

COMPARE AND CONTRAST THE CHARACTERS OF THE DOCTOR AND THE DICTATOR. ARE THEY THE SAME OR ARE THEY DIAMETRICALLY OPPOSITE TO EACH OTHER? WHAT IS THE MOST SALIENT ISSUE OF THE PLAY?

# THE WHITE DISEASE (BÍLÁ NEMOC)

- A mysterious new disease from China is spreading around a small country, only affecting the elderly and transforming them into lepers
- At the same time, the country's dictator is preparing to send them into a war
- A doctor has found a cure, and proved it to work in one of the country's clinics, however his treatment of patients there is put to an end when he reveals he will only tell others how to make the cure on one condition – every country agrees to uphold global peace
- He refuses to cure the rich, or especially those associated in any way with the military, unless they leave their jobs
- Even a meeting with the Dictator does not change his mind
- The Dictator contracts the disease and, taken over by sickness, agrees to sign a peace treaty
- The Doctor immediately travels over to the Dictator's residence, however is murdered by the crowds outside when they find out his desire for peace
- The film ends with the Dictator, now in one of the camps he had established to separate lepers from the rest of society, pleading for them to uphold peace

# THE DOCTOR & THE DICTATOR



## THE DOCTOR & THE DICTATOR

- Two opposing forces with different moral visions however there are some similarities
- Both are willing to sacrifice lives to achieve their own end goals
- Both end up dying at the hands of the Dictator's war fuelled mob

CONTEXT

## 1937 CZECHOSLOVAKIA

- Both play and film were produced in 1937
- Rise in militant German nationalism in Czechoslovakia throughout the 1930s (aftermath of the Great Depression)
- Political polarization
- The Nazis looking to expand their European territory
- In September 1938 the Munich agreement was signed

# KAREL ČAPEK

- “Čapek’s search for truth, tolerance, and trust dominates his writings.” (Bradbook)
- 1890 – 1938
- Times of great change
- “Čapek is a genuine democrat and has always advocated a humane, tolerant, and liberal government against extremists both on the right and the left... he hates hasty generalisations, doctrinaire fanaticism, any uncritical acceptance of ready-made opinions and systems.” (Wellek)

## THE MESSAGE OF THE PLAY

- Not a pacifist play
- Anti-totalitarian
- Fear
- “Čapek’s statement decades before the fall of Nazism and communism, that the authoritarian regimes have within themselves the seeds of their destruction.”  
(Culik)



- <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Czechoslovak-history/Czechoslovakia-1918-92>
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- Pynsent, Robert B., 'Review: Tolerance the Karel Čapek Myth', *The Slavonic and East European Review*, 78:2 (2000), pp.191-206
- Wellek, René, 'Karel Čapek', *The Slavonic and East European Review*, 15:43 (1936), pp. 191-206