura, and based on well-known sources might have appeared out of date even at the moment of their first staging had it not been for their astonishingly strong understanding of the contemporary man and

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<sup>1</sup> E. M. Browne: *Verse in Modern English Theatre*, The W. D. Thomas Memorial Lecture. Univ. of Wales Press, 1963, p. 27. G. Bullough: *Christopher Fry and the 'Revolt' against Eliot* [from:] *Experimental Drama* (Ed. W. A. Armstrong), Belland Sons, London 1963, p. 8.

<sup>2</sup> A. Nicoll: *British Drama*, London 1962 Harrap.

<sup>3</sup> A. Nicoll: *Something in a New Dimension* [from:] *Contemporary Theatre*, Stratford-upon-Avon Studies 4, Arnold 1962, p. 90.

his problems. Fry knows how to re-fashion common themes so that he brings to light both new meanings and lasting values. He is a humanist and a pacifist. He opposes any violation of basic human rights such as encroachments of the freedom of will and conscience, abuses of power, and generally all action that prevents man from attaining happiness.

Fry has been discounted, somewhat without sufficient reason, a religious dramatist. He certainly treats religious subjects somewhat extensively, but his view of human existence often transcends the region of theology. Though he holds God to be the final aim of mankind, his Deity very rarely interferes with the world. Through his emphasis on man's freedom of choice Fry approaches existentialism. Thus in his dramas man is always free to choose and always decides to live; if men want to die, as does Thomas in *The Lady's Not for Burning*, or Dynamene, in *A Phoenix Too Frequent*, they are made ultimately to realize the absurdity of their wish. The change comes about as a result of reaffirmation of a certain value — often of love — that helps them to come to terms with the world. Usually the world is accepted with resignation, less frequently with enthusiasm.<sup>4</sup>

A mood of resignation, the idea that man is destined to endure everything is a trait Fry shares with the existentialists. His characters are always out of harmony with themselves, they always look for something to satisfy them and all the time they are dissatisfied with what they have already achieved.

Now and then Fry allows pessimism and tragic resignation to enter his plays. A sad perception of the tragic result that follows every human action, even when man attempts to come nearer to God, is expressed by Moses, in *The Firstborn* p. 88:

I do not know why the necessity of God  
Should feed on grief; but it seems so [...]

A remark made by Meadows, in *A Sleep of Prisoners* p. 47, deals with the same problem; he wonders how it is that out of all possible means humanity has chosen war, an instrument which is terrible and futile, to re-introduce peace into the world:

Behind us lie  
The thousand, and the thousand and the thousand years  
Vexed and terrible. And we still use  
The cures that never cure.

Yet curiously enough Fry does not seem to believe that there is any wilful evil intended by man. He seems to take a delight in normality;

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<sup>4</sup> G. Weales: *Religion in Modern English Drama*, Univ. Press, Philadelphia 1961, p. 219.

for such men as Seti in *The Firstborn*, and Henry IV in *Curtmantle* are not made monsters of crime, though certainly they could appear as such.

Fry's usual focus is the individual; it may even be observed that society has no part to play in his drama. It would perhaps be more precise to say that he is mainly concerned with the problem of individual responsibility for what one has or has not done for other people. To make this clear Fry often has to deal with important individuals, with those who govern, such as a pharaoh, an archbishop, a duke or a duchess — persons who are preeminently responsible for other people, and should do more for them than anyone else could. This, however, does not seem to be Fry's view. In his comedies he is concerned with the responsibility of one individual to another. In *The Dark Is Light Enough* and in *The Lady's Not for Burning* we meet characters who are naturally not heroic but perform various heroic deeds in given circumstances. We see examples of extraordinary human helpfulness and kindness shown by utterly un-heroic characters in the most ordinary manner when there is no alternative way in which a man can behave. Here Fry seems to suggest that when the hour of trial comes, man must wish to be good since he has never been wilfully wicked. Thus Fry rejects the Christian notion of man's natural sinfulness. Although this view of Fry's position may appear to be unjustified it has been suggested by recurrent hints to the effect that human nature is basically good and that evil neither prevails nor is omnipresent in the world. But on the other hand he does not go to the opposite extreme so as to say for instance that men are always good and heroic, just and brave; he sees them as merely human, even though cowardly and weak they still may act like heroes.

We may also note that Fry's characters are not dull, nor are his plays didactic. The fact may seem extraordinary as so many elements of his dramas are taken directly from the Bible, but this has reference only to the subject matter. He does, of course, use ideas that are usually called Christian in the broadest sense of the word.

Among them is the doctrine of love and forgiveness, which is often contrasted with the pagan code of hatred and revenge, as in *Thor with Angels*. But in the modern world people experience almost the same hardships as their ancestors did. In one of his best plays, *A Sleep of Prisoners*, man endures the crucifixion of history. Derek Stanford<sup>5</sup> has used the phrase: „[...] and if it be asked what are the forces behind this crucifying process, Fry's answer would seem to be that they are prejudice, intolerance, and hatred.”

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<sup>5</sup> D. Stanford: *Christopher Fry, Writers and their Works*, No. 54, Longmans, 1954, p.20.

In the same play Fry has uttered other related doctrines namely that man will survive only if he is humble and ready to forgive and there is hope for man to approach God though this is far from easy. In his first play, *The Boy with a Cart*, he had said that it is impossible for man to approach the absolute, p. 40:

Between  
Our birth and death we may touch understanding  
As a moth brushes a window with its wing.

If Fry does not contradict himself here at least he shows how very broad his notion of religion is and how little it has in common with any formal religious loyalty.

When we compare Fry's comedies and his church dramas, they look at first as if they had been written by two different authors. In the comedies Fry has a more specific aim, he wants to please his viewers and readers, and does this in a breath-taking way, dazzling his audience by witticisms, jokes, highly improbable situations and semi-nonsensical dialogues. Yet fortunately this is not the whole content of the comedies. Though there is no extended discussion of ideas, we feel their presence. The main difference between these comedies and the church dramas is in the way in which they are conceived. Fry has probably re-introduced comedy in Oscar Wilde's style.<sup>6</sup> This is the genre based almost entirely on brilliance of language. Fry's world of unpredictable happenings and sudden twists of action creates the atmosphere of merriment and topsy-turvydom essential to such comedy. It also leads to seeing life through a veil of amazement. The amazement is usually created verbally. The use of verbal means by Fry has been criticized by G. Weales<sup>7</sup>, who repeats the opinion of S. Spender with the unflattering conclusion in which he tries to convince us that Fry is guilty of shallowness. Yet though the arguments are valid he seems to do less than justice to the playwright. It is true that the high seriousness of the *Church Dramas* is not retained in the lighter „comedies of seasons”, nor does he seem to have aimed at retaining it; but in many cases he has managed to include deep observations on life and man and record them in an intriguing way. It is true that, although his plays contain remarkably shrewd reflections, unfortunately one often feels that these are not indispensable to the structure of the drama or even that some of them are not in character but introduced as mere ornaments. If we explored this aspect of Fry's plays more extensively, we would have to deal with another matter, namely Fry's

<sup>6</sup> R. Williams: *Drama from Ibsen to Eliot*, Chatto and Windus, 1952, p. 262.

<sup>7</sup> Weales: *op. cit.*, p. 233.

effectiveness as a dramatist writing for the theatre, but this is not of primary interest to us here, though often remarked on by the critics.<sup>8</sup>

Returning then to the conceptual element in Fry's comedies we have to recognize that, however loosely connected with the action, they still reveal more aspects of his way of viewing the world. The quotation that I am going to produce is supposed to provide an important pointer on his creed as a playwright.<sup>9</sup> In *Venus Observed* Redbeck says, p. 36:

A spade is never so merely a spade as the word  
spade would imply.

This may mean that there is always the element of surprise or mystery present in even the most uninspiring things. Mystery and laughter seem to be very important guiding principles in his comedies. There are often unexpectedly good reasons for the protagonists to laugh, as in *The Lady's Not for Burning*, p. 49:

Thomas. For God's sake, shall we laugh?  
Jennet. For what reason?  
Thomas. For the reason of laughter, since laughter is surely  
the surest touch of genius in creation.  
[...]  
That same laughter, madam, is an irrelevancy  
Which almost amounts to revelation.

Here we see that for the playwright, to view the world in terms of laughter helps him to approach its hidden significance.

The ideas that we are asked to grasp through the language are not different from those expressed in the *Church Dramas*. Take *The Dark Is Light Enough*; here the humanistic elements have been strongly stressed. This is a pacifist play showing the terrible influence of war on man. Recreating the Hungarian Uprising of 1848, Fry considers the case in terms of human suffering and not in terms of justice, which seems to him irrelevant when people die;

Stefan, p. 6: But these Hungarian nationalists think they stand  
For truth and light and kill accordingly.

So we can see that the plots of these so called sunny comedies are not so very light after all. Several tragic components have been discussed by D. Stanford.<sup>10</sup> Comic and tragic situations spring from one another

<sup>8</sup> D. Donoghue: *Christopher Fry's Theatre of Words*, "Essays in Criticism", vol. IX, No. 1, January 1959, p. 37—49.

<sup>9</sup> Cf. Donoghue and Weales: *op. cit.*, and K. Muir: *Verse and Prose, Contemporary Theatre, Stratford-upon-Avon Studies 4*, 1962, pp. 97—115.

<sup>10</sup> Stanford: *Comedy and Tragedy in Christopher Fry*, "The Month", May 1959, pp. 307—312.

impromptu and with such rapidity that one has the illusion of universal confusion. All of a sudden the protagonists face situations that could easily change the play into a tragedy if they were dwelt upon a little longer. This is the case of Jennet in *The Lady's Not for Burning*, when she rejects Humphrey's invitation to become his mistress. The situation is more immediately acute than in Shakespeare's *Measure for Measure* for Jennet herself is to bear the consequences. Nevertheless she refuses Humphrey on the ground that she hates the idea though it seems sinful to her not to save herself, pp. 81—84), but when she says:

O God, I wish  
The ground would open

Thomas climbs in through the window and retorts at once: „Allow me to open it for you”, and suddenly the atmosphere of merriment is restored.

Fry never uses such technique in the *Church Dramas*, where his attention is focused on single significant problems so much that he hardly ever reveals his superb sense of humour so ebullient in his comedies. His plots always derive from well known sources but in the *Church Dramas* their interrelation is far more obvious than in the comedies. In these the source is hinted at rather than pointed to, but all the time the author manages to tell us more than a mere story. In fact he introduces a second level of meaning; in Fry's theatre we may laugh, and watch what is going on on the stage, but at the same time we have to think, and the problems exposed are valuable to us. Fry himself treats them from our, that is to say contemporary, point of view — however much obscured by the ancestry of the plot. In reading *Venus Observed* we realize how freely he transmutes the ancient story of the apple of discord, which is presented in the residence of an elderly bonvivant, and how he also manages to convey to us much more than the story.

It seems almost impossible to pass a final judgement upon Fry. When we view his literary output as a whole it appears to be a product of cross-fertilization: his academic training visible in the choice of sources and stylistic devices, and there is also his extraordinary sensitiveness and imagination. These two aspects should be discussed while attempting a reassessment of his technique.

As I have already said, one reason why Fry is original is that he has re-introduced verse to the theatre. I do not think it worth while dwelling upon the „mechanics” of the verse; it is much more interesting to find out the possible reasons for his choice of medium. The only source that can throw some light on this is an essay by the playwright himself bearing the title *Why Verse?*<sup>11</sup>

<sup>11</sup> Fry: *Why Verse?* [from:] *Playwrights on Playwriting* (Ed Toby Cole) London, 1960, pp. 120—125.

Here the author makes it plain that although the verse and prose plays are not antagonistic, there are some factors that make verse more suitable for the theatre. First of all verse provides speed and economy. Quoting various passages from *Macbeth* he contends that verse provides experience of the characters as well as a second level of meaning. The latter when communicated by poetry goes far beyond the mere story and can extend under our eye, in fact is unlimited. In this poetry can be compared to music because both are universal.

In Fry's view verse can convey both the immediate and deeper meanings and the experience is perfectly natural since we know the same thing from everyday life. According to Fry, we are made of two parts, one prosaic, the other poetic; and we never entirely belong to one „camp" only, and the same thing happens with poetry<sup>12</sup> in the theatre.

Fry's preoccupation with words in the theatre shows in the extensive use of various stylistic devices in his plays. If I were to indicate the one most characteristic, I would point to imagery. The unusual thing about it is that though the imagery is largely conventional the effect is far from trite. The choice of elements which the metaphor joins together makes for its uniqueness. Consequently we begin to wonder at the unexpected complexity of seemingly plain objects and events. Now and then some metaphors seem incomprehensible, and though it is an annoying fact, yet to some extent it helps to create the atmosphere of irresponsibility and confusion — perhaps this was intended by the author.

Fry makes us feel the living presence of darkness, though this phenomenon of nature as well as the accompaniment of our homely activities is quite commonplace, the combination evokes a feeling of wonder at the world. The following metaphor is taken from *The Boy with a Cart*, p. 1:

Chorus: The darkness hangs the hatchet in the barn  
and scrapes the heavy boots against the iron.

Another daring metaphor is introduced by David, *A Sleep of Prisoners*, p. 31:

God dips his hand in death to wash the wound,  
Takes evil to inoculate our lives  
Against infectious evil.

At the opposite pole stands another metaphor (*The Lady's Not for Burning*, Jennet, p. 49):

The morning came, and left  
The sunlight on my steps like any normal  
Tradesman.

<sup>12</sup> Fry: *op. cit.*, p. 125.



This one seems very charming. It has a quiet charm of a world sympathetic to men — they are given the sun, and it is as if „the sunlight” was a thing one could buy; thus strange things occur almost imperceptibly.

Yet though some of these metaphors seem very clever and original they are often somewhat imperfect. They do suggest a lot but very often they are too vague, their very profusion makes them largely ineffective for an audience that cannot grasp them all during the performance. So Fry’s principal fault seems to be such a massive use of metaphor which robs it of theatrical effectiveness. Similar objections have been made by the following critics: R. Williams<sup>13</sup>, M. Bewley<sup>14</sup>, D. Donoghue.<sup>15</sup> D. Daiches<sup>16</sup> points out, moreover, that Fry’s poetic imagery is too indiscriminate and repetitious in different circumstances. Since these opinions are supported by appropriate evidence they cannot be disregarded. Taking all such objections into account, one may conclude that Fry’s imagery is indeed of limited use to the theatre, but closely studied, can adequately convey the author’s meaning, on the whole the faults do not obscure the achievements.

Focusing his attention on language Fry enriches his plays with still another element apart from imagery. He uses language for comic effect extensively. The comic tone, however, is hardly ever noticeable in his *Church Dramas*, and when it is, it appears to be out of place.<sup>17</sup>

Not so in the comedies. The author makes much play of humour, wit, irony, and achieves his effects by means of: play on words, enumeration, paradox, metonymy, special use of idioms, and juxtaposition of words and phrases.

The double meaning of the word „reborn” is used by Nicolas and Margaret, *The Lady’s Not for Burning*, p. 11:

Nicolas. I must tell you  
I’ve been reborn.  
Margaret. You can be sure  
You were born quite adequately at the first occasion.

In the next example Fry achieves irony by an unexpected use of the word „illumination” — commonly associated with something beautiful and inspired while lumbago is a somewhat comic ailment of old age. The irony is strengthened by a further mocking remark; *Venus Observed*, p. 99:

<sup>13</sup> Williams: *op. cit.*, p. 264.

<sup>14</sup> M. Bewley: *The Verse of Ch. Fry*, “Scrutiny”, vol. XVIII, No. 1, June 1951, pp. 79—82.

<sup>15</sup> Donoghue: *op. cit.*, pp. 39—43.

<sup>16</sup> D. Daiches: *The Present Age*, Indiana U. P., Bloomington 1958, pp. 165—167.

<sup>17</sup> Weales: *op. cit.*, p. 223.

Duke. A sudden illumination of lumbago.  
 What a rich world of sensation to achieve,  
 What infinite variety of being.

The disquieting fact about such use of the comic is that it is rather loosely inset in the context so that in fact such passages could be used almost anywhere. As a result the comic does not seem to spring from the story but serves only to embellish it.

This brief survey of the artistic devices used by Fry does not exhaust the subject. I mention them chiefly because they do seem to help the playwright create a special atmosphere, an intellectual „climate” in the plays.

Such effects undeniably exist but it is hardly possible to analyse them by applying some objective standards. Of some help is Styan's<sup>18</sup> remark concerning *The Dark Comedy* when he places Fry among the early representatives of the so called modern comic tragedy. According to the definition of the comedy of mood quoted by Styan after Van Druten it is the kind of play „whose main quality — far more important than its story or its plot — is the maintenance and communication of a certain mood, through which the entire action is presented.” Fry's all four comedies of seasons would answer the definition of comedies of mood. To make the thing clear let me refer to *Venus Observed*. Here the story of the apple of discord is only a pretext to introduce the middle aged duke who feels the approaching autumn of his life together with loneliness and resignation. Even meeting his three former mistresses will change nothing in his life and will not release him from his fears.

D. Stanford quotes<sup>19</sup> Fry on this subject: „I don't know whether a comedy of mood is an accepted category, or whether it's something I've coined to cover my particular end. It means that the scene, the season, and the characters, are bound together in one climate. In *Venus* the season is autumn, the scene is a house beginning to fall into decay, the characters, most of them are in middle life.”

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In conclusion I want to consider what chance of life, if any, Fry's plays could have on Polish stages. As is generally agreed the most outstanding feature of Fry's dramatic dialogue is the play on words. Unfortunately the author's mastery in this kind of game is a thing almost impossible to imitate in translation. The Polish rendering of *The Lady's*

<sup>18</sup> Styan: *The Dark Comedy*, CUP, 1962, p. 120—122.

<sup>19</sup> Stanford: *Christopher Fry*, pp. 21—22.

*Not for Burning*<sup>20</sup>, the only play that has been translated and staged so far, illustrates the difficulty; it has little virtue apart from being faithful to the original, it is unable to retain either the charm or the nonchalant quality of the language.

A few examples will suffice to show how the play has changed in Polish version; thus the typical Wildian humour in the phrase „I wasn't born I was come across" (p. 9), has been lost in the words „Nikt mnie nie urodził. Ja jestem znajda". Thomas' utterance (on page 51) begins with an idiom which has no close equivalent in Polish and ends with a sequence of parallel constructions, some of which have been rendered very loosely:

Emperors  
 Would be colonizing you, their mistresses  
 Patronizing you, ministers if state  
 Governmentalizing you. And you  
 Would be eulogized, lionized, probably  
 Canonized for your divine mishap.

The Polish version runs as follows:

Cesarze by cię skolonizowali, ich kochanki  
 Otczyły opieką, a ministrowie  
 Upaństwowili. Byłabyś podziwiana,  
 Celebrowana, a może  
 I kanonizowana za swoją boską niezręczność.

Fry himself tried his hand at translation. He translated Giraudoux and Anouilh into English but rendered their plays rather freely. He even changed the titles, Giraudoux's *La Guerre de Troie n'aura pas lieu* to *Tiger at the Gates*, and Anouilh's *L'invitation au Château* to *Ring round the Moon*. The interest that Fry has taken in these dramatists may support the contention that he also adopted some of the views usually associated with existentialism.

In spite of all the interest that Fry has for a student of drama the Polish audience will probably content itself with translations of *Church Dramas*. In any case even a fragmentary knowledge of his plays will enable drama readers and theatre-goers to get in touch with an intelligent thinker, an independent and reflective mind. He would soon make an impact on his audiences thanks to his links with European culture, his great skill combined with his humanitarian outlook, and academic literary heritage. He should also impress people with his mastery in conveying, if not

<sup>20</sup> Fry: *Szkoda tej czarownicy na stos*, translated by W. Lewik and C. Wojewoda, "Dialog", June 1958, pp. 5—54.

discovering, the contemporary significance of well known themes. In both the choice of subjects and the form of his plays he has to be considered an original writer.

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#### T e x t s:

- The Boy with a Cart*, Muller, London 1961.  
*The Firstborn*, O. U. P., 1952.  
*A Phoenix Too Frequent*, O. U. P., 1950.  
*The Lady's Not for Burning*, O. U. P., 1950.  
*Thor, with Angels*, O. U. P., 1954.  
*Venus Observed*, O. U. P., 1950.  
*A Sleep of Prisoners*, O. U. P., 1951.  
*The Dark Is Light Enough*, O. U. P., 1955.  
*Curtmantle*, O. U. P., 1961.  
*Ring Round the Moon* (transl.), Methuen, 1950.  
*Tiger at the Gates* (transl.), Methuen, 1955.

### S T R E S Z C Z E N I E

Artykuł stanowi próbę zestawienia naczelných motywów ideowych i artystycznych dramaturgii Christophera Fry'a. Badane są powiązania między poglądami autora a formą artystyczną, w jakiej je wypowiada.

Jako ideolog Fry może być zaliczony do kontynuatorów dramatu religijnego w podobnym stopniu, jak T. S. Eliot, co przejawia się przede wszystkim w propagowaniu idei humanitaryzmu i pacyfizmu. O wiele ważniejsze miejsce zajmuje on jednak w literaturze jako, bodaj jedyny, artysta średniego pokolenia, który konsekwentnie używa na scenie tylko wiersza. Ze względu na język kontynuuje tradycję komedii w stylu Oscara Wilde'a.

Jednocześnie tenże język, którym z takim mistrzostwem operuje, jest obiektem największych ataków krytyki. Oryginalny język Fry'a nie stwarza wielkich nadziei na pojawienie się zadowalających przekładów na język polski.

### P E З Ю М Е

В настоящей статье делается попытка синтеза основных идейных и художественных мотивов драматургии Христофора Фрая. Исследуются связи между взглядами писателя и теми художественными формами, с помощью которых они выражаются.

Как идеолог, Фрай, также как и Эллиот, может быть отнесен к продолжателям религиозной драмы. У Фрая это проявляется прежде всего в пропаганде идей гуманизма и пацифизма. Однако основное значение Фрая как художника состоит в том, что он, пожалуй, является единственным писателем среднего поколения, пишущим свои произведения в стихотворной форме. Кроме того, язык произведений Фрая продолжает традиции комедий в стиле Оскара Уайльда. Вместе с тем, этот же язык, используемый Фраем с таким великолепным мастерством, является важнейшим объектом атак критики. Оригинальный, самобытный язык Фрая не дает нам больших надежд на появление хороших переводов на польский язык его произведений.