

## August

### Bernard Beckett

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Fiction, B paperback

Recommended for upper secondary

#### Resource kit contains

- Synopsis
- Author information
- Craft of writing
- Reading and writing activities
- Discussion topic



#### Synopsis

Tristan is the child of a poor, world-weary father, cynical about society and oppressed by his struggle to eke out a living in the poverty-stricken Workers' Quarter. Sensitive to his father's hidden pain and cynicism about life, Tristan is lured by the charismatic presence of Father Carmichael. As Tristan watches the priest in his flowing robes standing before the small congregation he is left with a strong sense that, unlike his father, 'here was a man who mattered.' (p.13) Tristan's natural curiosity invests him with a desire to learn to read and it is his intelligence and sharp mind that bring him to the attention of Father Carmichael who takes him into the Holy City to study religion and philosophy in the school of St Augustine. It is here that Tristan sharpens his knowledge, engaging in discussions of religious doctrine and orthodox teachings, and he dives into study. Sheltered from the outside world, he is cocooned from external influences and thrives in the environment where he must rise to the philosophical challenges presented by the rector.

But this nurturing and challenging environment of St Augustine's transforms into a place of torture as Tristan becomes the subject of an experiment used to prove that free will is an illusion, that we are all subject to a preordained destiny and that the traditional teachings of the church have been based on fallacies. Firstly, Tristan is subjected to the temptation of a beautiful young woman and then is ultimately forced to play a game for which she is the prize. But the priest is able to predict all of Tristan's strategies in all of the games and all of his decisions are apparently already known to the rector. While Tristan wins the prize of the girl, he loses his faith in Man, realising that we are but pawns in a game which has already been decided by God and that our role is simply to live the predestined path. Crushed by this discovery, Tristan seeks out the young girl Grace whose

story is also one of suffering and disappointment in the church and its hypocrisy. Grace has seen that, in spite of the teachings of the nuns, there is no real compassion for the suffering of others. She is devastated by the harshness of the nuns who beat her viciously, allow her friend Josephine to die and allow the Children of the Night no real opportunity to grieve for their dead. Grace is forced onto the streets into a world where there is no opportunity for philosophising. Instead, she must survive in the cruelest way, selling sexual favours for food and shelter.

When Grace, the pragmatist, and Tristan, the philosopher, do finally meet again, the union they have both been anticipating occurs under frightening circumstances. They are suspended upside down in a car which is balancing on a ledge between life and death and it is in this setting, that the whole story of their lives is unveiled. With their future in the balance, perched precariously, they share their stories. Tristan must ultimately acknowledge that if they rock the car they may fall to their deaths or they may indeed miraculously survive but they must, in the end, take responsibility for their choice. Grace reminds Tristan that, 'You can reduce it to physics if you want to but I will still ask you what you want to do and you must still tell me,' (p.172) and so Tristan's faith in the role of mankind to affect his own destiny is restored. The realisation that Tristan orchestrated this car accident to prove that there is indeed free will remains a haunting element of the book. Tristan has compromised Grace's life to demonstrate that acting against your own desire, doing the unforgivable, is indeed possible thus demonstrating that free will does exist.

### About the Author

Bernard Beckett has a degree in economics, and has taught in the Wellington region of New Zealand for several years. He has published ten books, and has won many awards.

In 2006, Bernard was awarded a New Zealand Science, Mathematics and Technology Teacher Fellowship where he worked on a project examining DNA mutations. This new direction led to the publication of *Genesis*, winner of the 2010 Prix Sorcières.

In 2008, the book made publishing history when UK publisher Quercus Books offered the largest advance ever for a young-adult novel in New Zealand. The novel has also been published in twenty other countries around the world. *August* is Bernard Beckett's second novel for adults.

### Note to teachers

This is a complex book that requires several readings. A useful study cannot really be done in a section-by-section manner and so these notes and questions assume that the students have completed one reading of the book and are able to comment on the rector's strategy and Tristan's response to it.

### Craft of writing

Note the chapter divisions in this book:

Part 1: The Fall

Part 2: The Temptation

Part 3: First Light

1. Consider the title of part 1, 'The Fall'. To what does it refer?  
Falling in love?  
Falling from grace?  
The fall of the car?  
Falling into the wrong hands?  
Falling into temptation?  
Falling into the abyss of loneliness?
2. Consider part 2, 'The Temptation'.  
What is the temptation that lures Tristan?  
What is the temptation that lures Grace?  
How is this linked to fundamental Christian view of temptation?
3. Why is part 3 called 'First Light'?  
Is Beckett referring to the light of day?  
The light of understanding?  
Redemption?
4. Within the three parts of the story, there are further divisions for Grace's story and Tristan's story. Why does Beckett unite their stories under the title of Tristan and Grace's story only in part 3 of the book?
5. Comment on the way in which Beckett moves in and out of the past within each story, returning to the present inside the upturned car. What is the effect of this method on the telling of the tale?

6. Explore the way in which these divisions mirror the story of Adam and Eve's experiences in the Garden of Eden. What is Beckett's message? Explore the way these divisions mirror the fall of man in Christian theology.
7. Consider the title of the book, *August*. What is its significance? Consider the title in light of the religious order of St Augustine referred to in the book. Research the life of the saint. Note the date of St Augustine's death, his particular research and writings on the concept of free will, original sin and the fall from grace. How do these focuses play themselves out in this book? In addition, note that St Augustine wrote a book titled *The City of God*. Why do you suppose Beckett made this into an actual place in his novel?
8. Re-read the first and last paragraphs of the book. Note the similarities but more importantly, note the difference in the added final sentence. What does this tell you about Tristan's growth in understanding? Assuming that this is the penultimate paragraph, write the novel's concluding paragraph.
9. Explore the origin of the name 'Tristan' (see the French *triste* meaning sad and the doomed romantic relationship with Isolde in the opera by Wagner, *Tristan and Isolde*) Why is this an apt name for Beckett's hero? Why do you think Beckett named his antagonist 'Grace'? Why does Grace refer constantly to her angel? In what way is Tristan the angel that Grace wished for?
10. There are many references to time slowing or altering its apparent pace. 'Time slowed' (p.136); 'In the steady, white light there was no means of measuring the passing of time' (p.81); '...exempt from the chiseling of time.' (p.104) Examine these and explain the way in which man views time as opposed to God's ability to see beyond the chronological. How does a discussion of time impact on a discussion of free will?

### The Fall

1. What indication is there that Tristan knowingly caused the accident?
2. When Grace asks Tristan to 'Explain it then' (p.8) he simply says, 'It's a long story.' Using your own understanding, explain why causing the car accident is a necessary part of Tristan's spiritual journey.
3. As Tristan tells the story of his childhood, readers gain an insight into the structure of society in this world. Make notes about:  
The Workers' Quarter  
The Holy City  
The Settlements  
The People of the Night

4. Re-read page 13. Explain why Father Carmichael was attractive to Tristan. How does this attraction advance the plot?
5. The family Holy Works is described as 'covered in dust and disinterest.' (p.15) What do we learn about the place of reading and study in Tristan's home from the description?
6. Explain the phrase on page 17, 'Knowledge sat on his horizon like a mountain waiting to be climbed.'
7. What is it about the education offered to Tristan that so infuriates and hurts Tristan's father? What is he afraid of? In hindsight, was he right to be fearful?
8. Tristan first meets the rector on page 21. What suggestions are there that the writer disapproves of the rector?
9. St Augustine's is described as '...the city's nursery... the place where its future germinated.' Explain this.
10. Re-read the descriptions of life in St Augustine's on pages 24–25. Design a brochure for parents promoting the school and advertising the benefits of the lifestyle for young boys.
11. The interrogations focus on topics of free will and destiny. Explain what is meant by '...man is free to choose between the paths of good and evil.' (p.26) Do you believe this is the case? Research the notion of free will versus determinism. Carry out an Oxford debate on this dilemma.
12. Do you believe that God judges by intentions or by deeds? (p.28) Which method of judgement do you advocate?
13. Augustine himself taught that 'woman was temptation, the devil's lever.' (p.30) How is this idea used by Beckett in the book? Re-read pages 30–33 in which Tristan is forced to draw a disrobed young woman and is then plagued by desire in spite of his will to subdue that desire. 'With every line the dilemma deepened. Tristan knew what he was doing was wrong but he couldn't summon the will to look away...now he lingered...his blood surging...' (p.32) How does the rector use the temptation of a woman to shake the foundations of Tristan's faith? Why does he do this?
14. Based on the book *August*, would you say that Beckett is critical or supportive of the teachings of St Augustine?
15. Samuel answers the rector's question that 'the soul is the seat of the will. The centre of responsibility' (p.35) and the rector is pleased with the answer but asks, 'How can we be blamed for turning away from God when it is God who gave us the capacity to turn?' (p.36) What is your view of this dilemma?
16. Part of the rector's plan for Tristan is to expose him to the suffering of the People of the Night and raise his sympathy for them. How is this supposed to enhance the rector's power over Tristan and his ultimate ability to predict Tristan's views?
17. The story of Josephine, Grace and the strawberry in the convent garden have clear links to the misadventures of the Garden of Eden. What are the parallels? What is Beckett trying to say?
18. 'When St Augustine's boys were being trained in the skills of logic and oratory, the convent girls were being taught that cleverness was the devil's doing.' (p.58) At the convent, Grace '...came to know the approval the powerful reserve for the submissive.' (p.60). How does the reader perceive the power of the church? Do you see these approaches as contradictory?
19. When Grace learns that the nuns would not save the innocent young baby boy, she is devastated. When Tristan learns that St Augustine's does not see the people of the night as possessing a soul, he too is a changed man. What is Beckett saying about compassion, empathy and the church? What is his message?
20. Grace claims that '...the convent shrinks your thinking.' (p.67) How does Beckett demonstrate this? Do you agree?

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### The Temptation

Extension Activity. Read Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*.

Look at the final paragraph on page 73. Is there a sense that, like the protagonists of the play, Grace and Tristan are also in limbo filling in the time before a decision needs to be made and a commitment undertaken? In what way are they too searching for God?

1. What point is the rector making when he uses the ball to crush the statue of St Augustine's head? How does the rector use the experiment of the many balls to confound Tristan's thinking? What is his purpose? Re-read the passage on pages 92–93 when answering this question.
2. Why does the conclusion of the rector: '...what happens, happens,' have such a devastating impact on Tristan? What are the implications for the soul? The rector responds to Tristan's sudden clarity of understanding of the ramifications of the experiment with the simple comment, 'It's alright,' but Tristan furiously responds, 'It's not. You've taken it all.' What has the rector taken? Is he guilty of a wrong doing?
3. Tristan explains that '...there is no path from observation to universal truth.' (p.79) What does this mean?
4. The church uses Tristan as an experiment to test the strength of its own philosophy. What is your view of such a strategy?
5. Ultimately, the rector proves that 'we are not players in our lives, we are the commentators.' (p.96) How is attempting to kill Grace in a car accident an attempt to prove this argument invalid?

6. The rector advocates the importance of questioning belief. He says: 'This is what believers do: ask only those questions that cannot hurt.'(p.117) Is a true believer one who questions or one who never questions?
7. Kevin hears Tristan's confession every night of his incarceration. The priest who has sexual relations with Grace hears her confession after every encounter. When Grace visits the priest in his place of work at St Margaret's, the priest whispers but Grace responds with, 'You can speak normally Father, Grace replied, There is no one but God to hear us and he already knows.' (p135) What is Beckett saying about religious ritual and those who are its representatives?

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### First Light

1. 'To commit the unforgivable act is to be truly free' (p.165) How was orchestrating the car accident of his beloved a way of defying destiny, demonstrating that free will exists?
2. Grace argues that being predictable is not a loss but a gain. 'It speaks of (their) character, that in the face of life's challenges their values still shine through.' (p.170) What is your view of predictability as a valuable human quality?
3. Grace argues that humans are not like the balls in the experiment which are subject to external forces of physics 'because of the stories we tell each other. They contribute as much to our trajectories as the physics of our collisions.'(p.170) Do you believe that free will or not, our lives are enriched because of the shades of colour we bring to them through our personal stories? Does it matter, ultimately that we do or do not have free will?

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### Discussion topic

Text Publishing 'want to publish books that make a difference to people's lives. We believe...that reading should be a marvellous experience, that every book you read should somehow change your life if only by a fraction.'

Discuss this quote in reference to *August*. In what way could this book be said to have changed your life or your thinking about your own decision-making and the power of your own will to effect change?