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TWO YEAR MASTER'S DEGREE COURSE

(CBCS in Accordance with NEP 2020)

SEMESTER - III

MODERN DRAMA

ENGLISH

Padmanath Gohainbaruah School of Humanities

KRISHNA KANTA HANDIQUI STATE OPEN UNIVERSITY

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DSC 8: MODERN DRAMA

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COURSE INTRODUCTION

This is the 2nd **Discipline Specific Core (DSC 8)** of the MA English programme and takes the learners to some dramatic works of the modern period. As a mode of representation, drama and stagecraft provide an all-important index to the cultural histories of any society. These are some aspects, which the learners studying 'Modern Drama' must try to comprehend. We have included six representative playwrights of the modern era who have enriched the dramatic culture with their explorations of various aspects of human life and society during the later part of the 19th century and the early and mid-20th century. Thus, this course intends to provide you an experience of dramatic writing starting from 1885 to 1960.

Modern drama is a participant as well as a result of a lot of different movements in art and literature taking place in Europe since the middle part of the 19th century. In a post-Darwinian world, conditioned by the growing middle-class values and the growing industrial and urbanised societies, the age-old values associated with human relations, cultural associations, social formations, religious faiths had to undergo a process of vehement and varied examinations and revaluations. Such socio-cultural environment did effect the production of literary and dramatic works. The end of the 19th century witnessed, in the hands of Ibsen, the development of a movement in theatre called Naturalism. This movement gave voice to the recurrent questions of the contemporary times thereby exposing to the audience the hidden dark realities within their own societies. This movement gave rise to the development of many other approaches in modern theatre.

Modern drama in the 20th century developed as a very dynamic field of thematic as well as technical experimentations. While the Realists tried to reflect life on stage as faithfully as possible, the Symbolists played with the props, colour, music and the stage designs to playfully deliver their content. While Brecht's Epic theatre broke the conventions of the stage-space and actor-audience relationships, the Theatre of the Absurd questioned all the conventional understandings of being, life and the purpose of existence. Thus, the field of modern European drama is not only interesting but also extremely thought provoking. They are important for the readers to understand the mind of Europe at different times during the last two centuries.

This is the first Block of this Course. This Block starts with a description of modern drama in the context of Europe. As you read through the units of this Block, you will find that Modern Drama refers to the whole range of plays produced in Europe since the middle part of the 19th century to the latter half of the 20th. Thus, Modern Drama includes a variety of plays with a large number of dramatists from different countries experimenting with the form of drama with different innovative techniques. As such, it is difficult to cover a huge number of great dramatists starting from Ibsen to Chekov, Brecht to Pirandello within one umbrella

term. Even then, they are all considered modern playwrights and their plays modern plays because of certain commonalities exhibited by them. You will get to read that different literary movements and approaches like Realism, Naturalism, Symbolism, Expressionism, Impressionism, Existentialism, Poetic drama, Absurd Drama—all collectively shaped modern theatre. Besides, many of the 'modern' innovative plays exhibit a complex intertwining of many different theatrical styles as well as theoretical approaches. Thus, it is difficult to find a play dealing with pure Realism, or stark Symbolism, or pure Expressionism in the context of Modern drama. This Block shall start with a reference to the idea of Modern drama in the context of Europe, and then a discussion shall be provided on two modern playwrights George Bernard Shaw and John Millington Synge so that you can have a better understanding of the various characteristics of Modern drama through a reading of the two prescribed plays by these playwrights.

This Course has 3 Blocks. Block 1 deals with the social and intellectual contexts of modern European drama with reference to George Bernard Shaw'*Candida* and John Millington Synge's*Playboy of the Western World.* Block 2 shall provide an idea onmodern English drama with particular reference to T. S. Eliot's *Murder in The Cathedral* and John Osborne's*Look Back in Anger*. Likewise, Block 3 shall deal with Absurd Drama with reference to Samuel Beckett's*Waiting for Godot*and Harold Pinter's *The Caretaker.*

BLOCK 1: INTRODUCTION

This Block has five units, which are as the following:

Unit 1: Introducing Modern Drama will try to address the social and intellectual contexts of modern drama and also trace the technical relationships shared by the co-called modern playwrights. However, this unit shall offer the basic introductory information about modern drama in the context of Europe in general. It is important to read the prescribed plays by situating them in their proper historical contexts.

Unit 2: George Bernard Shaw: *Candida* (PartI) shall introduce you to the Irish playwright, critic, and pamphleteer George Bernard Shaw who is generally considered the greatest dramatist to write in the English language since William Shakespeare. Following the example of Henrik Ibsen, he succeeded in revolutionising the English stage, disposing of the romantic conventions and devices of the "well-made" play, and instituting a 'Theatre of Ideas' grounded in realism.

Unit 3: George Bernard Shaw: *Candida* (PartII), which is to be studied in connection with the previous unit, shall help you to discussof freethinking and socialism as reflected mostly in his vast array of literary works. Shaw is renowned for his contribution to what we today know as "Modern drama" because with plays like *Candida* he broke away from the conventions of the melodramatic London theatre in the 1890s.

Unit 4: John Millington Synge: *Playboy of the Western World* (Part I) shall introduce you to John Millington Synge the author of the play *The Playboy of the Western World* (1907). Synge is considered the

greatest dramatist of the Irish Literary Renaissance. As you finish reading this unit, you will be able to see the qualities of J. M. Synge as one of the greatest playwrights of the modern world.

Unit 5: John Millington Synge: *Playboy of the Western World* (Part II) deals with Synge's play *The Playboy of the Western World* a three-act play written by the Irish playwright John Millington Synge. In his unsentimental but compassionate portrayal of Irish peasants in this play, and his highly imaginative and poetic dialogue (patterned after the vernacular spoken by the rural population in the west of Ireland), Synge attempted to capture the essence of the Irish spirit, which he described in his preface to *The Playboy of the Western World* as "fiery and magnificent, and tender."

BLOCK 2: INTRODUCTION

This Block shall provide an idea on modern English drama. To help you to understand the various issues and characteristics of Modern English drama, two plays by T. S. Eliot and John Osborne have been prescribed for your study. From your reading of the previous Block, you have learnt that the influences of different foreign dramatic movements, approaches and trends also rendered a visible impact on modern English drama. Therefore, our advice to the learners is that they should try to read about Modern English drama by situating them in the context of Europe. Though the roots of modern English drama can be traced back in the middle of the 19th century in the works of playwrights like T. W. Robertson or Sir Squire Bancroft, modern English drama properly began during the last decade of the 19th century.

Though Modern English drama started with Naturalism, it changed its course through different movement and approaches of theatre. You must note that the Irish nationalist movement also played a significant role in the development of English drama. For instance, the plays of W. B. Yeats and J. M. Synge enriched English drama with a native grandeur of a very rare kind. Similarly, T. S. Eliot is yet another important name in the history of modern drama because of his contribution to the revival of poetic plays in the 20th century. Another important phenomenon of modern English drama is Harold Pinter, who, after French absurdist Samuel Beckett, mastered the art of writing absurd plays. After going through the units of this Block, you will learn that the playwrights writing in English in the 20th century have also participated, in varied degrees, in most of the movements and experiments in modernist theatre. This Block comprises five units, which are as the following:

Unit 6: Introducing Modern English Drama serves as the introduction to Modern English Drama. The learners are supposed to relate English drama in its contemporary international context for a better understanding of the plays. As such, it is advisable that the readers treat this unit as a window to the vast realm of modern English drama and do read more on the contexts and the playwrights for a proper

comprehension of the plays.

Unit 7: Thomas Stearns Eliot: Murder in The Cathedral (Part I) unit is based on a discussion of T. S. Eliot as a playwright. Eliot articulated distinctly modern themes in forms that were a marked departure from those of 19th century poetry. Eliot is also considered one of the greatest poetic playwrights of the 20th century. This unit will help you to discuss Eliot as a modern playwright through a reference to his play *Murder in the Cathedral,* which has been prescribed for your studies.

Unit 8: Thomas Stearns Eliot: Murder in The Cathedral (Part II) shall deal with Eliot's play *Murder in the Cathedral* which is based on the assassination of Archbishop Thomas Becket in Canterbury Cathedral in 1170. This play is drawn from the writings of Edward Grim, a clerk who was an eyewitness to the event and it was first performed in 1935. This play while dealing with an individual's opposition to authority was written at the time of rising Fascism in Central Europe. Therefore, it can also be taken as a protest to individuals in affected countries to oppose the Nazi regime's subversion of the ideals of Christianity.

Unit 9: John Osborne: Look Back in Anger (Part I) will introduce you to John Osborne, another important English playwright of the literature of protest in the 20th century. As a modern playwright, John Osborne expressed the rebellious attitude of the 'Angry Young Men' in his famous play *Look Back in Anger*. Written as a reaction against the drawing-room comedies and middle-class drama of Noël Coward and Sir Terence Rattigan, *Look Back in Anger* is a landmark in the history of English theatre. As you finish reading this unit, you will be able to appreciate the role played by Osborne in the context of Modern English drama in the 20th century.

Unit 10: John Osborne: Look Back in Anger (Part II) shall help you to discuss Osborne's play *Look Back in Anger* (1956) in sufficient detail. In this play, Osborne focuses on the life and marital struggles of an intelligent and educated but disaffected young man of working-class origin, Jimmy Porter, and his equally competent yet impassive upper-middle-class wife Alison. While writing this play, it is believed that Osborne drew inspiration from his personal life and failing marriage with Pamela Lane. The play spawned the term "angry young men" to describe Osborne and those of his generation who employed the harshness of realism in the theatre in contrast to the more escapist theatre that characterised the previous generation.

BLOCK 3: INTRODUCTION

This is the third Block of the Course on Modern Drama. Our main purpose here is to discuss the history and characteristics of Absurd Drama with reference to two important Absurd Plays—Waiting for Godot and The Caretaker. The theatre critic Marin Esslin in his book The Theatre of the Absurd (1961) probably coined the phrase 'Theatre of the Absurd' to refer to the works of a group of dramatists who were active in

the 1950s. The important names include— Arthur Adamov, Samuel Beckett, Jean Genet, Eugene Ionesco and Harold Pinter. In the early 1950s, the concept of the absurd began to be resolved and articulated in a series of remarkable plays which dramatised the kind of vision of human beings struggling with the irrationality of experience, in a state of 'metaphysical anguish' as projected by the French writer Albert Camus. The so-called absurd plays lack a formal logic and conventional plot structure to support what may be called the absurd predicament. Some of the world's major Absurd plays are—Waiting for Godot, Endgame, Happy Days by Becket, Rhinoceros by Ionesco; The Birthday Party, The Dumb Waiter and The Caretaker, The Homecoming, Landscape and Silence and No Man's Land by Pinter. This Block consists of five units, which are as the following:

Unit 11: Introducing Absurd Drama unit should be read as an introduction to Absurd drama, its history and major exponents. Therefore, as you finish reading this unit, you will be able to discuss the history and background of Absurd drama, which shall further help you to discuss the plays Waiting for Godot and The Caretaker, which are prescribed for your study.

Unit 12: Samuel Beckett: *Waiting for Godot* (Part I) shall deal with the life and works of Samuel Beckett, one of the greatest exponents of the 'Theatre of the Absurd.' As a writer playwright, Beckett believed that the recognition of the triviality, senselessness, and the ultimate meaninglessness of life must be able to free and liberate human beings from their concern with senselessness and futile objectives. As you finish reading this unit, you will be able to appreciate both Beckett and his play Waiting for Godot in the context of the 'Theatre of the Absurd.'

Unit 13: Samuel Beckett: *Waiting for Godot* (Part II) is based on a reading of the various important aspects of Samuel Beckett's play Waiting for Godot that is often considered one of the greatest absurd plays of the 20th century. Beckett, through his characters and landscapes in the play, presents a vision of the collapse and decay of western philosophy, culture and society. This vision, no doubt, has its origins in the contemporary war-ridden western world, but it belongs also to a tradition of dramatic innovations of the 20th century.

Unit 14: Harold Pinter: *The Caretaker* (Part I) is based on Harold Pinter who is one of the best-known theatre activists of the 20th century. Although, he has been a poet, a novelist, a playwright, a screenwriter, an actor, and an able director on both the stage and the screen, it is mostly as a dramatist that Pinter is widely known to the world. Pinter's preoccupation with confined spaces, small habitats with constraining circumstances and brief events provides a scope for exploring the complexities of life, the instability of verbal interactions, the changing social realities, and the inability to communicate properly, as to be found in the play The Caretaker.

Unit 15: Harold Pinter: *The Caretaker* (Part II) is based on Pinter's play The Caretaker which

presents a simple story of the two brothers and a tramp. With this story, the play deals with themes like the distance between reality and fantasy, family relationships, and the struggle for power. It also touches on the subjects of mental illness and the plight of the destitute. Pinter in this play takes recourse to elements of both comedy and tragedy in order to express complex meanings about human existence, life and being, which in turn elicits complex reactions among the audience.

While going through a unit, you may also notice some text boxes, which have been included to help you know some of the difficult terms and concepts. You will also read about some relevant ideas and concepts in “LET US KNOW” along with the text. We have kept “CHECK YOUR PROGRESS” questions in each unit. These have been designed to self-check your progress of study. The hints for the answers to these questions are given at the end of the unit. We strongly advise that you answer the questions immediately after you finish reading the section in which these questions occur. We have also included a few books in the “FURTHER READING” which will be helpful for your further consultation. The books referred to in the preparation of the units have been added at the end of the block. As you know the world of literature and criticism is too big, we strongly advise you not to take a unit to be an end in itself. Despite our attempts to make a unit self-contained, we advise that you read the original texts of the authors prescribed as well as other additional materials for a thorough understanding of the contents of a particular unit.

UNIT 1: INTRODUCING MODERN DRAMA

UNIT STRUCTURE

1.1 Learning Objectives

1.2 Introduction

1.3 The Emergence of Modern European Drama

1.4 Important Continental Movements

1.5 Important Theorists/Practitioners of Modern Drama

1.6 Let Us Sum Up

1.7 Further Reading

1.8 Answers to Check Your Progress (Hints Only)

1.9 Possible Questions

1.1 LEARNING OBJECTIVES

After going through this unit, you will be able to

- discuss the developmental phases of modern drama in Europe
- understand modern drama against the context of different movements in art and literature
- relate the interconnections between different theatre movements
- get introduced to the different major practitioners of modern drama in Europe.

1.2 INTRODUCTION

This is the first unit of Block 1 of DSC-8 and it will introduce you to modern drama in the context of Europe. You will note that modern drama refers to the whole range of dramas produced in Europe since the middle part of the 19th century to the latter half of the 20th. Thus, modern drama includes plays of a large number of dramatists hailing from different countries writing in different periods. As such, it is difficult to cover a huge number of great dramatists starting from Ibsen to Chekov to Brecht to Pirandello within one umbrella term. Even then, they are all considered modern playwrights and their plays modern plays because of certain commonalities exhibited

by them. This unit will try to address such commonalities and trace the intellectual and technical relationships shared by these playwrights. While this unit offers the basic introductory information about modern drama in Europe, it is advisable that the learner read more to expand his/her knowledge. It is important to read the prescribed plays by situating them in the historical contexts. Therefore, the learners must read more about the founding movements and socio-political-cultural contexts of the plays and the playwrights.

1.3 THE EMERGENCE OF MODERN EUROPEAN DRAMA

Modern drama, as a pan-European and North American theatrical practice, had its genesis somewhere around the last few decades of the 19th century. The literary as well as the socio-political environment of the 19th century is characterised by a sense of discontent with socio-cultural and literary ideals, restless criticism and an intense probing into the disturbances and irregularities in the modern world. This ideological and social turmoil of the time did influence pioneers of the modern theatre like Henrik Ibsen, Hauptman or Gorki, Chekhov or Shaw. The fellow and follower dramatists of these pioneers of modern drama in Europe continued with the tradition of protest and revolt and the diversity of experimentations in their pursuit of the dramatic art. The modern theatre, as such, is an enormous enterprise strongly characterised by diversity of themes and techniques as well as a good variety of genres. Different literary movements and approaches like Realism and Naturalism, Symbolism, Expressionism and Impressionism, Existentialism, Poetic drama, and many other styles have been part of modern theatre. Besides, many plays exhibit a complex intertwining of many different theatrical styles as well as theoretical approaches. Thus, it is difficult to find a play dealing with pure Realism, or stark Symbolism, or pure Expressionism. Whereas Ibsen shows kinship with Realism and Symbolism, Eugene O'Neill's adheres to Realism and Expressionism, and Strindberg appears to be both naturalist and expressionist. American dramatist Tennessee Williams employs several

Brechtian techniques including the alienation effect; Weiss incorporates the Artaudian idea of cruelty within the Brechtian framework of Epic theatre; while Pirandello's attempt at Symbolism makes him a forerunner of the theatre of the Absurd. Theatre in the early 19th century Europe liberated itself from the conventional norms in order to accommodate newer forms of technical and theoretical engagements. These experimentations touched and tested everything that is part of stage production, i.e. acting, music, dance, scenic design, stage lighting, costume design and architecture. Even the interrelationship between the audience and actors present in the theatre underwent varying combinations and alterations.

Modern drama saw its beginning with the advent of realistic drama and realist stage production under the initiatives of Henrik Ibsen, Emile Zola, Bernard Shaw, and Konstantin Stanislavsky. The emergence of realistic techniques of acting and stage performance marks the first phase of modernism in drama. It got extended to a series of interweaving of strands that may be called Ibsenism, Wagnerism, Realism and Symbolism, objective Naturalism as well as subjective anti-Naturalism etc. Subjective anti-Naturalism can later be noticed in Expressionism while objective anti-Naturalism can later be seen in Erwin Piscator and Bertolt Brecht's Epic theatre.

The first guiding force of modern drama was the idea of freedom from the neoclassicist belief that theatre should adhere to certain fixed rules. The modernist revolt against the neoclassical ideals ensured the loss of importance of decorum, questioning of the idea that tragedy deals with the fate of princes and nobles, as well as negated the primacy of the three unities. Victor Hugo's negation of form, subject and style, in the dramatization of reality in his romantic play *Hernani* marks an important milestone in the history of modern drama. This play declares the end of control of the drama by fixed rules, including the absolute separation of comedy and tragedy. He is an inspiration for dramatists to experiment with any kind of material on stage and to employ any kind of form and style. This sense of freedom inspired the Naturalism of Zola or critical Realism of Ibsen or Expressionism of Strindberg. Zola, being inspired by the clinical method of experimental

biology, looked at art as a clinical demonstration of human problems. His parallelism between art and science promoted significant expansion of subject matter of literature and styles and techniques in both fiction and drama.

The reformers of modern drama in Germany were influenced by Zolas's objectives. Duke George II of Saxe-Meiningen reshaped German stage by stressing on scenic design, setting and costume. The stage, and the walls of the closed room conveyed the illusion of reality; the authenticity of stage props add to the air of truthfulness. Thus, the stage has been promoted from a mere platform of acting to a site of meaning. Such a change marks a fundamental development of the modern drama. Zola's Naturalism directly influenced Andre Antoine's *Theatre libre, which* dealt with horrific and astonishing effects in drama. On the other hand, the plays of Strindberg and Hauptmann established that Naturalism could transcend the limits of documentary Realism and even embrace symbolic and psychological techniques. The same spirit can be noticed in Stanislavsky, who founded Moscow Art Theatre to promote realist theatrical acting techniques. Chekhov came out as an extension of these precepts of Stanislavsky.

In the early 20th century, with the growing popularity of psychological studies, Realism and Naturalism got integrated with Psychoanalysis. The theatrical works of Ibsen and Strindberg provide significant reflection of this inclination. The playwrights like Ibsen and Strindberg, Chekhov and Shaw, Gorki and O'Casey, Miller and Eugene O'Neill have combined psychological Realism with the anatomy of the motives and values of the whole society in their plays. The importance on technical brilliance by Adolph Appia, the incorporation of the sense of social purpose in the movements like Impressionism and Expressionism, the renewed claims that the stage is a site for exploring and experimenting with fresh forms and ideologies, resulted in an incredible extension of the possibilities of theatre. Subjects and things never discussed earlier were being vehemently brought to the theatrical text. The dramatists from England fully participated in these experimentations, especially after the World Wars. Dramatists like James Birdie, J. B. Priestly, T. S. Eliot, Christopher Frye, Noel Coward, and Bernard

Shaw produced some very effective plays written in the realistic mode.

Apart from Realism and Naturalism, which revitalised the dramatic traditions all through Europe, modern drama opened the door for many other different approaches to drama. Symbolism opened the stage for the rhythmic and introspective language of poetry. The embellishments of the stage were imbibed with symbolic meanings. Adolph Appia, Gordan Craig, and Meyerhold, and the other scene designers brought about the complex union of the art. In order to express and sustain and enhance emotions in a play; Wagner drew upon the flexible properties of light and color in the expressions of feelings and emotions. Symbolism shaped the plays of Hauptmann, Strindberg, Claudel, Garcia Lorca, Ghelderode and many other dramatists across Europe. The surrealist fantasies of Garcia Lorca, the grotesque farce of Ghelderode and even the repetitions and pauses in the "static drama" of Samuel Beckett–all depended on symbolist evocations.

Italian playwright Luigi Pirandello revitalised the art of elaborate pretence and make-believe in his works. His successors, who were highly animated by the playfulness of Dadaism and Surrealism, reinvented elasticity in the dramatic form. In the works of Cocteau, Giraudoux, Wilder, Brecht, the fourth-wall of the realistic convention was vehemently rejected. In their hands, drama remained no longer the mirror image of real life; it was something more than common reality. The plays were performed in such a manner that the audience does not forget the performativity of the play and does not mistake the play to be reality. The advent of Expressionism is the outcome of all these experimental techniques whereby the playwrights look into the mind of the character, expose the inner man, through different modes of subjective experience. In his 'dream plays', Strindberg virtually creates a new dramatic dimension. The depiction of external reality coupled with the illogical and frenzied behaviour of the hidden self-results in the theatre of weird angularity and distortion. Fragmented episodes replaced the linear narrative. The idea of heroism and centrality of the single character gave way to multiple and depersonalised abstractions. With the use of epigrammatic and ironic language, the dialogues become nervous and explosive, resulting in piercing soliloquies and bizarre pantomime.

The two World Wars resulted in the development of a sense of anarchy and distrust of readymade ideologies in literature as well as in the theatre. The revival of the grotesque in modern drama indicates the dissolution of moral and spiritual values and norms of the contemporary times. The grotesque and bizarre and the irrational have found their new rational in the Surrealist and Existentialist representation of the crisis of modern man. Here begins the 'Theatre of the Absurd'–a term coined by a Hungarian author and critic Martin Esslin. The playwrights of 'the theatre of the Absurd' like Beckett, Adamov, Pinter, Genet, Ionesco and others share a common view that man inhabits a universe which is devoid of any reason and logic. Man's existence is purposeless, obscure and catastrophic. The modern drama effectively combines different literary movements like Realism and Naturalism, Symbolism and Expressionism, Surrealism and Existentialism to interpret human life in a period torn apart by disillusionment and disintegration in moral and spiritual values.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q 1: What were the factors that influenced the modern playwrights?

Q 2: Trace the growth and development of modern drama in Europe.

Q 3: How did the modernist playwrights revolt against Neoclassicism?

Q 4: How did the "Theatre of the Absurd" come into existence?

1.4 IMPORTANT CONTINENTAL MOVEMENTS

The following is an attempt at explaining the various strands of modern drama in some detail.

Naturalism:

Naturalism can be considered a kind of umbrella term used for various theatrical experimentations undertaken by masters like André Antoine, J. T. Grenin, Otto Brahm, Konstantin Stanislavsky among many others. André Antoine's 'Theatre Libre' in Paris, J. T. Grein's Independent

Theatre in London, Otto Brahm's Freie Bühne of Berlin, and Konstantin Stanislavsky's Moscow Art Theatre along with several other independent theatres promoted modern playwrights to perform works outside of commercial theatres. Originated in the 1860s France, as a movement influenced by science, Naturalism viewed social behaviour of men as the product of biological factors. It opposed Romanticism's interest in the expression of human emotion and personal experience. Naturalism drew its inspiration from Darwin's theories of the origin, development of species, their struggle for survival, the process of natural selection, and their dependence on the environment. As such, Naturalism's approach to human experiences and relations appears very clinical in nature. Norwegian playwright Henrik Ibsen is a major exponent of this movement.

Naturalist theatre gave importance to the use of realistic props and realistic acting on stage. Konstantin Stanislavsky was highly interested in realistic acting. For the performance, the Norwegian dramatist Ibsen even put on stage Norwegian furniture in order to help actors merge with their roles. Changes in ensemble acting and vivid crowd scenes were introduced by Georg II, the Duke of Saxe-Meiningen (1826–1914). Naturalism's emphasis on realistic acting fuelled the emergence of a band of modern actresses playing daring female roles. Actresses like Eleanora Duse, Elizabeth Robins, and Eva Le Gallienne often developed their signature styles and roles from women-centric plays like that of Ibsen's.

Realism:

As a literary and artistic movement, Realism attempts to truthfully represent subject matter, without any artificiality and avoiding other artistic conventions or the use of exotic and supernatural elements. As a theatrical movement, Realism is often associated with the representation of the social and psychological problems of ordinary life. It has to be noted here that the line of distinction between Naturalism and Realism in theatre is very narrow and they are often overlapping in their techniques and motives. The Influence of the ideas of Sigmund Freud, Charles Darwin and others inspired many artists to theatre from a psychological point of view that focused on the inner dynamics of the characters onstage. Beginning with the Russian

playwrights like Ivan Turgenev, Alexander Ostrovsky and Leo Tolstoy, Realism found avid expressions in the works of Emile Zola in France and Henrik Ibsen in Norway in the late 19th Century. With the emergence of writers like George Bernard Shaw and Edward Albee, Realism dominated most of the theatrical productions of the 20th century in Britain and North America.

In Russia, with the establishment of the Moscow Art Theatre in 1898, Realism found its first grips much earlier than the rest of the world. The works of Konstantin Stanislavski and Vladimir Nemirovich-Danchenko, attempted to reform the Russian stage which was hitherto been dominated by melodrama. Drawing inspiration from André Antoine's Théâtre Libre and other theatre activists, they opened a realistic theatre company, which later became internationally renowned. The production of Anton Chekhov's *The Seagull* in 1898, where Stanislavski played the role of Trigorin, was hailed by the audience and critics for its fidelity in the delicate representation of everyday life, its intimate and ensemble acting, and the resonance of its mood of despondent uncertainty with the psychological disposition of the Russian intelligentsia of the time. The company successfully produced many other plays of Chekhov along with Ibsen and Shakespeare. Stanislavski developed a unified system of acting whereby he trained actors to create reliable characterisations for their performances. This system, which he revised throughout his life, was partially founded on the idea of emotional memory; while performing, the actor focuses internally on the character's emotions. Many connected areas like concentration, voice modulation, physical appearance and skills, emotional memory, observation, etc. were part of this approach. His system became very popular in Russia as well as in the U.S. In the U.S., experimentations with his method began in the second decade of the 20th century and many theatre schools and professional companies have continued it throughout the century.

Symbolism:

With Symbolism, modern drama focused on its evocative and suggestive nature, and it brought to the stage rhythmic, playful and introspective language of poetry. Symbolism did not pay attention to the

accuracy of props, unlike the Naturalist or Realist trends, and reduced the embellishments on the stage to a few draperies or a few curtains of certain specific colours or even to some symbolic gestures. It emphasised mysticism, subjectivity, and suggestion instead of direct, common speech. In the Symbolist movement, the central tendency of dramatic expression was to de-theatricalise the theatre. The use of language and vocabulary also underwent much experimentation. The Symbolist theatrical stage often transformed itself into a complex site of different forms of arts. For expressing the central themes and essence of the play, and to sustain and enhance particular emotions, dramatists like Adolph Appia, Gordan Craig, and Meyerhold, and many others concentrated on the scene design of their plays. Thus, most of their stage designs showed some kind of complex unions of different art forms. Similarly, Wagner experimented with the flexible properties of light and color in is plays. Stages such as Aurélien Lugné-Poe's Theatre de l'OEuvre in Paris championed simple sets over the Naturalists' cluttered stages while Edward Gordon Craig's abstract sets in London parallel Symbolist settings.

The symbolist theatre gave a new emphasis to the creation of new atmosphere and mood in modern drama. Dramatists like Hauptmann, Strindberg, Claudel, Garcia Lorca, Ghelderode and many others made extensive use of symbols throughout their dramatic careers. Symbolism, as a theatrical movement, was associated with Maurice Maeterlinck (1862–1949) of Belgium, Madame Rachilde (1860–1953) of France and William Butler Yeats (1865–1939) of Ireland. The surrealist fantasies in Lorca's plays or the grotesque farce in Ghelderode's plays or even the repetitions and pauses in Samuel Beckett's plays were highly symbolic in nature. Symbolism also drew inspiration from the literary and artistic movement of Dadaism and Surrealism. As an opposition to Naturalism and Realism, Symbolism demanded that drama is not merely a copy of real life, it is something more than what is common and mundane. Symbolist plays are performed in such a manner that the audience has to think beyond what is seen or heard on the stage.

The Avant-Garde:

The term Avant-Grade, also known as Experimental Theatre, loosely connects many experimental approaches to the modern theatre since the last part of the 19th century. This umbrella term covers a great number of theatrical experimentations over a vast period. As part of the movement called 'Futurism' under the leadership of F. T. Marinetti (1876–1944) in Italy, human characters were removed from theatre and puppets, machines, and inanimate objects were placed on stage. In Dadaism, which flourished in the Cabaret Voltaire in Zürich during World War I, under the leadership of Romanian Tristan Tzara (1896–1963), nonsense poems, musical pieces were produced and masked performances were made on stage. Surrealism focused on Sigmund Freud's psychoanalytical and dream theories. *King Ubu* (1896) by Alfred Jarry became an iconic surrealist play. Antonin Artaud (1894–1948) from France was one of the most influential dramatists of Surrealism. He created a Theatre of Cruelty – a primal theatre inspired by ancient rituals. Artaud's *The Theatre and Its Double* (1938) discusses plague, primitive myths, and Balinese "animated hieroglyphics" in the context of curing the decadence of modern life. The avant-garde was also associated with progressive art, particularly related to socialism and anarchism. The Futurists in Italy developed association with Fascism, which functions on extreme nationalism and advocates for war. The Russian futurists participated in the Russian October Revolution of 1917 as socialists. On the other hand, the Dadaists opposed war and embraced socialism in order to destroy class-based societies. The Surrealists often expressed their inclination for the communist parties.

German playwright Bertolt Brecht (1898–1956) is the most influential political playwright of the avant-garde movements. With a strong Marxist undercurrent of thought, he experimented with both themes or contents and style of his productions and developed Epic Theatre. Epic Theatre uses a technique that interrupts the flow of plot and acting, and transforms the audience into critics rather than mere observers of the spectacle on stage. From Erwin Piscator, Bertolt Brecht learnt the value of using film and other art forms in theatre. His experimentations later led to the collaborative

performances on the theatre stage.

Expressionism:

Expressionism was a byproduct of the different types of experimental techniques employed by the Dadaists, Surrealists as well as the larger group of Symbolists. In Expressionism, the playwrights attempt to look into the mind of the character and discover the inner workings of the person. It takes recourse to the representation of hallucinations, dreams and other modes of subjective experiences. Strindberg's 'dream plays' are some important exponents of this technique as they have developed a whole new dimension of modern drama. Expressionism relies on the depiction of external reality coupled with the illogical and frenzied behavior of the hidden self, which results in the development of an environment of weird angularity and distortion. Linear narrative is replaced by fragmented episodes; centrality of the protagonist is replaced by the multiple and depersonalised abstractions; normal conversation is replaced by epigrammatic and ironic language delivering nervous and explosive dialogues.

Theatre and Cultural Renewal: Ireland

The mass appeal of theatre was used by dramatists for different political, cultural and nationalistic purposes. In Ireland, Abbey Theatre in Dublin, under the leadership of Lady Augusta Gregory and John Millington Synge (1871–1909), focused on establishing cultural independence from England. Lady Gregory emphasised using Irish language instead of theatrical productions in Ireland. John Millington Synge criticised and subverted the popular romanticised views of the Irish peasantry. His *Playboy of the Western World* created havoc in theatres. W. B. Yeats also participated as a poet and playwright in this Irish nationalist movement.

The Theatre of the Absurd:

Martin Esslin devised and coined the term 'Theatre of the Absurd' to a section of plays written in the 1950s and 1960s. This theatre derived from French philosopher Albert Camus' essay "The Myth of Sisyphus", claims that existence is meaningless and absurd; it ends in "casual slaughter". Playwrights like Samuel Beckett, Arthur Adamov, Harold Pinter, Edward

Albee, Jean Genet, Eugene Ionesco produced plays that questioned the very meaning of man's existence. Most of their plays written in this theatre form share a similar view that man lives in a universe, which is empty of reason and logic. Man's existence is purposeless, it ends purposeless and throughout his existence, he remains confused, spiritually disturbed and obscurely threatened. The essential motive of the 'Theatre of the Absurd' is the reflection of the metaphysical anguish of the contemporary times. In the Post-war modern period, the looming sense of futility and emptiness reflected in the mechanical nature of human beings led them question the purpose of their living. In such a world devoid of reason and logic, man feels isolated as the established values of society, culture, religion fall apart. The Absurd theatre is a strategy to come to terms with that universe.

Absurd writing, as a literary tradition, finds its roots in the Avant Garde experiments in art and literature in 1920s. The Second World War left humanity with the shocking experiences of the disgust, developed with the devaluing of morals, crisis of religious faith, disregard for the socio-cultural conventions and triviality of human life. It can also be perceived as an effort to restore the significance of myths and traditions to the contemporary age by making men conscious of his true condition in this alienated world. The Absurd theatre achieves this by startling human beings out of their mechanical and complacent reality. The authors of the Absurd plays debunked the old forms and standards that cease to be conclusive and lost their validity. The Absurd Theatre is thus an anti-theatre, which rises against the conventional theatre. It is surreal, illogical and without plot or necessary conflict. The dialogues seem unrelated and nonsensical and defy comprehension. Language loses its functionality; it is inadequate instrument of communication and is reduced to meaningless exchanges. 'Silence' as also used by the dramatists as an effective technique to present the unsolved mysteries of human condition. The unsaid meaning is delivered through ellipses, gaps, and half-finished sentences. Disrupting logic and breaking language to fragments, Absurd drama strives to express its sense of the senselessness of the human condition and the inadequacy of the rational structures in understanding life.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q 5: Write a note on the basic thematic concerns of the Naturalist theatre.

Q 6: What is understood by the term 'Theatre of the Absurd'?

Q 7: What are the basis characteristics of 'Epic Theatre'?

1.5 IMPORTANT THEORISTS/PRACTITIONERS OF MODERN DRAMA

In this section, we shall discuss some of the important theorists and practitioners of Modern drama.

Henrik Ibsen

The Norwegian playwright Henrik Ibsen (1828-1906) was the most important pioneering figure of modern drama in Europe. Ibsen emerged as a playwright at a time when Europe was undergoing a spell of drought in the field of successful drama. In Britain, the 19th century was a very prolific period for English literature in terms of poetry, novels and non-fiction; but it was equally barren in the field of drama. Ibsen, hailing from Norway, which did not have any remarkable dramatic tradition, could break that spell of drought and inspired a wave of new writers to experiment with the dramatic form. Ibsen refused to follow the conventional rules of theatre at the time and was determined to forge his own style of drama. There was a growing sense of revolt against the frivolous entertainment on mainstream stages of his time and he could sense the demand by the new intelligentsia for a realistic, serious "thinking" theatre. Ibsen's realist plays, such as *A Doll's House*, *Ghosts*, *Wild Duck*, and *An Enemy of the People*, caused storm in the theatres ad they became highly popular throughout Europe. The success of Ibsen's plays fuelled the formation of new theatres in major cultural capitals like London, Paris and Berlin. Modern theatre soon became an integral part of modern culture in Europe.

Ibsen deviated from the conventional theatrical norms in different ways. He succeeded in innovating three key ingredients – the use of colloquial dialogue, objectivity, and tightness of plot – that helped him in

establishing his own signature in the field of drama. His audience could recognise and relate to the settings and props he used on the stage, and identify themselves with his characters and narratives. This Realism functioned as the decisive factor behind the success of his plays. Ibsen could successfully rouse the intelligentsia's discomfort by confronting them with the social hypocrisies, the conflict between conventional moral values and the changing values in the context of the world after Darwin. The changing human relations in the industrial-capitalist society are vehemently tested in his plays.

His production of *A Doll's House* in 1879 left the theatergoers and critics with tremendous amount of shock and bewilderment because of it subversion of well-established conventions of family relations as well as plot designs. In many cities, the production of the play roused public anger and even he was compelled to revise his ending scene of the play. His *Ghosts* also created disgust among the audience as it exposed the hypocrisies hidden within the polite faces of the middle class civic society. *Ghosts*, with a plot touching upon venereal disease and incestuous relationships, were widely banned in many cities. *Hedda Gabler*, *An Enemy of the People* in 1882 also spoke of the darker aspects of the contemporary society. In his next few plays, *The Wild Duck* (1884), *Rosmersholm* (1887), and *The Lady from the Sea* (1888), Ibsen delved into darker and more psychologically complex depictions of human relations and their social existence.

Federico Garcia Lorca:

The celebrated Spanish playwright Federico Garcia Lorca (1898-1936) holds a unique place among the greatest dramatists of the 20th century. As a poet and dramatist, he tried to infuse elements of folktale, folk songs into the fabric of the modern times. However, he started his career and also became popular as a poet. His plays written during the last few years of his life made him the most significant voice from Spain in modern drama. Most of his plays portray a dreamlike experience soaked in the mystic Andalusian folklores. His use of bold, profound metaphors and culturally rooted symbols along with the use of music and dance sequences create in his plays a

surrealist environment.

With his first Andalusian tragedy *Blood Wedding* (1933), which is an expressionist work that recalls ancient Greek, Renaissance, and Baroque sources, Lorca achieved his first major theatrical success. It is followed by his second Andalucian tragedy, *Yerma* (1934). These plays, including other popular plays like *The House of Bernarda Alba* (1936) are basically rural plays, and they draw on classical forms and archetypal characters moulded to a Spanish rural milieu. During the very short life and career, Lorca built a reputation both at home and abroad as a rising socialist, who believed that the purpose of theatre was to question and challenge societal norms. His political associations got reflected very subtly in the reformative, revolt motifs of his plays. Such political affinities may be considered the causes of his mysterious assassination at a very young age during the Spanish Civil War.

Luigi Pirandello:

The Italian playwright Luigi Pirandello (1867-1935), is counted among the peer group of modern European dramatists. Pirandello did not adhere to any one exclusive theatre technique, but his works incorporate elements of Naturalism and Futurism. He was associated with an Italian theatre company through the *teatro del Grotesco* movement, the theatre that adopts the ancient native Italian tradition of *Commedia Dell'arte.* This association provided him with all necessary environments for his experimentations. Among his other plays, *Six Characters in Search of an Author* is the most prominent one.

Pirandello made significant use of puppet-like characters in his plays that allowed him to infuse both reality and fantasy. The puppet nature of the characters in h dramatic art provided him with a means of manipulation, which is essential to the realization of fantasies. For this, he had to depend on certain highly skilled methods of acting, including the capacity for improvisation, which was a central method of Commedia Dell'arte. The conflict between life and mask, broken personalities and disjuncted psyches become the hallmark of the plays of Pirandello. He was dissatisfied with the conventional theatricality because he felt that life, which is constantly changing, is distorted and killed when presented on the stage. He believed

that human motives could not be reduced to simple formula; therefore, he wanted all drama to be as fragmentary as life itself. His dramatic technique comprises his command over art of compression, dexterity in the portrayal of characters and sudden climax. His language is often seen fractured. His powerful artistry along with his concepts and attitudes kept his work alive and transformed it into drama.

Bertolt Brecht:

Bertolt Brecht (1896-1956) is considered one of the most important dramatists of the 20th century because of his experiments with the theatrical media as a tool for spreading social and political messages. He appeared on the scene with an entirely new dramaturgic concept, alienating empathy from the stage, destroying the forth wall convention to demonstrate his ideologies. He disregarded emotional identification and purgation on the ground that a play should perturb viewers, prompt their critical faculties, unnerve and jolt them out of complacency. He argues in his article 'On the Experimental Theatre' that the function of the conventional theatre was morally and intellectually degrading because, "the more the public was emotionally affected, the less capable it was of learning".

He formulated what became popular as 'Epic Theatre' whose aim is to arouse the attention of the spectator into the irregularities surrounding them and look beyond the habitual way of looking at a thing. Epic theatre tries to disrupt the difference between the stage and the audience and still unite them in mutual enjoyment Brecht frequently opposed the Naturalistic theatre and believed that the theatre should give up its attempt at portrayal of truth on stage. For him it was important for theatres to create a kind of distancing – a certain degree of separate existence from what was happening on the stage so that the spectators would be able to enter into an unusual dramatic experience and would be able to grasp things rather than be mastered by them. This distancing is attained by what the 'alienation effect' or 'verfremdungseffekt', as Brecht calls it. The reaction of the audience out of this alienation effect forms the foundation of Epic theatre. The plays are woven in contrasting episodes juxtaposed with one another. This structure helps the spectators to see, ponder and criticise the play. Placards are

used to display the theme on curtains. Music, songs interludes are some other alienating devices employed by Brecht. Some of the significant plays of Brecht are *The Threepenny Opera*, *Life of Galileo*, *Mother Courage and Her Children, The Good Person of Szechwan, The Caucassian Chalk Circle, The Resistable Rise of Arturo Ui.* Among them, *Mother Courage and Her Children* is one of the most popular and highly staged plays of the modern times.

Eugene Ionesco:

Eugene Ionesco (1909 - 1994), is a Romanian-born French dramatist who is basically known for his expressions of the existential questions of the modern man. His one-act "antiplay" *La Cantatrice Chauve* (1949) or *The Bald Soprano* inspired a revolution in dramatic themes and techniques and inaugurated the 'Theatre of the Absurd'. In the most famous scene of *The Bald Suprano*, two strangers while exchanging banalities about the weather, where they live, and how many children they have, suddenly arrive at the astonishing discovery that they are indeed husband and wife. Such a scene is one among the series of scenes where Ionesco deals with the recurrent themes of self-estrangement and the difficulty of communication at the modern times. Ionesco developed the 'antilogical' ideas that he presented in *The Bald Soprano* in a number of plays written recurrently. Plays like *La Leçon* (1951; *The Lesson*), *Les Chaises* (1952; *The Chairs*), and *Le Nouveau Locataire* (1955; *The New Tenant*) were expressive of his recurrent existential questions about being, living, and the fear and horror of death. In *The Lesson*, a timid professor uses the meaning he assigns to words to establish tyrannical dominance over an eager female pupil. In *The Chairs*, an elderly couple gathers empty chairs and awaits the arrival of an audience to hear the old man's last message. Giving the responsibility to speak on his behalf, the old man and his wife commit a double suicide. However, the orator turns out to be dumb can speak only gibberish.

His longer plays like *Amédée* (1954), *Tueur sans gages* (1959; *The Killer*), and *Le Rhinocéros* (1959; *Rhinoceros*) lack the dramatic unity he achieved in his one-act plays. His other important works include *Le Roi se meurt* (1962; *Exit the King*), *Le Piéton de l'air* (1963; *A Stroll in the Air*), *La*

Soif et la faim (1966; *Thirst and Hunger*), *Jeux de massacre* (1970; *Killing Game*); *Macbett* (1972), which is a retelling of Shakespeare's Macbeth, and *Ce formidable bordel* (1973; *A Hell of a Mess*). Among these, *Rhinoceros*, a play about totalitarianism, is considered Ionesco's most popular work.

Ionesco's plays are important because of the fact that they have popularised a wide variety of nonrepresentational and surrealistic among audiences conditioned to a Naturalistic convention in the theatre. His tragicomic farces dramatise the absurdity of bourgeois life, the meaninglessness of social conventions, and the futile and mechanical nature of modern civilization. His plays build on bizarrely illogical or fantastic situations using such devices as the humorous multiplication of objects on stage until they overwhelm the actors. The clichés and tedious maxims of polite conversation surface in improbable or inappropriate contexts to expose the deadening futility of most human communication. Ionesco's later works show less concern with witty intellectual paradox and more with dreams, visions, and exploration of the subconscious.

Samuel Beckett:

Samuel Beckett (1906-1989), who wrote in both French and English, is perhaps best known for his plays, especially *En attendant Godot* (1952; *Waiting for Godot*). His most well known works, written between the Second World War and the 1960s were written in French. Beckett's plays revolted against the traditional norms with conventional plot and time and place references. He tried to concentrate on the essential elements of the human condition in dark humorous ways. As a practitioner of the "Theatre of the Absurd", his plays focus on human despair and the will to survive in a hopeless world that equally unintelligible. Bceckett's rise to world fame began with the amazing success of *Waiting for Godot* at the small Théâtre de Babylone in Paris, in January 1953 and soon he became renowned as an absurd playwright.

Beckett's works are concerned primarily with the morbidity, meaninglessness and purposelessness of human existence. He plays test human beings in extreme situations in order to examine the essential aspects

of human experience. The subject matter of so much of the world's literature – the social relations between individuals, their manners and possessions, their struggles for rank and position, or the conquest of sexual objects – appeared to Beckett as mere external trappings of existence. These are the accidental and superficial aspects that mask the basic problems and the basic anguish of the human condition. The basic problems for human beings are the challenges of understanding life, understanding being, understanding the nature of being, understanding the true nature of our self – the 'I'.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q 8: In what way, did Henrik Ibsen deviate from conventional theatrical representation?

Q 9: Explain briefly Samuel Beckett's contribution to modernist theatre.



1.6 LET US SUM UP

At the end of this unit, we have come across some basic information about the growth and development of modern drama in Europe, the important dramatic movements led by some important personalities associated with drama in Europe. Modern drama is a very dynamic field of thematic and technical experimentations performed by dramatists hailing from different parts of Europe during a period spanning from the middle of the 19th century the latter half of the 20th century. Some of the important movements in modern drama include Naturalism, Realism, Symbolism, Expressionism, Theatre of the Absurd, Political Theatre etc. Ibsen is considered the father of modern drama. Some of the important playwrights of the modern times include names like G. B. Shaw, Garcia Lorca, J. M. Synge, W. B. Yeats, Anton Chekov, Luigi Pirandello, Bertolt Brecht, Eugene Ionesco, Samuel Beckett, Harold Pinter and so on.



1.7 FURTHER READING

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1.8 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS (HINTS ONLY)

Ans to Q 1: The 19th century sense of discontent with socio-cultural and literary ideals… … restless criticism and an intense probing into the disturbances and irregularities in the modern world… …the ideological and social turmoil of the time influenced the pioneers of the modern theatre.

Ans to Q 2: Read carefully about the basic premises of Naturalism, Realism, Symbolism, Expressionism, Absurd and Epic theatre as reflections of the problems faced by modern human beings in order to address this question.

Ans to Q 3: They declared the end of control of the drama by fixed rules, including the absolute separation of comedy and tragedy… …experiment with any kind of material on stage and employment if different kinds of form and style… …the loss of the importance of decorum, questioning of the idea that tragedy deals with the fate of princes and nobles… …negation of classical three unities.

Ans to Q 4: The two World Wars caused a sense of anarchy and distrust of readymade ideologies… …the revival of the grotesque in modern drama indicating the dissolution of moral and spiritual values and norms… …theatre of the Absurd share a common view that man inhabits a universe which is devoid of any reason and logic… …man's existence is purposeless, obscure and catastrophic.

Ans to Q 5: Post-Darwin social context… …industrial, urban, middle class… …thinking intellectuals… …problems inherent in polite societies… …social hypocrisy… …faithful image of society… …Ibsen's plays.

Ans to Q 6: Martin Esslin… … "Myth of Sisyphus"… …meaning of being… …purpose of life – meaninglessness, purposelessness… …obscure existence – fear, angst… …Beckett, Ionesco, Pinter.

Ans to Q 7: Brecht's alienation effect… …loose plot structure… …no forth wall… …audience as participant and critic… …awareness about invisible problems and realities.

Ans to Q 8: Ibsen introduced three key ingredients–the use of colloquial dialogue, objectivity, and tightness of plot… …audience could recognise and relate to the settings and props he used on the stage… …identify themselves with his characters and narratives… …exposed social hypocrisies, the conflict between conventional moral values and the changing values in the context of the world after Darwin.

Ans to Q 9: Beckett's plays revolted against the traditional norms with conventional plot and time and place references… … presented the

essential elements of the human condition in dark humorous ways…
…his 'absurd' plays focus on human despair and the will to survive in a hopeless world that equally unintelligible.



1.9 POSSIBLE QUESTIONS

Q 1. Explore the socio-cultural contexts behind the development of Naturalist theatre in Europe.

Q 2. Write a detailed note on the themes and techniques of the plays of Henrik Ibsen.

Q 3. Do you think that theatre can be used as a political tool? Discuss with reference to the Irish nationalist theatre and Brecht's epic theatre.

Q 4. What are the thematic concerns of the 'Theatre of the absurd'? How do the absurd playwrights experiment with plot and the stage in order to deal with the philosophical questions? Discuss.

Q 5. Write a detailed note on the theatrical experimentations of Luigi Pirandello with reference to the plays you have read.

Q 6. Discuss the significance of cultural symbols in Lorca's plays.

Q 7. Explore how different movements in modern drama are interconnected.

Q 8. How have the movements in art and literature influenced modern European drama? Discuss in detail.

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UNIT 2: GEORGE BERNARD SHAW: *CANDIDA* (PART I)

UNIT STRUCTURE

2.1 Learning Objectives

2.2 Introduction

2.3 George Bernard Shaw: The Playwright

2.3.1 His Life

2.3.2 His Dramatic Career

2.4 Sources of the Play *Candida*

2.5 Critical Reception of Shaw

2.6 Let Us Sum Up

2.7 Further Reading

2.8 Answers to Check Your Progress (Hints Only)

2.9 Possible Questions

2.1 LEARNING OBJECTIVES

After going through this unit, you will be able to

- discuss the life and works of the playwright George Bernard Shaw
- assess George Bernard Shaw's contribution to Modern Drama
- trace the sources of the play *Candida*
- make a critical assessment of Bernard Shaw as a modern playwright.

2.2 INTRODUCTION

This unit shall introduce you to the Irish playwright, critic, and pamphleteer George Bernard Shaw. Shaw produced more than fifty-two plays, three volumes of music and drama criticism, and one major volume of socialist commentary. Shaw is generally considered the greatest dramatist to write in the English language since William Shakespeare. Following the example of Henrik Ibsen, he succeeded in revolutionising the English stage, disposing of the romantic conventions and devices of the "well-made" play, and instituting a theatre of ideas grounded in realism. During his lifetime,

he was equally famous as an iconoclastic and outspoken public figure. Essentially a shy man, Shaw created the public persona of G. B. S.– showman, satirist, pundit, and intellectual jester, who challenged established political and social beliefs. Through this unit, you will be able to grasp certain important ideas regarding Shaw the person and the Shaw the playwright.

2.3 GEORGE BERNARD SHAW: THE PLAYWRIGHT

It is important for you to know about the life and works of George Bernard Shaw. This section offers a broad understanding of the playwright, and, as is expected, helps steer your interest in the play.

2.3.1 His Life

George Bernard Shaw (1856-1950) was born in Dublin as the third and the youngest child to George Carr Shaw, a civil clerk turned wholesale corn merchant and Lucinda Elizabeth Gurly, a music teacher and singer. The family was of Anglo-Irish heritage, and was Protestant by religion. Shaw had a very troubled childhood owing to his father's drinking habits, and even his mother, after her marriage to George Carr Shaw, was disowned by her family. Shaw and his two sisters were mostly brought up by neglecting servants. When he was sixteen, his mother and sisters, Elinor Agnes and Lucinda Frances had left Dublin to live permanently in London. He attended several schools in Dublin but had a dislike for formal education, which he expressed later in a polemical essay "Treatise on Parents and Children". Even as he was reluctant towards learning, he attended the Central Model School and Wesley College in Dublin. He briefly ended his education at the Dublin English Scientific and Commercial Day School. It was only in his later years that Shaw revealed how he was ostracised by Protestant boys for having attended Central Model Boy's School with Catholic students, "a secret kept for 80 years." Left to be with his father, he started work at the age of 15, as an office boy and later a junior clerk in a firm of estate agents in Dublin for five years.

In the year 1876, fearing that he would never achieve his ambitions as a musician or a painter, he left Ireland to join his mother in London. There he first began work as a music critic in a weekly paper in which he was successful and also began freelancing in writing. In London, he resided with his mother's partner George John Vandeleur Lee who organised operas and concerts and used Shaw's musical talents. Shaw got from his mother the love for music, which became useful for him in London. He became a music critic on the *Star,* a London evening newspaper. He often visited public libraries and particularly the reading room at the British Museum. It was in his reading room that he began experimenting with the form of novel and wrote several novels in between the years 1880 to 1883 but they were not well received by publishers.

From the kind of reading he spent his time with, Shaw was inspired to become a member of the Fabian Society a new socialist organization established in 1884 and became a dedicated Socialist. In London, he joined several debating team in his bid to fight his self-consciousness and following poet P. B. Shelley's example, he turned into a vegetarian. After he heard the American economist Henry George speak, he became a socialist and when he met his Fabian friends Beatrice and Sidney Webb, he joined the Fabian Society. He read Karl Marx's *Das Kapital* to understand socialism in depth and to expand his knowledge.



LET US KNOW

Fabian Society: A British socialist organisation whose purpose was to advance the principles of socialism via gradualist and reformist, rather than revolutionary, means. It is best known for its initial groundbreaking work beginning late in the 19th century and continuing up to World War I. The society laid many of the foundations of the Labour Party and subsequently affected the policies of states emerging from the decolonisation of the British Empire, especially in India.

Shaw was more for a moderate understanding of socialism and was even more convinced of it when he witnessed the violence of **Bloody Sunday** on November 13, 1887, during which the police troops used force to break up the socialist protests in London. This event made him realise that force was indeed ineffective and he felt that it was more important to educate others in Socialist thoughts. During this time, he came to be well received in the literary circles with his publication of *The Quintessence of Ibsenism* (1981).



Iconoclasm: George Bernard Shaw is well known for his **"iconoclasm"**. An iconoclast is one who attacks popular beliefs or established values and practices. In his time, Shaw was convinced of a necessary moral revolution in the social order and through his works satirised conventional social ideals and institutions.

It was through his Fabian friends that he met and fell in love with a wealthy Irish lady and a fellow Fabian Charlotte Payne Townshend whom he married and remained with her until her death at the age of 86 in 1943. Owing to her insistence, their marriage is said to have remained unconsummated, and in 1906, the Shaws moved into their permanent residence (now known as Shaw's Corner) in a small village in England.

He was intellectually active even at the age of 91 when he joined the Interplanetary Society. Shaw believed in a **universal Life Force**, an energy which, when combined with progressive social awareness, improved the natural man. He defined it as "vitality with a direction". He believed that one could live as long as one wished, as long as they were in tune with this life force. However, at the age of 93, he fell from a tree that he was pruning and broke his hip. Doctors told him that it would not heal. Subsequently, Shaw passed away within a week on November 2, 1950. His ashes were mixed with his wife's and scattered in their garden, around St. Joan's statue.

Shaw had refused a knighthood in 1923, but at the request of his wife had accepted the Nobel Prize for literature in 1925, requesting that the prize money be used as the fund for the translation of the playwright August Strindberg's works. He was of the belief that "merit in authorship could only be determined by the posthumous verdict of history". Shaw was also the co-founder of the London School of Economics and Political Science in 1895, along with his fellow Fabians, Sidney and Beatrice Webb and Graham

Wallas.

Shaw was in many ways the product of Victorian England, although he is also attached with the Modernism in literature. The Victorian period was a time of great literary creativity, what influenced Shaw most was its tendencies toward realism, its confident championing of self-reliance and inner strength, its moral earnestness, its advocacy of charity and social reform, and its patriotic British nationalism. The authors who perhaps best embody all of these things would be the novelist Charles Dickens, the poet Alfred Lord Tennyson, and the critic Matthew Arnold.

Bernard Shaw took from Victorianism its moral earnestness and commitment to social reform, but he left behind its nationalism and its confidence that core British values would steer a sure path to a brighter future at home and around the world. Shaw felt that the Victorian version of "realism" was too idealised—it ignored controversial issues, it glorified heroes for the wrong things, and it packaged life too neatly into "well made" stories with predictable structures and sentimental conclusions. Shaw is more in line with the "naturalism" movement which began in late 19th century France, culminating in the novels of Guy de Maupassant (1850–1893) and E´mile Zola (1840–1902) and aiming to represent a "slice of life" marked by a detached, objective description of society with careful accuracy of detail and historical background. People, often neglected in previous literatures, such as housewives, the poor, or criminals, were given priority. Whereas naturalist writers often showed individual freewill to be ineffective against the powerful forces of history, society, or biology, however, Shaw strongly believed that creative adaptability, powered by the strength of human willpower, is the "life force" that ensures our evolution as a species. Evolution The idea of "evolution" was highly charged in Shaw's day. Charles Darwin had published *The Origin of Species* in 1859, detailing the evidence for his conclusion that species (including man) evolved from lower order animals through a process of natural selection and random

mutations. The idea that God might not be the sole guiding hand in creation, especially the creation of humankind, scandalised the 19th century and still reverberates today. Shaw was an early supporter of Darwinian evolution, applying the ideas to socialism, women's rights, and other reformist political ideas. Literature and other arts, he strongly felt, could play a part in mankind's evolution to a higher state.

Shaw was also greatly influenced by the German thinker Karl Marx (1818–1883) who developed his socialist theory after observing the lives of the factory workers in the north of England. Marx wrote that economics is the engine of history, and the unfairness of a capitalist society—where business owners are motivated to pay workers as little as possible, and workers do not own the products of their own labour—can only be changed by revolution. Marx's ideas were quickly assimilated into literature and literary criticism, and Shaw consistently applied socialist ideas in his plays, prefaces, and essays. Shaw's socialism shared with Marxism its commitment to social change via economics but remained committed to political reforms within the system and not by revolution from outside it. That said, Shaw did not shy away from celebrating the effects of revolution. After a visit to the USSR (Union of Soviet Socialist Republics) in the 1930s, when he met long-time Soviet dictator Joseph Stalin, he returned to England convinced that the Soviet Union was leading the world to a brighter future. This conviction, held by many leftist artists and intellectuals of the time—most of whom saw the Soviet experiment as a truly socialist project, rather than the façade for authoritarianism that it ultimately became—was unshaken by evidence of Stalin's "pogroms," or slaughter of countless of his own citizens in order to achieve ''state security.''



LET US KNOW

The playwright who had the most influence on Shaw was the Norwegian writer Henrik Ibsen, who wrote realistic and intellectual dramas about pressing social issues that had never before been discussed on the stage. Shaw details his debt to Ibsen, in the context of Shaw's own socialism, in *The Quintessence of Ibsenism* (1891, rev. 1913). Immediately after Shaw's time, his influence on drama was eclipsed by the more symbolic, avant-garde, and impressionistic (although no less politically challenging) work of Bertolt Brecht (1898–1956) and Samuel Beckett (1906–1989).

In recent years, however, "postmodern" British and American stages have seen a great deal of "Shavian" drama, which are plays that contain intellectual discussion, are based more upon character than plot, and engage the audience with important social issues. It is easy to imagine Shaw applauding heartily for two of the most ambitious and important plays in the last several decades, Tony Kushner's two-part "Angels in America" (dealing with AIDS) and Tom Stoppard's trilogy "The Coast of Utopia" (dealing with the Russian Revolution).

2.3.2 His Dramatic Career

Shaw was a dramatist, novelist, an essayist, pamphleteer, music and drama critic and is known to have written more than 250,000 letters. At the beginning of his literary career between 1879 and 1883, Shaw wrote five novels titled *Immaturity October* (1887), *The Irrational Knot* (1905), *Love Among the Artists* (1881), *Cashel Byron's Profession* (1886) and *An Unsocial Socialist* (1887). The novels however were not well received. Among the short story collections to his credit, the ones that deserve mention are *One of the Lesser Tales is The Miraculous Revenge* (1885) and *The Black Girl in Search of God and Some Lesser Tales* (1934). The latter

resembles the allegory form in John Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress*, in which a Christian convert sets on a quest to find God. Shaw, who is better known for his plays, had penned 63 plays, which were first performed on stage in the 1890s.

In collaboration with William Archer, Shaw began writing his first play *Widower's Houses* which was an attack on the slumlords in 1880s and was performed at London's Royalty Theatre in 1892. The play was included in the collection *Plays Unpleasant* (1898) along with *The Philanderer* (1898) and *Mrs. Warren's Profession* (1898). Shaw's collection titled *Plays Pleasant* (1898) included the plays *The Man of Destiny* (1897), *Arms and the Man* (1894), *Candida* (1898) and *You Never Can Tell* (1897). Among these plays *Arms and the Man* and *Candida* were more popular. *Arms and the Man* is an anti-romantic comedy with the twin themes of love and war in the background of the Serbo-Bulgarian War. Shaw questions the reality of Romantic love and highlights the futility of war and violence. A musical adaptation of the play was called *The Chocolate Soldier* (1908), performed by the German Operetta. The World War I had shaken Shaw's faith in humanity and it found a reflection in the play *Heartbreak House* (1919) written after the war.

The collection *Three Plays for Puritans* published in 1901 contained *The Devil's Disciple* (1897), *Captain Brassbounds Conversion* (1900) and *Caesar and Cleopatra* (1901). *The Devil's Disciple* is an interesting play about an outcast from his family and a self-proclaimed devil's disciple, Richard "Dick" Dudgeon, which is set in colonial America. Another collection of Shaw's plays titled Back to *Methuselah (A Metabiological Pentateuch)* (1921) begins with a preface and a series of five plays *In the Beginning, The Gospel of the Brothers Barnabas, The Thing Happens, Tragedy of an Elderly Gentleman* and *As Far as Thought Can Reach*. These plays are based on the two principles of 'Creative Evolution' and 'Life Force' in which Shaw believed in and the series traces the beginning from the Garden of Eden to that of a futuristic time.

Shaw revolutionised drama and the dramatic art by highlighting the moral, political and socio-economic issues. He had written *The Quintessence of Ibsenism* (1891) highlighting the works of the Norwegian playwright Henrik Ibsen. Here he stated the quintessence of 'Ibsenism' was that "there is no formula". Among his well known later plays are *Man and Superman* (1903), *Major Barbara* (1905), *Pygmalion* (1913) and *Saint Joan* (1923).Based on the Don Juan theme, *Man and Superman* is about the romance between two rivals John Tanner and Ann Whitefield, in which Shaw famously focuses philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche's idea of the 'Superman' (one who is responsible for the creation of values in a world where God is dead).

While the woman-centric play *Major Barbara* is about an officer of The Salvation Army Major Barbara Undershaft and her changing convictions of providing true salvation. This was followed by *Pygmalion* a major success on the stage and which was also adapted most successfully as the musical film *My Fair Lady* earning Shaw an Oscar. The play critiques the rigid British class character centering on a Cockney flower girl Eliza Doolittle who is trained by a Professor of phonetics Henry Higgins in fluent speech and etiquettes/ manners to pass for a duchess at an ambassador's garden party. Shaw is believed to have been considered for the Nobel Prize in Literature for his play *St. Joan*, based on the canonised saint, Joan of Arc. The citation for the Nobel he received in 1925 read: "...marked by both idealism and humanity, its stimulating satire often being infused with a singular poetic beauty".

Shaw had also written criticism on music and drama, several letters and polemical essays such as "Maxims for Revolutionists" (1903), "On Going to Church" (1905), "How to Write a Popular Play" (1909), "Treatise on Parents and Children" (1910), "Common Sense about the War" (1914), "The Intelligent Woman's Guide to Socialism and Capitalism" (1928), "Essays in Fabian Socialism" (1931), "Our Theatres in the Nineties" (1932), "Dictators – Let Us Have More of

Them" (1938), "Everybody's Political What's What?"(1944) and "Sixteen Self Sketches" (1949) among other works. He was a journalist and an art critic and wrote for newspapers such as *The Pall Mall Gazette, The World, The Star, The Saturday Review* until he had been well established as a playwright. From 1904 to 1907, Shaw had entered into a successful theatrical partnership with Barker and John Vedrenne at the Royal Court Theatre which accounted for seventy percent of his staged works. Shaw always encouraged amateur playwrights and also encouraged Harley Granville Barker who was twenty one years his junior, with whom he shared one of his closest friendships.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q 1: Why did Shaw leave for London in 1876? In London, what were the activities in which he was involved in?

Q 2: Name the public honours that Shaw had both refused and accepted state why?

Q 3: Name the significant plays contained in the collections *Plays Unpleasant* (1898) and *Plays Pleasant* (1898).

Q 4: What do you mean by the term 'Ibsenism'?

2.4 SOURCES OF THE PLAY *CANDIDA*

Shaw's Candida in *Candida* is very similar to Ibsen's Nora in *A Doll's House*, which centers on the significance of choice in traditional bonds of marital relations in the 19th century. Ibsen's Nora makes the choice of leaving her husband Torvald's home (leaving the play open-ended). She breaks her silence in the play by saying: "We must come to a final settlement, Torvald. During eight whole years…we have never exchanged one serious word about serious things". This play *A Doll's House* was based on the life of Ibsen's close friend Laura Kieler. On the other hand, Shaw's protagonist Candida exercises her freedom of choice at the end of the play to remain with her husband Rev. James Morell, instead of giving in to the young poet

Eugene Marchbanks. To Shaw, Candida was the ideal woman whom he created with an irresistible charming persona. In his letter to Ellen Terry, he wrote, “Candida is the Virgin Mother and none else.” Ibsen had influenced Shaw’s treatment of the theme of marriage in *Candida*, which was more “an open-ended questioning rather than confident enlightenment”.

George Bernard Shaw wrote *Candida* in 1894, but it was first published in 1898 as a part of the *Plays Pleasant.* It is interesting to note that Shaw had subtitled the play as “The Mystery”. It is set in the transitional phase between the Victorian period and the Modern age and takes place in London’s suburban north east end. The play has detailed stage settings and stage directions as is common to all Shavian plays. It is significant to note that *Candida* as a woman centric play was a huge success when it was performed on the stage and it had interestingly led to a phenomenon of “Candidomaniacs”. The central characters in the play are Reverend James Morell a socialist clergyman, his affectionate wife Candida, and a young poet Eugene Marchbanks who is in love with her. Candida plays the central role in raising questions about the Victorian notions of love, fidelity and marriage and through her candid approach to the possibilities of alternate choices redefines her relation with her husband.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q 5: Write a note on the sources of the play *Candida*.

2.5 CRITICAL RECEPTION OF SHAW

Bernard Shaw’s position as a “classic playwright” tends to obscure the essentially revolutionary nature of his writing. He was often charged with didacticism, for his various reformist agendas, but he was less interested in promoting a particular point of view. As the critic Eric Bentley has pointed out, Shaw’s purpose was to investigate the relation between ideas and reality, or, more accurately, between idealism and realism. Exposing hypocrisy was not his goal. Instead, he hoped to demonstrate how human beings are hoodwinked by their own unconsidered actions and the beliefs.

Shaw had the outstanding talent of a dramatist as well as a critic and according to Hermann Bahr, had "the ability to arouse the whole state, the whole nation against him" with his iconoclastic writing. Alfred Kerr observes that he was "a distinct gain for our age." He also states that "opposition was the very breath of his nostrils" and that Shaw, both as a propagandist and a dramatist, asserted the destruction of established morals while infusing an element of comedy in the representation of his ideas. Due to his representation of everyday life, critic Charles Benjamin Purdom called his plays, "a living drama". In defending himself from his critics, Shaw too asserted that as a dramatist realist he had "simply discovered drama in real life." Shaw was not only a moralist or a socialist, he was above all a humanitarian and due to the representations of his ideas ("Shavian ideas"), he was also considered the father of the theatre of ideas. Finally, Shaw was instrumental in revitalising the theatre towards the end of the 19th century and the early part of the 20th.

In reference to Shaw's *Candida*, Archibald Henderson notes, "Candida was praised in Paris as a new solution of the feminist problem; and in *St. Petersburg reviews*, Mr. Shaw was rated far above Pinero and Jones, and elevated to the pedestal of fame." Although, Shaw was discouraged that it would take twenty-five long years before the London stage would receive a play like *Candida*, when the play was staged by the Independent Theatre Company in 1897, it was extremely well received particularly because of the reception by feminists. In a letter to Ellen Terry Shaw described his play *Candida* as "the mother play". Raymond Williams in praise of him said, "Shaw is able to tell us, by naming a problem, what each of his plays is about; and the phrase is always an adequate explanation."

It has been easy for critics to point out that despite his allegiance to realism, Shaw's characters sometimes seem more like intellectual concepts rather than real people, especially when compared to the characters in Henrik Ibsen or August Strindberg. Other critics locate this as one of Shaw's strengths: those ideas come alive at the center of his dramas. Shaw's early plays were very popular, but following his questioning of England's

participation in World War I, he was suspected of being a German sympathiser, and he lost support. Shaw kept writing about the war, however, and as World War II was starting, he increased his attacks on capitalist democracy further instigating his enemies. His reputation benefited from the play *Saint Joan* in 1923, a play about the martyr Joan of Arc that suggested criticism of England's cruel treatment of Ireland, that also later propelled him toward the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1925.

After the wars, Shaw's criticisms began to seem more like prophesies, and his critical standing and popularity improved. The huge success of *My Fair Lady*, a musical adaptation of Shaw's play *Pygmalion*, also helped to renew affection for Shaw's work. Some critics denounced Shaw's plays for their preachiness and unsympathetic characters, while others applauded his efforts to raise the tone of British drama, while his depiction of independent women characters found an attentive audience with feminist critics starting in the 1960s. Contemporary observer Sunder Katwala describes Shaw as "a persistent pioneer of both feminism and racial equality," and notes, "Shaw's genius cannot be doubted. Nor his astonishing range, from his major contribution to music criticism to his being the only Nobel laureate to also bag an Oscar."



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q 6: How does Eric Bentley view Shaw's contributions?



2.6 LET US SUM UP

This unit has helped you discuss the life and works of George Bernard Shaw one of the greatest of the modern playwrights. Although an Irish dramatist, Shaw is now seen as one of the most significant British dramatists of the modern era, and at least until the 1970s with the rise of Tom Stoppard, he is often recognised as the greatest British dramatist since Shakespeare.



2.7 FURTHER READING

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9) Shaw, George Bernard. (1995). *Candida: A Critical Introduction.* New Delhi: Atlantic Publishers and Distributors.
10) Soanes, Catherine. (Ed.). (2004). *The New Pocket Oxford Dictionary*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Websites and Electronic Resources:

www. mccarter.org/ Education/ candida

www.wikipedia.org/wiki/George_Bernard_Shaw

http://www.mccarter.org/Education/candida/

2.8 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS (HINTS ONLY)

Ans to Q 1: Ambition to become a musician and painter… …first occupation in London : freelancing… …visiting public libraries… …writing his first novels… …member of Fabian Society… …debate teams… …turning vegetarian… …dedicated Socialist.

Ans to Q 2: Refused Knighthood in 1923… …accepted the Nobel in 1925 on wife's request… …prize money given away for a cause…. …his belief on literary merit.

Ans to Q 3: [*Plays Unpleasant*] : ... ... Widower's House, ... The Philanderer, ... Mrs. Warren's Profession… … [*Plays Pleasant*] : … …The Man of Destiny, ... Arms and the Man, ... Candida, ... You Never Can Tell etc.

Ans to Q 4: Shaw revolutionised drama and the dramatic art by highlighting moral, political and socio-economic issues… …Shaw wrote *The Quintessence of Ibsenism* (1891) and highlighted the works of Henrik Ibsen ... ... he stated that the term 'Ibsenism' meant "there is no formula" in a drama.

Ans to Q 5: Shaw's Candida in *Candida* is very similar to Ibsen's Nora in *A Doll's House* … …both enters on the significance of choice in traditional bonds of marital relations in the 19th century… …Ibsen's Nora makes the choice of leaving her husband Torvald's home while Shaw's Candida exercises her freedom of choice at the end of the play to remain with her husband Rev. James Morell.

Ans to Q 6: He points out that Shaw's purpose was to investigate the relation between ideas and reality… …between idealism and realism… …exposing hypocrisy was not his goal, but he hoped to demonstrate how human beings are hoodwinked by their own unconsidered actions and the beliefs.



2.9 POSSIBLE QUESTIONS

Q 1: What assumptions can you make regarding 'drama of ideas'? Discuss with reference to the plays of Bernard Shaw.

Q 2: Make a comparison of Shaw's artistic achievements with that of the other great dramatists of the 20th century.

Q 3: In what ways did Shaw's works contribute to and/or work against the Modernist aesthetic that developed in literature during his heyday?

Q 4: Read any of the plays by Bernard Shaw and discuss the problems he wanted to see reformed.

Q 5: Discuss the importance of G. B. Shaw as a modern dramatist with reference to the innovations that he brought to the stage.

Q 6: Write in detail about the critical reception of Shaw as a playwright.

Q 7: Shaw was not only a moralist or a socialist, he was above all a humanitarian, and due to the representations of his ideas, he was also considered the father of the theatre of ideas. Discuss.

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UNIT 3: GEORGE BERNARD SHAW: *CANDIDA* (PART II)

UNIT STRUCTURE

3.1 Learning Objectives

3.2 Introduction

3.3 Act wise Summary of the Play

3.4 Critical Commentary on the Play

3.5 Major Themes

3.6 Major Characters

3.7 Let Us Sum Up

3.8 Further Reading

3.9 Answers to Check Your Progress (Hints Only)

3.10 Possible Questions

3.1 LEARNING OBJECTIVES

After going through this unit, you will be able to

- make a summary of the play *Candida*
- explain the play *Candida* in terms of its different thematic renderings
- analyse the role of different characters including that of the protagonist Candida, who is central to the play
- gain a better perspective into the play through the significant themes.

3.2 INTRODUCTION

This unit, which is to be studied in connection with the previous unit on Bernard Shaw's life and works, shall help you to discuss the play *Candida* in sufficient details. The play is a comedy but it contains some serious themes and issues, as you will soon discover. George Bernard Shaw, who was a dramatist, a socialist, critic, musician and painter, also had a prolific dramatic career and was well known for his "**iconoclastic**" views and ideas of freethinking and socialism as reflected mostly in his vast array of literary works. Shaw is renowned for his contribution to what we today know as

"Modern drama" because he broke away from the conventions of the melodramatic London theatre in the 1890s. His plays are as much read as watched, and he is probably the only dramatist to have been famous first in print followed by his success in theatre. With the kind of voluminous works to his credit, he received the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1925 for the play *Saint John* and an Oscar Award in 1938 both for his contribution to literature and adaptations of his plays. The play *Candida* was first published in 1895 as one of the four plays which he termed as "Plays Pleasant".

3.3 ACT WISE SUMMARY OF THE PLAY

Act-I

The play begins on a fine sunny October morning with a description of the suburbs with the "characterless brick houses" with "front gardens", the Radical Clubs", "stony pavements", the green Victoria park and St. Dominic's Parsonage which is a "semi detached villa" with a resident parson, the Reverend James Mavor Morell. It also contains the stage settings of the drawing room which is the centre of the action in the play. Morel is a Christian Socialist clergyman of the Church of England. He is having a conversation with his typist Miss Proserpine Garnett (Prossy), in the drawing room. Opening his letters, he glances at the dates for his lectures and engagements for the entire week and discusses the same with her as he is very hard pressed for time. Morell's curate the Reverend Alexander Mill (Lexy) enters interrupting but enlivening the discussion. While at her typing, Prossy is vexed at Morell's expressive love for his wife and is rather annoyed at Morell's impatience about his wife's return by 11.45 AM. She states that a man must be concerned about his wife without making a fool of himself like Morell who is preoccupied only about "Candida here, and Candida there, and Candida everywhere."

Prossy and Lexy being left to themselves begin a conversation that leads to an argument. Prossy compares her looks with that of Candida, while Lexy is impressed by Candida's photograph finding her extremely beautiful. Prossy turns sarcastic about Lexy trying to imitate Morell in his dress and conduct.

Mr. Burgess enters unannounced and Prossy goes upstairs to call on Morell. Burgess tells Lexy that his purpose of the visit is rather personal. Meeting his son-in-law, Burgess recalls his previous visit alleging how Morell had turned him out of a contract. What had angered Morell the previous time was Burgess's tender for a contract of clothing supply to a work house and the way Burgess had conducted it. He had forwarded the lowest tenders and had paid starvation wages to the women who prepared the clothing. This had angered Morell because the wages had been so meagre that the women who were Morell's parishioners would have taken to prostitution. Being a Christian socialist he was particular about his ideals and called his curates, his "helpers and comrades", to push forward that mission.

Burgess accepts that he had been wrong earlier but had come to Morell to ask for pardon. He had also raised payments, turning himself into a model employer. There were now no women employees as they were replaced by machines. The machine operating men received the Trade Union rate of payment for their work. For a moment, Morell thought that the old man had changed but becomes wary when Burgess replied that these changes were made in the absence of alternate choices. Burgess insists that it was rather "family sentiment" and "pure friendliness" to be on good terms with him as a good Christian that had resulted in his sudden visit. Yet, Morell does not buy the idea, remains unconvinced, and says, "I won't have you here sniveling about being a model employer and a converted man when you're only an apostate with your coat turned for the sake of a County Council contract."

Burgess tells him that five years before no sensible man would take up with the ideas (of Christian Socialism) that Morell and his crew had taken up, but they had now become very influential. Thus, the quarrel is made up on that note of appreciation and the acceptance of a hand of friendship. This is when Candida enters dressed in bonnet and mantle with a strapped rug, an umbrella in tow, a handbag and a supply of illustrated papers. She is received with affection by her husband who apologizes for having lost track of time to receive her at the train station.

Eugene Marchbanks who had visited her the day before has accompanied her in her journey and is well received too. He was one of James's discoveries and was found sleeping on the embankment. Candida refers to the painting of the Virgin on the wall, which was gifted by Eugene, and she tells Burgess, her father, that Eugene's uncle was a Peer- a real Earl, belonging to the nobility. Eugene even had a seven-day bill for 55 pounds in his pocket when he was found. However, Burgess rather belittles the aristocracy just as he would earlier call Socialism a set of "foolish ideas". It is important to note that in the situation, Shaw presents Burgess as a Capitaist, Morell as a Christian Socialist and Marchbanks as belonging to the aristocratic class. Morell tries to make Eugene comfortable by formally introducing him to Mr. Burgess.

Burgess in his joviality and noisiness takes leave, as he is to catch a city train at 12.25 p.m. Candida is glad to notice that Eugene is courteous to her father. She would have rather minded had he laughed at the good old man, as usually he is ill-at ease, and becomes self-conscious with strangers. Eugene is seated on the sofa with an expression of hopeless suffering and on being asked by her why is he so melancholic since they came in the cab that morning, he answers that it is due to his confusion as to how much he had to pay the cab driver. Candida picking up her handbag excuses herself to take care of the household chores as she has been away for three weeks. Morell then asks Eugene to stay for lunch but he refuses reluctantly saying Mrs. Morell had told him earlier that probably her husband wouldn't ask him to stay back for lunch but if he did, he would only want otherwise. This also shows Candida's frank nature which can be observed throughout the play and it is interesting to note that the name **'Candida'** may be drawn from the word **'candid',** which means frank, truthful or straight forward. On hearing this, in his good humour, Morell adds that usually "an old friend or a truly noble and sympathetic soul" is not an obstacle in a couple's reunion, as a chance visitor is and yet he would rather want Eugene to remain for lunch and be part of the couple's happiness. Morell has very ideal opinions of "a happy marriage" like theirs, and finds "something very sacred in the return of his wife" and wished Eugene to see "what a happy thing it is to be married as he was."

At this, Eugene expresses his cynicism about Morell's belief in his own "happy" marriage but Morell counters it with his cynicism about La Rochefoucauld who had said that "there are convenient marriages, but no delightful ones." This is when Eugene rather puzzling Morell, writhing in wild anger says: "I must speak to you. There is something that must be settled between us." Although, Morell is comforting and patient with him, but when Eugene confesses, "I love your wife" Morell recoils for a moment but the bursts into uncontrollable laughter. He takes it sportingly, laughing about how Eugene was just under twenty and she over thirty and their nature of affection would rather be "a case of calf-love".

Morell asks him not to make a fool of himself but Eugene begins to "stagger" him on purpose, thinking himself wiser over Morell's blind foolishness in the faith of his marriage. Throughout the heated conversation, Morell maintains his "fine forbearance" and tries to comfort him with his preaching oratory. Nevertheless, Eugene in his "boyish crudity of assertion" extends the argument. Eugene then stings Morell with his question: "Is it like this for her here always? A woman, with a great soul, craving for reality, truth, freedom, and being fed on metaphors, sermons, stale perorations, mere rhetoric. Do you think a woman's soul can live on your talent for preaching?"

As Eugene is about to leave asking Morell to tell her about his truth, Candida, oblivious of what the two had talked about, enters in her housekeeping attire, and on finding Eugene about to go, requests her husband to ask him to stay for lunch. Eugene gives a knowing look over his shoulder, challenging Morell's move and pretending to busy himself at his table. Morell agrees. Eugene offers his arm to Candida and the two go about setting the table. Act one ends with Eugene declaring, "I am the happiest of men".

Act- II

Act two opens with Eugene, late in the afternoon, being alone and idly passing his time, meddling with the typewriter when Prossy enters with her notebook (in which she takes down Morell's letters in shorthand from his dictation) and sits at the typewriter to start work, without taking notice of

Eugene. Finding Eugene busy with the typewriter, she complains about the stuck key. In the conversation that follows, Eugene's allusion to people who can do business and write letters as always having love affairs offends Prossy because that is precisely the kind of work that she does. She sharply denies having had any love affairs but Eugene is carried away by his poetical talk on the thoughts of shy and unspoken love. As she is by the fire, he talks out to her, of her secret love for Morell following which she blushes. Eugene then questions her if it is possible for a woman to love a man like Morell. At this, she looks him straight in the face and affirms in the positive, leaving him rather dejected in his child's chair. This is when Burgess enters and Prossy is almost taken aback and sets to work. He talks of how Morell is busy receiving a deputation in his dining room and Candida is busy upstairs, educating a young stitcher-girl, teaching her to read out of the Evenly Twins.

Burgess is rather impolite towards Prossy considering her lower status, but in an argument that follows, she stings him with her comment on his Cockney accent. She has been distracted from work and has spoilt a letter along with her mood and consequently, she is unable to contain herself and calls him "silly old fathead." Burgess feels greatly offended and decides to complain against her before Morell. Eugene then tries to soothe Burgess's anger and Prossy goes out hearing the electric bell ring. Here, Burgess and Eugene share a short conversation where Burgess talks about how he doubts Morell's sanity with something "queer" about him and how he is "mad" about acting his ideas out and even having the audacity of calling him a "scoundrel".

Morell calls out to Prossy and comes in with the deputation documents. This is when Burgess takes the chance to make a complaint against Prossy for calling him a "silly old fathead". However, Morell lightens the situation with his usual heartiness, citing her frank nature. This makes Burgess even more angry. Having decided to wait for dinner, the old man asks for a good book to read by the fireside to pass his time. When Morell mentions that Candida would soon be there to give him (Burgess) company after "filling the lamps", Eugene bursts with the wildest consternation. He says: "But that will soil her hands. I can't bear that, Morell: it's a shame. I'll

go and fill them". He cannot bear that Candida is submitted to such drudgery. He argues to stay on the condition that Candida will hand over all the rough work to him.

When Burgess suggests that they keep a servant, Morell talks of how the home looks as if not one but three people have kept it organized and how Prossy and he share her chores. While Eugene questions Morell angrily as to how many servants Morell's father used to keep, Morell returns the question mentioning that one of the great facts of aristocratic existence is the dependence on servants. Actually, what annoys Eugene is the thought that Candida's beautiful fingers would have to dabble in paraffin oil, while Morell would comfortably preach about it, in his usual "everlasting preaching, preaching, words, words, words." At this point, Candida enters with a trimmed ready lamp, filled and ready for lighting; and places it on Morell's table.

Eugene now argues to stay back there only on the condition that she hands over all the "rough work" to him. Candida blames Morell for damaging a scrubbing brush. She hears Morell back giving out a painful cry out of horror. But the young poet in Eugene is now again carried away by his longing to sail her away in a tiny boat far from the world or dream of a chariot to carry them together into the sky "where the lamps are stars, and don't need to be filled with paraffin oil every day." This reflects Eugene's poetic sensibility against Morell's practicality in the way they looked at life. It is followed by their respective argument about the ideal of life. While Morell finds Marchbank idle, selfish and useless, the latter criticizes Morell for his ideal to preach while allowing his wife to scrub. But he will offer her a small boat to sail away.

Prossy tells Candida that Maria the maid is ready for her in the kitchen and the onions ready to be sliced. Therefore, she pulls along Eugene with her. Burgess in his sudden sentiment talks of how Eugene "talks very pretty" and how the old man himself always had a turn for poetry. At this Prossy warns Burgess's fancy of Eugene, calling him mad and pointing at the queer things he says. Almost short of another argument, Burgess goes out to the garden for a smoke. This is when Morell comes back and takes the chance of asking her if Prossy if she had been calling Mr. Burgess

names and half in fear, she bursts into tears and when he tries to comfort her, she makes a dash at the door.

Candida is quick to notice Morell's careworn, dejected appearance. She lovingly goes near him and asks him if he had been overworking. Candida tells him she does not get one evening with him because he goes out at night to lecture in the congregations. Candida further states that 'his' splendid preaching is what makes the women so enthusiastic about the sermons and not socialism or religion: *"They all have Prossy's complaint", which confounds him. She continues elaborating to her dazed husband saying: "Prossy and all the other secretaries you ever had. Why does Prossy condescend to wash up the things, and peel potatoes and abase herself in all manner of ways for six shillings a week less than she used to get in a city office? She's in love with you, James: that's the reason".*

She mentions how she has grown fonder and fonder of Eugene and also knows "that though he has not the least suspicion of it himself, he is ready to fall madly in love" with her. Thus, there ensues an open discussion between the couple about the nature of their marital relation and their mutual understanding. She states that her concern is if Eugene comes to learn what love really is from a bad woman. But, "if he learns it from a good woman then it will be a right: he will forgive me."

To Morell's puzzled quarry as to why he should forgive her, Candida explains saying: "forgive me for not teaching him myself? For abandoning him to the bad woman for the sake of my goodness and purity as you call it!" She feels that James does not try to understand her and that she would give away both her goodness and purity willingly like her shawl to a beggar dying of cold, if there was nothing to restrain her. But she also asks him to put his trust in her love for him. Morell feels now that Eugene had been right about his words and she too delightfully agrees to the same saying: "He understands you; he understands me; he understands Prossy."

Eugene's entry with Burgess interrupts their conversation on Eugene. Morell is stabbed by Candida's words: "Your preachings…is merely a fine language with which you cheat yourself and others every day." At this Morell in his pain goes back to his place at the table while Candida sits on the sofa

beside Eugene to ask why he looks so sad. Eugene genuinely feels sad at her cruelty and torture towards her husband. Seeing how Morell's feelings are hurt, he says: "I feel his pain in my own heart." At this point, Lexy comes in, bringing news about the disheartened Guild of St. Matthew having received from Morell, a refusal telegram to preside over a meeting. This unusual refusal surprises Candida who now begins to suspect something wrong, she reacts to his giving up an engagement for the first time in his life. Lexy then confirms if Morell had received their urgent telegram requesting him to change his mind. And this is when Morell says that he has replied them that he cannot go, Candida wants to know the reason. As his reply, Morell says: "These people forget that I am a man: they think I am a talking machine to be turned on for their pleasure every evening of my life. May I not have one night at home, with my wife and my friends?"

Lexy pressures him to relent, fearing that the only available speaker, the President of the Agnostic League would undo all their good work as he insists strongly on the divorce of Socialism from Christianity. This is when Candida coaxes him to agree to go and to cheer him up say's that they would all accompany him too. Immediately, Burgess grumbles at the idea and Eugene is terrified of the crowd staring at them. When Candida says "they'll be too busy looking at James to notice you", Morell meaningfully refers to her earlier remark on "Prossy's complaint" (meaning how all the women are blind in their admiration of him). This confuses Burgess as he thinks that the reference of "Prossy's complaint" meant that Prossy must have complained about him.

This is when Morell asks Prossy to telegraph to the Guild to inform of his coming. At the idea of having to attend the meeting, old Burgess comically feels quite lost before the "instability of the human intellect" in a clergyman's house and having "four in the same house!" for a crazy group! Morell asks for Burgess's company to the meeting and he only relents when Morell offers the possibility of being introduced to the Chairman heading the Works Committee of the County Council, who may have some information on his contracts. Lexy agrees to go and so does Prossy but authoritatively Morell asks both Candida and Eugene to stay behind in the

house and says that he would rather show Eugene how afraid he was by leaving him there in her custody.

This greatly troubles Candida who is unable to understand what her husband tells Eugene but at the same time he also tenderly takes her in his arms and takes leave.

Act III

Act three begins with Shaw's stage directions and settings. It is late in the evening past ten and the lamps are lit. Candida and Eugene sit by the fireside (could also be read symbolically) and the two are left to themselves in the sitting room. While he breaks off in his poetical recitation, Candida is lost in her thoughts and realising that he has been reciting poetry for two long hours and she hasn't been paying adequate attention, she stops him short saying "those sonnets of yours have perfectly addled me" and asks him to put his poetry away. Candida addresses him affectionately as "moonshine" and asks him to sit down on the hearth rug and rather 'talk' and amuse her. In this scene, both of them make a brief conversation. When Candida asks him to say anything that he truly feels, Eugene expresses his love and fascination for her saying: "Candida, Candida, Candida, Candida. I must say that now… I never think or feel Mrs. Morell: it is always Candida".

This is when Morell returns from his meeting and unknowingly interrupts them. On seeing him, Candida rises from her chair to receive him and asks him about his meeting and the whereabouts of the rest. He tells her that they had left early for supper before he could even get away. As Candida leaves the room to tell Maria (the maid) to go to bed, Morell takes a moment to ask Eugene what had transpired in his absence between the two. Eugene takes this too far when he refers to "Candida" by her name in front of Morell and even calls him a "fool", "moralist" and a "windbag". He uses his poetics and heights of imagination to express how she had repulsed him becoming an "angel" with "a flaming sword" barring "the gate of hell" and feels that Morell can't make a woman like Candida who has "a divine insight", love him by merely being more of a Parson than a proper husband. However, Morell makes a point saying that it was rather his "golden moment"

in the pulpit that he earned the "right" to ask for her love.

Morell seizes him and being annoyed with his "poetic fripperies", demands to have his question answered. This is when Eugene says "I would only go to her as a beggar" and at recognising this uttered phrase Morell completes this sentence adding "a beggar dying of cold-asking for her shawl?" because in his earlier conversation with Candida she had repeated the same lines. Perhaps it was due to the influence of Eugene's usual poetic words on her. But Eugene reveals now that on seeing how Candida had tortured Morell, who loved her so much that same morning, he had felt one with him and says that he was now another sort of 'the happiest of men', desiring nothing but her happiness and for which both of them should give her up. He says: "Why should she have to choose between a wretched little nervous disease like me, and a pig headed parson like you?"

When he demands an answer of what had happened during his absence Eugene says: "Well, in plain prose, I loved her so exquisitely that I wanted nothing more than the happiness being in such love. And before I had time to come down from the highest summits, you came in." On hearing this Morell in his misgiving calls Candida "some fiddlestick" wondering if she was already mad enough to leave him for Eugene. He worries about who would protect her, help her, work for her and be a father to her children in his absence. But Eugene calls Morell a "triple fool" saying he himself is the man she wants and that "it is she who wants somebody to protect, to help, to work for—somebody to give her children to protect, to help and to work for. Some grown up man who has become as a little child again."

This is when the door opens and Candida enters, rather amazed at finding them in an argument, and forgetting her wifely tact, she treats Morell as a child, saying: "My boy shall not be worried: I will protect him." When Morell hears the word "protect", he rises uttering the word in his hurt pride. At this, Candida questions Eugene about what he had told him. This indicates that they (Candida and Eugene) may have had a lengthy discussion of her thoughts and expectations before. Even Morell feels the same doubting Eugene's knowledge about her, of which he couldn't have an idea unless she shared her thoughts with him. On realizing that Eugene may have

prompted Morell's anger, Candida vehemently cries shame on him for not holding his tongue. Also, she is very angry with Eugene's misbehaviour with Morell. When Eugene blames it on him, Morell states that Eugene had started the quarrel in the morning. At that time, all the others return from dinner. Lexy is in his high spirits, Burgess is in his jovial best and a smartly dressed. Prossy with bright eyes, apparently from drinking champagne. While Eugene relapses into his shyness, Lexy and Burgess praise Morell's address at the gathering. They reveal that Mr. Burgess had treated them all to a splendid champagne supper at the Belgrave along with the 'Chairman', which shows Burgess diplomatic or even opportunistic side.

This is when Candida brings glasses, lemons and jug of hot water to prepare lemonade, in order to break their drunkenness saying, "You know our rules: total abstinence" (abstinence meaning drinking is not a practice in their household). Soon, except Eugene they all take leave with Lexy accompanying Prossy and Burgess out on his way. Candida with quiet authority asks Eugene to stay behind and sit down, fearing a "terrible scene" now but Morell is rather open to a discussion. This is when Morell says that "she must choose between us now." When Candida asks Morell if he has anything to say, by "bracing himself for the catastrophe" he says that she is his "greatest treasure on earth—if she is really mine."

Morell senses a threat in Candida's voice and she warns him "Take care, James", asking Eugene to leave but Morell instead wishes him to remain. Candida respects this decision and asks him about the entire matter at which Morell is rather lost for words, wondering from where to start. When Morell discloses about what Eugene had told him, he fearfully decries explaining that he was talking simply about King David's wife, who hated him while dancing with all other people. Candida understands what Eugene had tried to mean at the mention of King David's wife. He probably meant that, like her, Candida too despised Morell for moving the hearts of all the women suffering from "Prossy's compliant" with his mission. Although she loves her husband, she is now misunderstood and Morell asserts that Eugene was indeed right since the morning and had only repeated what she must have shared with him.

Thus, enlightened about the whole thing, she remorsefully questions Morell, “Do you mind what is said by a foolish boy, because I said something like it again in jest?” Morell in his confusion admits that he cannot live tortured with doubts and suspicions, with the “intolerable degradation of jealousy” and from her keeping a secret. That is why both Eugene and he had agreed for her to decide on the truth and choose between them. However, Candida is taken aback with this sudden resolution because probably she didn’t think of making choices. At this she feels that if at all, she meant to care about herself alone, it would mean that she would not only make choices but mean a good deal more too. At this, she concludes that she was rather up for “auction” and asks what Morell would bid to have her. On having her feel as if she was up for auction, Morell breaks down into tears.

But, with proud humility, he says, “I have nothing to offer you but my strength for your defence, my honesty of purpose for your surety, my ability and industry for your livelihood, and my authority and position for your dignity. That is all it becomes a man to offer to a woman.” On the other hand, Eugene in his bidding says: “My weakness! My desolation! My heart’s need!” Morell’s lofty confidence turns into his heartbreaking dread at Eugene’s bid and breaks into his anguish. She declares her decision saying: “I give myself to the weaker of the two.”

Morell in his confusion of whether it was him that she decides on, asks again to reassure himself. At this, Candida wishes to sit and talk comfortably over it like three friends. She reasons that Eugene was someone for whom no one had cared for since his old nurse died, his clever and fashionable sisters and successful brothers were his parent’s favourites. He was always miserable at Eton and his father would have him starve, punish him to return to Oxford, and he always had to live alone without comfort, welcome or refuge, almost disliked and misunderstood. Eugene consoles himself saying that at least he had his books and Nature for company.

Whereas, she says, James Morell was always the hero of his household, the most “wonderful of all babies” holding his first school prize at the ripe age of eight, captain at eleven etc., all the photographs in his

glorious circumstances, being “strong, clever and happy.” His mother and sisters didn’t let him do anything except for doing well and being an achiever.

Candida says, “Ask me what it costs to be James’s mother and three sisters and wife and mother to his children all in one.” It is she who builds “a castle of comfort and indulgence and love for him and stand sentinel always to keep little vulgar cares out. I make him master here, though he does not know it, and could not tell you a moment ago how it came to be so”. Also, she emphasises how Morell, to tempt her to be with him, offers his strength for her protection, his industry for her livelihood and his position for her dignity among other things. Morell who is overwhelmed like a boy says; “It’s all true, every word, what I am you have made me with the labour of your hands and the love of your heart! You are my wife, my mother, my sister: you are the sum of all loving care to me.”

She looks at Eugene and questions him if he takes her also as his mother and sisters. In addition, he disgustedly refuses to answer to her question and realises that he is not in the right place. While Morell who is calmed finally with all his fears of losing her at rest, is reluctant to let the young boy leave impulsively but Candida is confident and she says, “Oh, there is no fear. He has learnt to live without happiness”. Eugene prepares to take leave saying he is to leave with a “secret” in his heart, which adds to a certain mystery that remains unresolved.

Candida has the last word at the end of the play. Bidding him goodbye, she takes Eugene’s face who, divining her loving intention, bends his knee and receives a kiss of blessing on his forehead and takes leave. Then she turns to Morell, holding out her arms to him and they embrace each other. The play thus ends on a mysterious note with the line, “But they do not know the secret in the poet’s heart”.



LET US KNOW

Anarchist: A proponent of the political philosophy (Anarchism) which defines the state as undesirable or unnecessary and believes in stateless societies based on non-hierarchical free associations. The word derives from an ancient Greek word *anarchos*, meaning “without rulers.”

Christian Socialist: An activist who conforms to the mid-19th century religious socialism or Christian socialism, based on Jesus Christ's teachings. Many Christian Socialists believe capitalism to be "idolatrous" as it is associated with greed. The term was first used by a group of 19th century writers like Frederick Denison Maurice, Charles Kingsley and others.

Communist: A person who conforms to the political and economic philosophy of communism (a higher or advanced form of socialism) in the common ownership, production and distribution of wealth among all. The word communism derives from the Latin word *communis* meaning "shared", "common" or "belong to all".

Fabian Society: A British socialist Organization founded on 4, January 1884 by Sydney and Beatrice Webb in London. The Fabians believed in the principles of socialism by gradual rather than revolutionary means. Some of the members were the Bloomsbury Group which consisted of writers as Leonard and Virginia Woolf and H. G Wells, Annie Besant, Oliver Lodge, Bertrand Russell, George Bernard Shaw among others.

Socialism: A socio-economic doctrine that believes in common or state ownership of property and natural resources so that society as a whole benefits from a social product. This is opposed to capitalism which is based on private ownership and means of production. Karl Marx and Friedrich Engel

Women's Liberal Federation: Formed in between 1886 and 1887, the Women's Liberal Federation was a radical part of the Liberal Party during which women were actively involved in politics and were for the voting rights or women's suffrage which was finally granted in 1918.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q 1: In what ways, does Candida represent the idea of a 'new woman'?

Q 2: Why, according to you, is Candida so important a character in the play *Candida?*

3.4 CRITICAL COMMENTARY ON THE PLAY

In keeping with the ideas of 'The Woman Question' and the 'Feminist Movement', which was gaining ground during the late 19th century, Shaw had created Candida as a strong willed and a self-sufficient 'New Woman'. In the play, Candida effortlessly engages everyone's affection with her loving and candid nature. She also plays a central role in shaking up the comfortable notions of life, love, and marriage through her approach of a frank and open discussion. She is no more bound to the Victorian conception of women as the "angel in the house" and with an evolving sense of self, asserts her freedom of choice as an individual.

Morell develops a gradual fear of losing his wife to Eugene, who tries to woo her to an alternate life beyond her household duties. Candida's ambiguous treatment to both Morell and Eugene raises significant questions about mutual relations and delves deeper into both the intellect and the possibilities/truths of human nature. In the play, Morell commands a strong presence in the society but is emotionally weak before his wife, yet she depends on him just as he on her. Similarly, Eugene is emotionally strong for his young age and weak in front of Candida, but the two do not depend on each other. Thus in the end, Candida exercises her choice of being with her husband instead of being carried away by Eugene's promises.

Candida is also notably worried about Eugene's perception of love, being careful not to hurt his young notions and she brings out the maternal aspect in her diplomatic handling of him. Thus, Eugene also associates her with the sacred Christian image of the 'Virgin of Assumption' perhaps to highlight her maternal role. It may also be possible, that Candida will have wanted to assert her individuality, to test her faith in her marriage and to teach both her husband and Eugene a lesson of life. Thus, we find that instead of blindly conforming to her role-playing, Candida also debunks/ defies the Victorian values of women such as "purity" and "goodness" as expected of her, even by her husband. It is important to note that both Morell and Eugene as a preacher and a poet respectively are professional men of words but at the end, it is Candida who has the last word in the play.

Although, she upsets the Victorian notions of what is expected of a woman and her propriety, she does not defy her role as a mother, wife and a home-maker but instead revises her role as a woman and also an individual who has a freedom of choice.



LET US KNOW

Realism and Modern (New) Drama:

Wilbur Dunkel states that, **"the demand of the modern theatre is for the new"** and that Shaw is "the most familiar figure to emerge from the modern theatre". It was Shaw's effort to publish his plays for a mass readership, which led to the definition of the Modern or New Drama leading to the reception of drama as texts for reading as well as for performing on the stage. Katherine E. Kelly observes that to bring Modern Drama during the 1980s into the "realm of literature", Shaw prepared editions of his works aiming at the "growing market of literate readers". Thus, Shaw intended to create a position in the emerging "modern" drama by writing and publishing "literary" drama, which was entertaining as well as educative in calling "attention to its commerce with politics, philosophy, science and fiction". The new theatre movement had been established by 1982, replacing the old melodramatic tradition with "real human emotion". When Shaw arrived on the scene, Henrik Ibsen and Oscar Wilde were already well established as leading dramatists and he appreciated Ibsen's works of which he considered *A Doll's House* and *Ghosts* as the best. G. K Chesterton opines, "He (Shaw) is so much of an idealist about his ideals that he can be a ruthless realist in his methods". He emphasized on realistic representation in theatre in which realism was a "revaluation of experience intellectually and not emotionally." This was a reaction against Victorian sentimentality and he notably defended himself as a dramatic realist to his critics by stating that "I created nothing; I invented nothing; I perverted nothing; I simply discovered drama in real life".

3.5 MAJOR THEMES

The following are some of the important themes in the play we are discussing.

The New Woman:

In the late 19th century, a new feminist ideal of "The New Woman" had emerged. It was a term coined in the 1920s and popularized by the American writer Henry James. In the nineties the concept of the "new" had revolutionized New Fiction, New Journalism, New Drama, New Art and Art Criticism, New Politics and other such fields. The most important influence on the ideal came from the Woman's Suffragette movement that fought for women's democratic rights in the 19th century. This had opened up doors of new opportunities for education and employment and women were no more to be confined to their households being dependent economically on their husbands or relatives. Thus, the New Woman challenged the gender roles, which had been traditionally imposed on them, and most women joined Universities, reputed colleges like the Seven Sisters Schools, which were all-women colleges, ventured into modern professions and even joined politics. The new legal rights to property, changes in Divorce law enabled them to exercise their freedom of choice in their marital relations and to define their individuality. Although it was a challenge for the New Woman in the conventional Victorian age to assert themselves and their rights, through education and self-establishment they also gained a new dignity and respectability.

As is explicit in the first act of *Candida*, Prossy has nothing against Candida and rather praises her nature saying she's "nice, very good hearted". She is in general fond of her and appreciates her real qualities. In Prossy, there is a kind of a feminist streak that can be understood when she tells Lexy: "It must be so nice to be a man and have a fine penetrating intellect instead of mere emotions like us…" In the same discussion, Lexy makes a mention about the New Woman and the Woman's Liberal Federation movement, which was catching up during that time. He says: "Ah, if you women only had the same clue to Man's strength that you have to his

weakness…there would be no Woman Question". The play *Candida* reflects how Shaw formulated his views about woman's emancipation in *The Quintessence of Ibsenism* in which he emphasised the self-respectability of women, and equality with men. He wrote, *"love loses its charm when it is not free…the successful wooer, in both the sexes alike is the one who can stand out for honourable conditions, and failing them, go without".* The Shavian Woman or the New Woman of Shaw, who did not remain behind the times, bore the characteristics of a non-conformist, unconventional and intelligent new woman with an independent mind of her own.

Ideas of Christian Socialism:

In *Candida*, Morell is a powerful speaker in both the religion and politics. His sermons focus on the teachings of the church as well on progressive socialist movements of the time. This blend of spiritual beliefs and political activism is commonly known as Christian Socialism. However, this movement grew out of recognition following the disparity between Christian ideals and the societal effects of capitalism. Christian Socialist parties were usually led by religious leaders unlike other socialist unions and parties whose leaders were secular reformists.

Working Conditions of the Factory workers:

During the 1850's in Britain, the condition of the factory workers was very deplorable. They had could earn two to three times more than the farm workers. Subsequently, by the late 1800's, a huge numbers of workers left English farms to live and work in an urban setting. This change drastically altered their lives as families were separated for up to 14 hours a day, sometimes with each family member in a different factory. The rate of infant mortality rose dramatically due to neglect and malnourishment of the children. However, despite all hardships, workers continued to flood the labour market. With such an excess of available labour, manufacturers took advantage and lowered wages. Weavers such as those employed in Burgess' factory in the play *Candida* made only about 10 shillings to 16 shillings a week, and children, who worked up to ten hours a day, took home 3 shillings to 4 shillings a week. At that time, a loaf of bread cost about 1 shilling. As early as the 19th century, some of the English recognised

the harmful effects of unregulated factory work. Trade unions, workers guild, and political parties fought for reform by regulating working hours, safety standards, and wages. These liberal groups characterised the factory owners as greedy, uncaring, and amoral and urged the workers to unite in protection of their rights. This background is clearly visible in the play *Candida.*



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q 3: Briefly write about the feminist ideal of the 19th century "New Woman".

Q 4: Briefly describe the protagonist Candida in the play.

Q 5: How is the theme of the 'New Woman' significant in the play?

3.6 MAJOR CHARACTERS

The following are the important characters in the play *Candida.*

Candida:

The play is centered on the charismatic and affectionate Candida, addressed also as "Candy is Reverend James Morell's wife and the mother of two young children Jimmy and Fluffy. She is in her early thirties and is in good health, pretty, attractive and well built "with the double charm of youth and motherhood". She is likened to the Virgin of the Assumption in the painting on the wall and her "serene brow, courageous eyes, and well set mouth and chin signify largeness of mind and dignity." She is concerned with the family's welfare and deeply loves her husband. We get more insight into her persona through the compliments or descriptions from the rest of the characters, each of whom has something appreciative to say about her.

The Reverend James Mavor Morell:

He is a Christian Socialist clergyman of the Church of England and actively who is involved with the Guild of St. Matthew and the Christian Social Union. He is Candida's husband. He is in his forties and in appearance good looking with a good forehead, blunt eyebrows, bright eyes, a resolute mouth, being robust in health, and actively energetic. His tastes in reading can be understood by the content of his bookshelves containing volumes

of Browning's poems, Fabian Essays, Marx's *Das Capital* Maurice's Theological essays among others. He is very well read a man, a popular orator and a clergyman. By nature he is a mature, pleasant, well-mannered, disciplined and God-loving person and "his well-spring of spiritual enthusiasm and sympathetic emotion has never run dry for a moment." In addition, he is adores his wife, is considerate to others and is very progressive in his thoughts.

Miss Proserpine Garnett:

She is Reverend Morell's typist and secretary who attends to his weekly schedules, takes down and transcribes shorthand notes. Much to her dislike, she is also addressed as "Prossy". She is of about thirty, belonging to the lower middle class and is neatly dressed and busy at the typewriting. Her formal but affectionate nature also turns into a sharp sensitivity as can be gathered from her pert replies and rude arguments with Marchbanks and later with Mr. Burgess. Although she denies in her conversation with Marchbanks, her jealousy for Candida and secret love for Morell is revealed. However, she also admits the good-hearted nature and qualities of Candida.

The Reverend Alexander Mill:

Addressed as "Lexy", he is a young gentleman chosen by Morell as a curate or assistant to him. He is trained at Oxford and his duty is to impart his training for the benefit of the London society, but he comes across as immature. However, he won Morell's confidence, whom he looks up to with his well-intended "dog-like devotion" and hero-worship, and even tries to imitate and at the same time serve with enthusiasm.

Mr. Burgess:

Mr. Burgess is Candida's father and the father-in-law of Morell. He is a man of sixty, podgy in appearance, with a clean-shaven square face and a square beard under his chin, small watery blue eyes, a funny accent and intonation with a casual joviality. By profession, he is an experienced businessman with shrewdness and commercial and capitalist interests. By nature, he is often offensive, coarse, vulgar and ignorant but he is also

affectionate and humorous as is revealed in his conversations with others.

Eugene Marchbanks:

He is a young poet of eighteen who is again a discovery of Morell who had found him asleep on the embankment the previous June. He accompanies Candida on her return home, helps her with the luggage, and is well received by Morell. Eugene is of a shy and effeminate nature, with a child's voice, and nervous and lacking in self-confidence. He bears "a hunted expression and shrinking manner that show the painful sensitiveness that very swift and acute apprehensiveness produces in youth". In appearance, his dress is carelessly messy, his nostrils and mouth show a fierce wilfulness and he has a fine brow and large imaginative eyes of a poet. In his torment, he reveals his deep infatuation with Candida, voicing his mental conflict and trying to establish his compatibility and his love for her.



3.7 LET US SUM UP

In this unit on Shaw's *Candida*, there is an attempt to analyze the play critically. Besides, an attempt has also been made to know the different aspects of the life and works of George Bernard Shaw and his contribution to Modern Drama. A summary of the three acts of the play *Candida* is also provided to supplement your comprehension of the play's plot development. Candida who plays the central role in the trajectory of the play has been shown under the light of the New Woman and the Shavian heroine as discussed in the themes. The list of characters and the short glossary have helped you in your easy reference while reading the play on your own. Also, Shaw and his critical, and at times, controversial reception have been included in order to assess the Nobel Laureate's contribution and literary merit. Shavian drama became "a cult of the twentieth century intelligentsia" and George Bernard Shaw is indeed a versatile dramatist of his time. You should have noted that both Ibsen and Shaw used the formula of the well-made play, but reacted against its trite moralising by shifting the emphasis on to contemporary social and moral questions.



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Websites and Electronic Resources:

www. mccarter.org/ Education/ candida

www.wikipedia.org/wiki/George_Bernard_Shaw

http://www.mccarter.org/Education/candida/



3.9 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS (HINTS ONLY)

Ans to Q 1: Shaw was aware of the ideas of 'The Woman Question' emerging in the late 19th century… …Candida is strong willed and a self sufficient … …she engages everyone's affection with her loving and candid nature… …she shakes up the comfortable notions of life, love, and marriage… …she is no more bound to the Victorian conception of women as the "angel in the house" ... ... she asserts her freedom of choice as an individual.

Ans to Q 2: Although, she upsets the Victorian notions of what is expected of a woman she does not defy her role as a mother, wife and a home-maker. Instead, she revises her role as a woman and also as an individual who has a freedom of choice.

Ans to Q 3: New feminist ideal… …in late 19th century revolutionising various concepts… …various fields… …Woman's Suffragette movement... …new opportunities… …breaking traditional roles… …economic independence of woman.

Ans to Q 4: Charismatic… …affectionate… …addressed as "Candy"… …wife of Rev. Morell… …mother of two children… …in her early thirties… …likened to Virgin of Assumption… …concerned with family… …love for husband… …more about her from other characters.

Ans to Q 5: Gender roles challenged... …new legal rights to property… …Divorce law changes… …freedom of choice in marriage… …individuality… …assertion of rights… …new dignity and respectability… …Shaw's views on woman's emancipation… …*The Quintessence of Ibsenism*… …Characteristics of Shavian heroin …



3.10 POSSIBLE QUESTIONS

Q 1: What does Eugene confess to Morell about Candida? How does Morell react to it?

Q 2: Why does Eugene turn angry and argue about the "rough work" that Candida has to do in the household?

Q 3: What is "Prossy's complaint" as mentioned by Candida to Morell? Why does it lead to Burgess' misunderstanding?

Q 4: In the absence of her husband what does Eugene and Candida talk about by the fireside? Why does Morell want Candida to choose between Eugene and him?

Q 5: What do both Morell and Eugene, offer to Candida in order to win her? Elaborate on the comparison that Candida finally draws between Morell and Eugene?

Q 6: What is Candida's decision and how does the play finally end? In what way, Candida's decision upsets the idea of a 19th century women in England?

Q 7: According to you, how does Shaw represent the "New Woman" in *Candida*?

Q 8: Explain what is realism in modern drama with reference to the play *Candida*?

Q 9: How does Shaw represent the 'Shavian Woman' in his play *Candida*? Discuss.

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UNIT 4: JOHN MILLINGTON SYNGE: *THE PLAYBOY OF THE WESTERN WORLD* (PART I)

UNIT STRUCTURE

4.1 Learning Objectives

4.2 Introduction

4.3 John Millington Synge: The Playwright

4.3.1 His Life

4.3.2 His Dramatic Career

4.4 Sources of *the Playboy of the Western World*

4.5 Critical Reception of Synge

4.6 Let Us Sum Up

4.7 Further Reading

4.8 Answers to Check Your Progress (Hints Only)

4.9 Possible Questions

4.1 LEARNING OBJECTIVES

After going through this unit, you will be able to

- discuss the life and works of the Irish playwright J. M. Synge
- read Synge as one of the greatest modern playwrights
- trace the sources of his important play the *Playboy of the Western World*
- discuss the reception of Synge as a great playwright.

4.2 INTRODUCTION

This unit shall introduce you to John Millington Synge the author of the play *The Playboy of the Western World* (1907). Synge is considered the greatest dramatist of the Irish Literary Renaissance. In his unsentimental but compassionate portrayal of Irish peasants and his highly imaginative and poetic dialogue (patterned after the vernacular spoken by the rural population in the west of Ireland), Synge attempted to capture the essence of the Irish spirit, which he described in his preface to *The Playboy of the*

Western World as “fiery and magnificent, and tender.” As you finish reading this unit, you will be able to see the qualities of J. M. Synge as one of the greatest playwrights of the modern world.

4.3 JOHN MILLINGTON SYNGE: THE PLAYWRIGHT

4.3.1 His Life

Synge was born in Newtown Villas, Rathfarnham, County Dublin on 16 April 1871. He was the youngest son in a moderately prosperous family of eight children. Rathfarnham was then a rural part of the county, and during his childhood, he was passionately interested in county life. Synge was educated privately at schools in Dublin and Bray. Later, he travelled to Europe to study music, but changed his mind and decided to focus on literature. Synge entered Trinity College, Dublin in 1889 and graduated with a BA in 1892. He also studied piano and violin at the Royal Irish Academy before travelling and studying music in Germany, Italy and France. He returned to Ireland in June 1894, and moved to Paris to study literature and languages at the Sorbonne. In 1896, he visited Italy to study Italian for a time before returning to Paris. Later that year, he met W. B. Yeats, who advised him to develop an interest in the Irish language and tradition and also encouraged him to live for a while in the Aran Islands and then return to Dublin and devote himself to creative work. Subsequently, from 1898 to 1902, he spent five summers in the Aran Islands collecting stories and folklore and perfecting his Irish, which stimulated his interest in the life style and humour of this isolated community of people. From the notes he had made during this stay was born *The Aran Islands* (1907) which clearly shows his developing interest in the music of speech.

Together with W. B. Yeats, Lady Gregory, he formed the Irish National Theatre Society, which would in 1904 be established as the Abbey Theatre. Until his death, Synge was one of the directors of Abbey Theatre along with Yeats and Lady Gregory. Synge is widely

regarded as the most influential Irish dramatist of the 20th century, who made his debut in 1903 when his first play *The Shadow of the Glen* caused a stir among audiences and critics alike during its opening run in Dublin. Over the next two years, Synge produced two other plays: *Riders to the Sea* (1904), which is considered to be one of the greatest one-act plays in the history of modern drama; and *The Well of the Saints* (1905), which celebrates the imagination and heroism of the a dissident. However, he became notorious as the author of *The Playboy of the Western World* (1907), which caused riots in the Abbey Theatre and brought his work to the attention of the wider world for the first time. Two other plays, *The Tinker's Wedding,* written in 1907 and *Deirdre of the Sorrows* staged posthumously in 1910, complete the canon of Synge's plays. Yet besides *The Aran Islands* (1907) before his early death in 1909 he also left a small body of prose of considerable significance which includes an extraordinarily rich compendium of travel essays, now collected under the title *In Wicklow, West Kerry and Connemara* (CW II, 187–343), as well as a collection of poetry (1909).



LET US KNOW

In 1901, there emerged "The Irish National Dramatic Society", its main objectives being the production of purely Irish plays, plays written in English by Irish authors, and plays related to Ireland interpreted by local actors under a self-contained board of direction. This society was the outcome of The Irish National Literary Society, which Mr. W. B. Yeats founded in the early nineties. Associated with him from the beginning had been Lady Gregory, whose plays now form an important part of the company's repertoire. Miss Horniman stepped in as the patron, providing them with the little Abbey Theater in Dublin and subsidising the company through all their early struggles, thus lending her personal assistance until the company became independent.

In 1907, the production of Synge's play *The Playboy of the Western World* was followed by a week of rioting in Dublin —because its intention was misinterpreted. Yeats supported Synge and wrote eloquently about his works in various prefaces. A few months later *The Playboy* was enthusiastically accepted in London. Yeats' experience turned ironical, as it was Synge who began to be regarded as the master spirit of the Irish Literary Movement. However, Synge's reputation was short lived, as he died young at the age of only 37.

Synge's life coincided exactly with one of the most pivotal phases of Irish socio-political history, which saw the agrarian unrest of Charles Stewart Parnell's era of the late 19th century that gave way to the revolutionary republicanism that led to the 1916 Easter Rising. His involvement in the turbulent early years of the Abbey Theatre–Ireland's national theatre, was crucial to his life as a dramatist. In addition, with his unique perspectives on his ascendancy and the nationalist cultural revival, Synge could very well diagnose the ills that crippled Irish society and culture.

4.3.2 His Dramatic Career

In 1903, Synge left Paris and moved to London. By that time, he had written two one-act plays *Riders to the Sea* and *The Shadow of the Glen.* These were conscious celebration of the independent spirit of the Irish people. These met with Lady Gregory's approval, and *The Shadow of the Glen* was performed at the Molesworth Hall in October 1903. *Riders to the Sea* was performed at the same venue in February 1904. Both plays were based on the stories Synge had collected from the Aran Islands, and Synge relied on props from the Aran Islands to help set the stage. *The Shadow of the Glen* (1903) was based on a story of an unfaithful wife and it was attacked in print by the Irish nationalist leader Arthur Griffith as "a slur on Irish womanhood". Years later, Synge wrote, "When I was writing *The Shadow of the Glen* some years ago, I got more aid than any learning could have given me from a chink in the floor of the old Wicklow

house where I was staying, that let me hear what was being said by the servant girls in the kitchen." This encouraged more critical attacks that alleged that Synge described Irish women in an unfair manner.



Threnody: A wailing ode, song, hymn or poem of mourning.

Riders to the Sea (1904) is both a **threnody** and a song of praise to the unfathomable spirit of the Aran Islanders. The combination of the poetic and the realistic is excellently demonstrated by this one act play about a mother who loses her sixth son to the sea. The characters are peasants of the type of people Synge lived with the Aran Islands. They were a rude people, and their struggle against a relentless nature is beautifully told in poetic prose based on their common speech. It was also attacked by nationalists who decried it because of the author's attitude to God and religion. Furthermore, Synge's audience felt that he did a disservice to Irish nationalism for not idealising his characters. However, later critics would attack Synge for idealising the Irish peasantry too much. Despite these attacks, the plays are now part of the canon of English language theatre. *Riders to the Sea* is an example of superb theatre. The characters of this tragedy of the sea are not symbolist shadows but persons in an environment or a milieu of occupations and customs who had similar experiences with the stormy Atlantic off the coast of Ireland. The characters in the play are life-like, and their speech is so much a part of their character. Not to be able to act, indeed, is in their case and in their situation of the play a form of action.

His next play, *The Well of the Saints* was staged at the theatre in 1905, again to nationalist disapproval. Set in the East of Ireland 'one or more centuries ago' it is a comedy in which Synge's ironic pessimism finds expression in the decision of two blind beggars to reject the gift of sight because it had destroyed their illusions. Synge's masterpiece, *The The Playboy of the Western World*, was first performed in the Abbey on 26 January 1907. The comedy centres on the story of apparent patricide and attracted a wide hostile reaction from the Irish public and a riot was sparked off by a mere reference

to an undergarment. One doubts that the Dublin and America riots against the *Playboy* really were caused by Christy's celebrated image of "a drift of chosen females, standing in their shifts itself, maybe, from this place to the Eastern World." Synge's image of west Ireland is joyous in its presentation, but what it reflects is barbaric squalor, credulity, brutal cupidity—a world of drunken louts and their hopelessly desperate women.



LET US KNOW

Riot also sparked off because Ireland was the home of the Christian tradition, her women were models of chastity and purity. Against this are set the 'heroic' aspects of homicide, countless jests on the subject during agrarian troubles. The language of the play was also misunderstood, and Audience broke up in disorder at the utterance of the word 'shift', they thought that it was coarse. The *Freeman's Journal* described it as "an unmitigated, protracted libel upon Irish peasant men, and worse still upon Irish girlhood". *The Playboy of the Western World* is regarded as his crowning achievement. Although it is not so easy to refuse the iconic status earned by the play, arising out of its infamous first production and as a work of dramatic excellence in its own right, the attention that it routinely received often hints at the deeper and more engaged considerations of Synge's works.

Another one-act play *The Tinker's Wedding* was first performed in 1909. It is a comedy, which portrays a tinker (A person who moved from place to place repairing and selling things), called Sarah Casey with the problem of reconciling her wandering life with the urge to be properly married by a priest. However, Synge initially did not attempt to have it performed, largely because of a scene where a priest is tied up in a sack, which, as he wrote to the publisher Elkin Mathews in 1905, would probably upset "a good many of our Dublin friends". As was obvious, the staging of the play led to lot of troubles as it offended many Dubliners who did not like to see

a priest bundled into a sack. Therefore, following the riot caused by *The Playboy of the Western World,* Synge thought it prudent to stage the play in London rather than in Dublin. Synge's last play was *Deidre of the Sorrow* (1910), a dramatised representation of Irish mythology. It was, however, posthumously staged after Synge had died of Hodgkin's disease.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q 1: Who was J. M. Synge? Why is his play *The Playboy of the Western World* so important?

Q 2: How did W. B. Yeats influence Synge?

Q 3: Many of the plays by Synge became controversial. Do you agree?

4.4 SOURCES OF *THE PLAYBOY OF THE WESTERN WORLD*

Synge in the 'Preface' to the play clearly explains that it was born out of his experiences in the countrysides of Ireland. The idea of a man who killed his father being welcomed and shielded from justice by a rural community came from a tall tale told to Synge by the Aran storyteller Pat Dirane. Tall tales are a prominent feature of Irish folklore and are defined by scholar Carolyn Brown as the first-person narratives told as true, but which "challenge the listener's credulity" and which perform "different social functions depending on whether [they are] heard as true or fictional." Both Synge's Preface to the play and the Abbey Theatre's promotional material stressed the fact that Synge had lived among peasants and that the story in the play had actually occurred. When that first audience in 1907 saw fantastical and crude elements in what they had expected to be a piece of realism, they thought that it had offended the politically symbolic Irish peasantry, and rioted. On the other hand, those more prepared to see the play as a piece of fiction hailed it as a great work of art. You may read the following from Synge's own 'Preface' to the play to gain some ideas regarding the sources of this great play you are reading in this unit.

"In writing The Playboy of the Western World, as in my other plays, I have used one or two words only that I have not heard among the country people of Ireland, or spoken in my own nursery before I could read the newspapers. A certain number of the phrases I employ I have heard also from herds and fishermen along the coast from Kerry to Mayo, or from beggar-women and ballad-singers nearer Dublin; and I am glad to acknowledge how much I owe to the folk imagination of these fine people. Anyone who has lived in real intimacy with the Irish peasantry will know that the wildest sayings and ideas in this play are tame indeed, compared with the fancies one may hear in any little hillside cabin in Geesala, or Carraroe, or Dingle Bay. All art is a collaboration; and there is little doubt that in the happy ages of literature, striking and beautiful phrases were as ready to the story-teller's or the playwright's hand, as the rich cloaks and dresses of his time. It is probable that when the Elizabethan dramatist took his ink-horn and sat down to his work he used many phrases that he had just heard, as he sat at dinner, from his mother or his children. In Ireland, those of us who know the people have the same privilege. When I was writing "The Shadow of the Glen," some years ago, I got more aid than any learning could have given me from a chink in the floor of the old Wicklow house where I was staying, that let me hear what was being said by the servant girls in the kitchen. This matter, I think, is of importance, for in countries where the imagination of the people, and the language they use, is rich and living, it is possible for a writer to be rich and copious in his words, and at the same time to give the reality, which is the root of all poetry, in a comprehensive and natural form. In the modern literature of towns, however, richness is found only in sonnets, or prose poems, or in one or two elaborate books that are far away from the profound and common interests of life. One has, on one side, Mallarme and Huysmans producing this literature; and on the other, Ibsen and Zola dealing with the reality of life in joyless and pallid words."

The above paragraph clearly explains Synge's purpose of writing this great play.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q 4: What offended the people when the play was first performed in 1907?

Q 5: Comment on the sources of the play.

4.5 CRITICAL RECEPTION OF SYNGE

J. M. Synge rendered important influence towards the development of Irish drama by bringing in the Anglo-Irish dialect to the stage, and influencing later playwrights such as Sean O'Casey and Brendan Behan. He remains one of the most revered figures in modern drama, and his plays had a great influence on the modern developments in Theater. In addition, his creation of a stylised language incorporating poetic imagery and vernacular speech patterns that had a profound effect on such writers as William Butler Yeats and Samuel Beckett. Critics often gave mixed reviews to Synge's plays when they were originally produced, and the critics from France and Germany quickly embraced him and his style of thinking. Later critics most often focus much on the dialogue, themes, and sources for Synge's plays.

Despite the relatively small corpus of work, Synge's stature has continued to grow steadily among audiences, readers and critics since the time of his death almost a century ago. His plays have been performed frequently and consistently on stages in Ireland and abroad. Besides, many of his works have been translated into other languages. His major prose work *The Aran Islands*, has taken its place as the acknowledged progenitor of the sub-genre of Irish island memoirs. His travel essays are the lesser-documented social and cultural dynamics of the rural Ireland at the close of the 19th century. His stature as a dramatist of international repute was assured early on and it continues to grow as his global influence extends far and wide to the work of Eugene O'Neill, Djuna Barnes, and James Weldon Johnson in America, to Louis Esson in Australia, to Bertolt Brecht and Federico García Lorca in Europe, and to Derek Walcott and Mustapha Matura in the West Indies.

Over the century, Synge's works have been mobilised in the pursuit of nationalist, liberal humanist, formalist, feminist, Marxist, historical revisionist and postcolonial critical agendas. Much intellectual energy has been invested since Synge's own time in recording and analysing the details of his plays in production. The original staging of *The Playboy of the Western World* and the controversy, which surrounded it, are important events in the theatre history of modern times. Synge's plays provide fertile ground for those keen to investigate the dynamics of audience response and the function of the theatre at particular historical moments. Yet the range of productions that Synge's work has inspired also demands critical attention.

Synge's plays helped set the Abbey house style for the following four decades. The stylised realism of his writing was reflected in the training given at the Theatre's school of acting, and the plays of peasant life were the main staple of the repertoire until the end of the 1950s. Sean O'Casey, the next major dramatist to write for the Abbey, knew Synge's work well and attempted to do for the Dublin working classes what his predecessor had done for the rural poor. However, Synge also influenced playwrights like Brendan Behan, Paul Vincent Carroll, Brinsley Mac Namara, and Lennox Robinson. It is also assumed that Samuel Beckett too was indebted to Synge because in his youth Beckett was a regular audience member at the Abbey and was a great admirer of the plays of Yeats, Synge and O'Casey. Synge's use of tramps, beggars and peasants influenced the portrayal of many of the figures in Beckett's novels and dramatic works.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q 6: Briefly explain Synge's contribution to Irish drama?

Q 7: Besides being an important event in the theatre history of modern times, *The Playboy* is also important in other ways. Explain.



4.6 LET US SUM UP

From your reading of the above account, you have come to know that Synge was an Irish playwright, poet, prose writer, travel writer, and collector of folklore. He was a key figure in the Irish Literary Revival and was one of the cofounders of the Abbey Theatre. He is best known for his play *The Playboy of the Western World*, which caused riots in Dublin during its opening run at the Abbey Theatre. Although he came from an Anglo-Irish background, Synge's writings are mainly concerned with the world of the Roman Catholic peasants of rural Ireland and with what he saw as the essential paganism of their world-view. You must have noted that while writing the play *The Playboy of the Western World*, Synge turned to the speech and imagination of the Irish country people to add vitality to English drama. Subsequently, his language seems to have emerged as rich, poetic, real, and natural. This play is a resounding success both as a comedy and as a 'Criticism of life'. The other point that you have learnt is that the speech of the Irish peasantry also provided him with some of the resources of poetic drama. In this play, the traditional ideas and ideals are undermined by a comic representation of reality. However, what makes this play 'modern' is its undermining of the neat pattern of the well-made play. Synge's plays written mainly between 1903 to 1909 were often accepted by the Dublin audience as strange. Synge too sought to reduce the conventional action by stressing more on ritual than on distinctive ways of speaking the speech of the English and Western Ireland. In *The Playboy of the Western World*, he perfected the Irish comic form.



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4.8 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS (HINTS ONLY)

Ans to Q 1: Synge was an Irish playwright, poet, prose writer, travel writer and collector of folklore… …he was a key figure in the Irish Literary Revival… …he was one of the cofounders of the Abbey Theatre in Dublin… … *The Playboy of the Western World* is important for its faithful portrayal of Irish peasantry and also because it caused riots in Dublin during its opening run at the Abbey Theatre.

Ans to Q 2: Yeats advised him to develop an interest in the Irish language

and tradition ... ... encouraged him to live for a while in the Aran Islands… …Synge spent five years in the Aran Islands meeting people and collecting stories and folklore… …from the notes he had made during this stay, was born his famous book *The Aran Islands* (1907)

Ans to Q 3: Yes… …*The Shadow of the Glen*, based on a story of an unfaithful wife, was attacked in print by the Irish nationalist leader Arthur Griffith who took it to be "a slur on Irish womanhood"… …*Riders to the Sea* was attacked by nationalists who decried it because of the author's attitude to God and religion… …, *The Playboy of the Western World*, caused riots because of Christy's celebrated image of "a drift of chosen females, standing in their shifts itself, maybe, from this place to the Eastern World… …*The Tinker's Wedding* was attacked largely because of a scene where a priest is shown to be tied up in a sack.

Ans to Q 4: The first audience in 1907 saw fantastical and crude elements in what they had expected to be a piece of realism… …it offended the politically symbolic Irish peasantry who rioted.

Ans to Q 5: In writing the play he used certain words which he had heard among the country people of Ireland… …Synge acknowledged his indebtedness to the folk imagination of the people of Mayo… …he took the imagination of the peasants and fishermen, and the language they used … …he felt that it is possible for a writer to be rich and copious in his words, and at the same time to give the reality, which is the root of all poetry, in a comprehensive and natural form… …but in modern literature of towns, richness is found only in sonnets, or prose poems, or in one or two elaborate books that are far away from the profound and common interests of life.

Ans to Q 6: J. M. Synge contributed to the establishment of Abbey Theatre… …he brought the Anglo-Irish dialect to the stage… …influencing later Irish playwrights such as Sean O'Casey and Brendan Behan… …his stylised language, poetic imagery and vernacular speech patterns had a profound effect on writers like W. B. Yeats and Samuel Beckett.

Ans to Q 7: This play caused riots in Ireland… …this play provide fertile

ground for those keen to investigate the dynamics of audience response and the function of the theatre at particular historical moments.



4.9 POSSIBLE QUESTIONS

Q1: Is Synge's depiction of the Aran Islands sympathetic? Hostile? Condescending? Discuss.

Q 2: Describe the various types of humour and comedy used by Synge in his plays particularly in *The Playboy of the Western World.*

Q 3: Discuss Synge's influence on the growth of the Abbey Theater. What made the Abbey Theater so important for its era, and for Irish national consciousness generally?

Q 4: Examine the history of the Abbey Theater alongside other culturally important Theater groups and art collectives, such as the "Lost Generation" of American expatriates or the art circle surrounding Andy Warhol and the Velvet Underground.

Q 5. *The Playboy of the Western World* was considered so offensive at the time of its staging that it sparked riots. Discuss.

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UNIT 5: JOHN MILLINGTON SYNGE: *THE PLAYBOY OF THE WESTERN WORLD* (PART II)

UNIT STRUCTURE

5.1 Learning Objectives

5.2 Introduction

5.3 Act wise Summary of the Play

5.4 Critical Commentary on the Play

5.5 Major Themes

5.6 Major Characters

5.7 Critical Reception of the Play

5.8 Let Us Sum Up

5.9 Further Reading

5.10 Answers to Check Your Progress (Hints Only)

5.11 Possible Questions

5.1 LEARNING OBJECTIVES

After going through this unit, you will be able to

- explain the different aspects related to Synge's Irish background reflected in the play
- identify the major themes of the play and explain how they reflect the major concerns of Synge as a dramatist
- have an idea of the different characters and discuss their role in the play
- assess the play as a landmark in modern drama.

5.2 INTRODUCTION

This unit deals with *The Playboy of the Western World* a three-act play written by the Irish playwright John Millington Synge. This play was first performed at the Abbey Theatre, Dublin on January 26, 1907. It tells the story of Christy Mahon, a young man running away from his farm, claiming he killed his father. The people of the locality are more interested

in enjoying his story than in condemning his murderous deed. You should note that the Irish dramatic movement produced a number of humorous and sentimental plays of Irish life and history. Subsequently, Synge turned to the speech and imagination of the Irish country people to restore the vitality to English drama. He sought a vocabulary, which was rich, poetic, real, and natural. *The Playboy of the Western World* exemplifies all such qualities. This play succeeds both as a comedy and as a 'Criticism of life'. At the same time, the speech of the Irish peasantry also provided him with some of the resources of poetic drama. In this play, the traditional ideas and ideals are undermined by comedy. However, what makes this play modern is its undermining of conventional social myths, beliefs, and convictions and the demolition of the neat pattern of the well-made play. Even after eighty years of the riot-provoking first performance in (1907), this play retains an extraordinary freshness. Whether it is an accurate representation of peasant life in the impoverished rural west of Ireland seems rather unimportant because what matters is the play's aesthetic originality and it is exalting the persuasiveness of rhetoric over the reductive world of the reality.

5.3 ACT WISE SUMMARY OF THE PLAY

You must have already noticed that the action of the play takes place near a village on the coast of County Mayo during two autumn days. On the first day, the character called Christy Mahon arrives and tells the people of the locality that he has killed his tyrannical father. Overwhelmed by this act of boldness, the villagers lionise Christy. Peegen Mike, the daughter of the owner of the local Shebeen (inn), and Widow Quinn provide him the first pleasure of the company of a woman. Subsequently, Christy wins a mule race and is rewarded with the promise of marriage to Peegen. However, the celebration is cut short by the sudden return of Christy's supposedly dead father, to reclaim his delinquent son. In the end, Christy goes with him but no longer into servitude. Old Mahon respects him now, and Peegen grieves over the loss of her 'playboy' from the West. In the following subsections, you will get to read about the play in more detail.

Act I

A disorderly young man, Christy Mahon, stagger into Michael Flaherty's tavern in rural County Mayo, Ireland. Upon hearing that their sudden visitor is on the run from the law, the curious onlookers, including Michael Flaherty's daughter Pegeen Mike, try to find out his crime. When it was eventually found out that Christy murdered his father with the blow of a heavy spade used to dig potatoes, the locals get awestruck as they reason that a man who kills his father must be strong, brave, and dangerous. Against the protests of Shawn Keogh, Pegeen's meek and God-fearing fiancé, Flaherty engages Christy as a potboy to keep Pegeen safe in dark and lonely nights. Now left alone together, Christy and Pegeen start talking and fall in love with each other. However, they are interrupted by the Widow Quin, who has been sent by Shawn and by the priest, and who is to take Christy away. However, Widow Quin is unable to persuade him to leave and Pegeen kicks her out of the house. Pegeen then puts the tired Christy to bed and retires to her own room.

Act II

Christy is very happy to find himself with a job and a girl. He also draws the attention of the local women, who arrive from the town to marvel at the man who killed his father. Pegeen angrily sends the girls away and frightens Christy with the story of a man hanged that morning. They reconcile until they are again interrupted, this time by Shawn and the Widow, who try to bribe Christy with nice clothes and a ticket to the States. When this ploy to get rid of Christy also fails, Shawn leaves the Widow to attempt to seduce Christy. Unexpectedly, Christy's father, Old Mahon, comes to the pub. Christy hides himself out of shame and the Widow questions the old man. It finally turns out that Old Mahon did not die from the blow by his son, and claims that Christy is lazy, shy, and incompetent. Widow Quin takes her chance by protecting Christy and by sending Old Mahon away on a wild goose chase and vowing to keep Christy's secret. The danger having passed for the moment, the village girls come to take Christy away to participate in the local games and sports.

Act III:

The farmers Philly Cullen and Jimmy Farrell are chatting in the pub when Old Mahon returns. Widow Quin, arriving soon after, tries to convince them that the old man is crazy, but the farmers' suspicions are aroused by the man's actual identity. The crowd enters, celebrating Christy's win. Christy, who is now at the height of his confidence and poetic powers, and Pegeen convinces Flaherty that he's a better match for Pegeen than Shawn. Just as it seems that everything is falling into place for the young lovers, Old Mahon returns and chaos ensues. Christy, sensing that public opinion has turned against him for appearing to be a liar, chases his father outside to kill him for good. Now the villagers become entirely hostile, scared they will be arrested as accomplices. Widow Quin and a village girl try to save Christy from hanging by disguising him in a petticoat and sending him off to the states, but he refuses to leave Pegeen. The villagers come back in and tie him up, and Pegeen even burns him. At the last minute, Old Mahon miraculously returns alive and unties his son. Christy agrees to go with his father, but reverses their roles: now the young man is the master and his father the cowed subservient. Christy leaves on a triumphant note, blessing the crowd for having turned him into a "likely gaffer" after all. Devastated Pegeen laments her loss of "the only The Playboy of the Western World."



LET US KNOW

The Revival of Poetic Drama:

From 1860s onwards, spectators and actors were trained in the naturalistic forms of drama. In the hands of Ibsen, Jones, Pinero, Shaw, Galsworthy, naturalist drama became prosaic, matter of fact, realistic and intellectual. Drama became social, critical and thoughtful, its main preoccupations being the problems of marriage, sex, war, poverty, law and justice and so on. The Naturalist dramatists wanted to produce 'the illusion of reality' with a deliberate choice of everyday contemporary situations and ordinary characters. Subsequently, they rejected the older conventions of dramatic speech. Ibsen gave up verse thinking it to be the 'language of Gods'. Besides,

these dramatists believed that poetic dramatists complicated the meaning by using too many metaphors, images and symbols. Thus, it can be argued that the influence of naturalism on stage became the cause for the decline of speech. The visual elements became more elaborate, scenery more powerful and acting more personal. Playwrights such as Synge believed that by becoming over real, drama had lost its essential joy. Besides, the influence of Japanese Noh drama, the plays of Maeterlink, the French Symbolist poets and the Russian ballet, made drama take a turn towards the imaginative and symbolic tendency. It became poetic again.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q 1: How would you like to comment on the role of folklore in Synge's upbringing as a playwright?

Q 2: Do you think that Synge arouses only laughter with his use of many humorous elements in the play?

5.4 CRITICAL COMMENTARY ON THE PLAY

Like many Irish nationalists and literary figures of his time, Synge took a deep interest in the traditional Irish folklore, and the peasants for whom tradition was an integral part of everyday life. Synge nevertheless felt a deep connection between folklore and nature, poetry, and human psychology, and believed that he himself had "[t]hat kind of frank imagination by which folk-lore is created." The deep influence of folklore on both Synge and his play has led to significant crossover between anthropology and literary criticism in the interpretation of *The Playboy*. This reminds one of Mikhail Bakhtin's ideas of the carnival, which is a time of "festive misrule" in which roles and values are inversed. In *The Playboy* too, a murderer is considered a protector, a son rules his father, a "liar on walls" becomes "The Playboy of the Western World." Such 'carnivalesque' acts as an important release for the society.

Synge gained the mastery over writing lively dialogue coupled with

colourful imagery. This play is an excellent rendering of his infusion of the speech of the common people with the rich English-language dialect of the Mayo County. You must have by now noted that it was from his five years stay in Aran Islands that Synge had learnt the intonations and speech patterns of the people of western Ireland. However, he also prepared the dialogue with words or phrases common in other parts of Ireland. As he states in the 'Preface': "...As to the imagery, it relies heavily on vivid metaphors and hyperboles. For example, when Michael Flaherty asks Christy Mahon whether he has committed larceny, Christy replies that he has no need to stoop to thievery, for his father "could have bought up the whole of your old house a while since, from the butt of his tail pocket, and not have missed the weight of it gone." Thus, the significance of Synge's plays lies to a greater extent in their use of local languages and dialects. Synge further writes in the 'Preface':

"On the stage one must have reality, and one must have joy; and that is why the intellectual modern drama has failed, and people have grown sick of the false joy of the musical comedy that has been given them in place of the rich joy found only in what is superb and wild in reality. In a good play, every speech should be as fully flavoured as a nut or apple, and such speeches cannot be written by anyone who works among people who have shut their lips on poetry. In Ireland, for a few years more, we have a popular imagination that is fiery and magnificent, and tender; so that those of us who wish to write start with a chance that is not given to writers in places where the springtime of the local life has been forgotten, and the harvest is a memory only, and the straw has been turned into bricks. J. M. S. January 21st, 1907."

Another aspect of Synge's writing style is his use of humour most of which grows out of the dialogue. Synge is not concerned with arousing laughter, but he uses **reversal** to reach the central ambiguity and complexity of being in a lost world. The stranger upsets all conventions and ironically, he is later accepted in society. Those on whom we laugh at are also laughing at ourselves because laughter is central to the idea of acting and being. When Old Mahon comes crawling over the floor, Christy cries out: "Are you coming to be killed a third time, or what ails you now?" Although

contemporary readers read the play as a satire on Ireland, it is rather an exuberant folk tale in which the humorous is curiously blended with the poetic.

Although this play is often read as a comedy, there is often an element of pathos in the play, which deals with the self-deceptions of characters in a bleak and distant part of Ireland. The remote Mayo coastline, on which *The Playboy of the Western World* is set, serves to confine an isolated rural community, one which is disturbed by the arrival of a fugitive, a supposed parricide. Words, and the illusion words create, dominate the action. As Andrew Sanders writes: "Christy Mahon's prestige depends not upon a fulfilled deed but on his recounting of a deed which has failed to succeed; his final departure with his thrice 'resurrected' father is accompanied by a final, triumphant act of myth-making in which he declares that he goes away 'like a gallant captain with his heathen slave'. Nothing could be farther from the world of Oscar Wilde."

The chief value of *The Playboy* lay in the fact that it ripped up the smugness of the Irish people, people so pleased with themselves on certain slender grounds, and teaching themselves the much-needed lesson that they are very like the rest of God's creatures. Synge portrayed the Irish people as faithfully as he could, and in his play put in the element of poetry in the Celtic character. He also put in the elements of cruelty, wit and generosity, dullness and greed, gallantry and cowardice, nobility and brutality and so on. The outcry against *The Playboy* was one against its style, against its way of seeing.

5.5 MAJOR THEMES

The above sections have already hinted at some of the themes of the play. Yet, for a better appreciation of the play's abiding interest the following themes are discussed in some detail.

Idea of Heroism:

In this play, among the people of Mayo, the idea of heroes and heroism is truly ambiguous and ironic. For instance, in Pegeen's views, heroes are dangerous and violent men who are set against the background

of Holy Ireland. Soon one discovers that the great talkers are synonymous with bravery and heroism in this community. By the end of Act I, Christy becomes fully conscious of his heroic status and his new self-flourishes after this. It is because of his power of eloquence and exaggerated use of language that the community makes a hero of Christy Mahon. This encourages Christy to develop within himself the illusion that he really is the hero. Ironically, bravery of talk is an adequate substitute for brave deeds in this somewhat sterile community. At the end of the play, however, Christy emancipates himself from all forms of illusion and achieves true heroism and freedom. Christy Mahon also echoes several characters or types from the traditional lore. The criminal or the outlaw as the hero is not uncommon among the groups that have been historically oppressed, because the criminal defies unjust laws and a societal system that keeps the group subjugated. Because of Ireland's long history of colonisation by and rebellion against England, the heroic outlaw is especially strong in Irish mindset and tradition. However, violence in folktales is not limited to criminals, and in many cases, it functions as a ritual rite of passage into maturity. Christy's "murder" of his abusive father accelerates his personal growth. Described by his father as "the looney of Mahon's" and a lazy, good-for-nothing laughingstock, Christy is like yet another folk hero: the foolish, bumbling younger son who succeeds where his older and cleverer brothers fail.



LET US KNOW

In returning to specifically Celtic sources, Christy is also made to resemble the great Irish hero Cuchulainn in some general (and possibly satirical) ways. Cuchulainn is an Irish mythological hero who appears in the stories of the Ulster Cycle, as well as in Scottish and Manx folklore. Both Cuchulainn and Christy are renowned for violent deeds and are relentlessly pursued by women. Both accomplish great feats (Christy's verbal, Cuchulainn's physical) in order to woo their chosen brides. More specifically, "a drift of chosen females, standing in their shifts itself," references the episode in which Cuchulainn is brought down from a battle rage by being confronted with around 150 naked women.

Escape from Humdrum Life:

Christy Mahon acts to change his life—first by cracking his father's skull and second by telling a grand tale, that endears him to his listeners. Neither action, of course, is how a young man in the real world should go about improving himself. However, *The Playboy of the Western World* takes place in a fanciful world that allows the author to do the implausible and the outrageous. Therefore, Christy describes himself as the most admirable of murderers to the rural folk of County Mayo. Ironically, though, Christy really does transform himself in response to the adulation heaped on him. However, his admirers—people hungry for diversion from their humdrum life—do not change; the closest they get to an exciting life is to drink, listen to exciting stories, or attach themselves to a hero, Christy, from the outside. After he returns home, they return to their monotonous life.

Significance of Community Life:

The community represented in this play comes from a small rural village in the west of Ireland. Christy's father Old Mahon describes the people of the community at the conclusion of the play as 'the fools of Mayo'. These people become the major victims of irony and satire in the play. The moral standard of this community is ambiguous and contradictory. They glamourise a man because he claims he has murdered his father. They are unable to accept the true reality at the conclusion. Christy is a hero and man at the conclusion. Yet the villagers fail to see that. At the conclusion of this play, these people are forced to return to their village more imprisoned than ever. Storytelling is an important aspect in this community. It is not the actual deed, which exalts Christy in the eyes of the community, but the manner in which he tells it. This is clear from the comments of Pegeen Mike: 'such poet's talking and bravery of heart.' These people are stifled by the dull, drab quality of their lives and so they use the imagination to escape from reality. They chat themselves out of reality and into fantasy. At the sports, Christy truly does win the games and here fantasy is translated into fact. By the time Old Mahon turns up and exposes the hollowness of Christy's story, Christy is changed in such a way that nothing will displace this new self. From now on, he will be the master of all fights. However, the villagers are

unable to face reality. They expel Christy, as they are unable to accept the fact that they have created the fantasy and now it has become reality.

Comic Aspects of Life:

The first draft of the play was entitled "The Murderer, A Farce". Yet it is not so easy to classify the play as it has many facets. It is a comedy with elements of strong farce especially seen in the resurrection of Christy's father and in the revelation of a massive and mock-heroic lie. Still, the comedy might have resulted in the marriage of Christy and Pegeen, and Old Mahon and Widow Quin. From another viewpoint, this play can be termed as a 'free' comedy in which moral issues are reversed, transcended or ignored. This view is synonymous with what Yeats had said, "In a country like Ireland, where personifications have taken the place of life, men have more hate than love, for the inhuman is nearly the same as the human, but literature which is a part of that clarity that is the forgiveness of sins, will make an understand men however little they confirm to our expectations." The playboy Christy finds his soul through a lie, the 'gallous story' of his parricide. Nothing can be more comic than this in the play.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q 3: What are the important themes that one can identify in this play?

Q 4: In what ways, did Synge become instrumental in the revival of poetic drama?

Q 5: What aspects of Heroism can you find in the play?

5.6 MAJOR CHARACTERS

You must be already familiar with the characters of the play. However, in an attempt to give a more comprehensive analysis of the play, the major characters are given a brief introduction.

Christopher Mahon:

The Young boy who claims to have murdered his father. At the beginning of the play, Christopher Mahon or Christy is ordinary and undistinguished except in his ability to tell a good story—namely the story

of how he killed his father. His tale turns him into a hero to his listeners. Their admiration for him improves his self-esteem. By the end of the play, however, he is not only a better man but also mature enough to realise his individuality. He is the playboy, an offensive simpleton, then a hero and a braggart, living in Kerry before he decides to kill his father with a spade. Then he leaves for Mayo. Between his timid entrance into Mayo by saying "God save all here!" and his exit by saying, "The way I'll go running through a romping time" he learns what it means to being branded as a fraud. The remote coastline of Mayo, which serves as the setting of the play, represents the insular rural community, which is disturbed by the sudden arrival of a fugitive. Christi Mahon's prestige depends not upon a fulfilled deed but on his recounting of a deed, which has failed to succeed.

Margaret Flaherty:

Margaret is the pub owner's daughter, who is pretty and witty, and who takes fancy to Christy Mahon. Her friends call her *Pegeen Mike*, or simply *Pegeen*. She is a bit of a tragic figure by the end of the play, when Christy leaves her community without reconciling with her. She is the heroin and victim. She won her man despite all opposition from her own sex. The marriage had also been approved by her father in a drunken phase. From this union would come, it was hoped, a band of 'little gallant swearers by the name of God.' However, she loses her man, as she states: "Oh my grief, I've lost him surely, I've lost the only The Playboy of the Western World."

Michael Flaherty:

Father of Margaret (Pegeen) Flaherty and owner of the pub in which the action of the play takes place. He enjoys attending wakes (nightlong viewings of corpses before funerals), where liquor and lively talk flow freely. During most of the onstage action of the play, he is attending a **wake** with his friends offstage.

Shawn Keough:

Dull, spineless young farmer who has Michael Flaherty's approval to marry Margaret (Pegeen) who is also his second cousin. She despises Shawn after Christy arrives in the locality. With the help of Widow Quin, he tries to send him away from Pegeen but in vain.

Widow Quin:

Crafty, opportunistic 30-year-old who makes a play for Christy. According to rumours, she killed her husband and now flirts with handsome guys.

Old Mahon:

Christy Mahon's father. Thanks to his thick skull, he survives Christy's attempts to kill him. Although he has always looked down upon his son, Christy comes to respect him at the end of the play after he reveals himself as a man of nerve.

Father Reilly:

The local Roman Catholic priest. He does not appear in the play, but his presence is nevertheless felt because of Shawn Keough's frequent references to him. Because Shawn is a relative (second cousin) of Pegeen, he needs the approval of the Catholic Church to marry her. Therefore, Shawn is forever worried about how his conduct will be perceived by Father Reilly.

5.7 CRITICAL RECEPTION OF THE PLAY

The Playboy of the Western World is considered by some to be the finest play written in English during the 20th century. Criticism of *The Playboy* typically stresses the thematic opposition between reality and imagination in the drama, tracing Christy's development toward self- realisation as an individual and as a poetic persona. The play's portrayal of his transformation is praised for suggesting a variety of mythological and biblical archetypes. For example, *The Playboy* is often discussed in terms of the central themes and plot structures of the legends surrounding the hero Cuchulain from Irish mythology, and the drama's treatment of patricide is compared to that in Sophocles' tragedy *Oedipus Rex*. Some commentators, emphasising the rejection of Christy by his former admirers in the play's third act, have argued that Synge presents him as a Christ figure. However, comic and ironic elements in *The Playboy* have caused critics to debate the degree of parody involved in Synge's approach to such prototypes. Christy, for example, is also considered a mock or secularised Christ in light of the drama's pagan themes and ironic use of religious allusions and expressions.

The Playboy has garnered much critical attention for eluding traditional classifications of comedy and tragedy, and is cited as an early example of the modern tragicomedy.

Synge's use of language in *The Playboy* was also important from the first. Writing about the play in 1908, Louis Untermeyer in *Poet Lore* noted, "Wild poetry itself is in his utterance, for although Mr. Synge writes entirely in prose, his sentences are so steeped in similes of the skies that his very commonplaces are filled and coloured with all the nuances of rhythm. The sunlight filters through his lines and the spell of scenic splendour is over all his work."



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q 6: What kind of mythical and biblical allusions does the play *The Playboy* make?



5.7 LET US SUM UP

From this unit, you have learnt that *The Playboy of the Western World* is considered by many to be one of the finest plays written in English during the 20th century. You have learnt that criticism of the play typically stresses the thematic opposition between reality and imagination in the drama, tracing Christy's development toward self-realisation as an individual and as a poetic persona.



5.8 FURTHER READING

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5.9 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS (HINTS ONLY)

Ans to Q 1: Synge took a deep interest in the traditional Irish folklore… …he felt a deep connection between folklore and nature, poetry, and human psychology… …this resulted in a significant crossover between anthropology and literary criticism in the interpretation of *The Playboy.*

Ans to Q 2: No… … but he uses reversal to reach the central ambiguity and complexity of being in a lost world… … those on whom we laugh at are also laughing at us because laughter is central to the idea of acting and being... …in many instances the play approaches the spirit of black comedy as 'Humour is the test of morals, as novice is

humorous.'

Ans to Q 3: Idea of Heroism… …Escape from humdrum life… …Significance of Community Life… …Comic Aspects of Life etc.

Ans to Q 4: From 1860s Naturalist drama became prosaic, matter of fact, realistic and intellectual… …Drama became social, critical and thoughtful, its main preoccupations being the problems of marriage, sex, war, poverty, law and justice and so on… … Synge believed that by becoming over-real, drama had lost its essential joy, and subsequently, he turned to poetry to deal with the everyday reality of the common people.

Ans to Q 5: The idea of heroes and heroism is truly ambiguous and ironic in the play… … in Pegeen's views, heroes are dangerous and violent men who are set against the background of Holy Ireland… …for the community great talkers are synonymous with bravery and heroism… …Christy becomes fully conscious of his heroic status and develops within himself the illusion that he really is the hero… …finally he is free from illusions and achieves true heroism.

Ans to Q 6: *The Playboy* is often discussed in terms of the central themes and plot structures of the legends surrounding the hero Cuchulain from Irish mythology, and the drama's treatment of patricide is compared to that in Sophocles' tragedy *Oedipus Rex*… …Some commentators, emphasising the rejection of Christy by his former admirers in the play's third act, have argued that Synge presents him as a Christ figure.



5.10 POSSIBLE QUESTIONS

Q 1: Why does Christy readily tell the people of Mayo that he killed his father? What implications does the story have in the context of the play?

Q 2: Was Old Mahon right in abusing his son on the ground that he was a dandy?

Q 3: In what way, can *The Playboy* be called a modern play? How does it undermine the conventional social myths, beliefs, and convictions?

Q 4: What is a Well-made play? Do you consider the play to be a 'well-made play'? Give reasons for your answer.

Q 5: Give a character sketch of Shawn Keough? Does he have anything in common with Christy Mahon?

Q 6: To what extent is the humour in the play a result of the ways the characters speak in the country called Mayo in rural Ireland?

Q 7: The custom of holding wakes has a long history in Ireland. State the function it serves in the context of the play.

Q 8: What accounts for Old Mahon's acceptance of his son at the end of the play? Why does Christy go home with his father instead of remaining at Mayo and marrying Pegeen?

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UNIT 6: INTRODUCING MODERN ENGLISH DRAMA

UNIT STRUCTURE

6.1 Learning Objectives

6.2 Introduction

6.3 The Emergence of Modern English Drama

6.4 Important Theorists/Practitioners of Modern English Drama

6.6 Let Us Sum Up

6.6 Further Reading

6.7 Answers to Check Your Progress (Hints Only)

6.8 Possible Questions

6.1 LEARNING OBJECTIVES

After going through this unit, you will be able to

- situate modern English drama in the context of modern drama in Europe as a whole
- know different developmental stages of modern English drama
- get introduced to the main exponents of modern English drama
- differentiate different trends and movements that constitute modern English drama
- understand how different international movements in theatre affected the modern English dramatists.

6.2 INTRODUCTION

This unit which is also the first unit of Block 2 of the lomrse, presents before you a brief introduction to modern English drama. As such, it will cover different phases in the growth and development of modern English drama along with a brief discussion of the different movements and the major dramatists. At the same time, attempts shall be made to trace the foreign or international influences on different movements, approaches was well as different dramatists in modern English drama so that the learners

like you can situate English drama in the modern European context. Though the roots of English drama can be traced back in the middle of the 19th century in the works of playwrights like T. W. Robertson or Sir Squire Bancroft, modern English drama properly began during the last decade of the 19th century. It was George Bernard Shaw, who after being influenced by the naturalist, serious, problem plays of the Norwegian playwright Henrik Ibsen, took to write plays in order to highlight certain hidden, inherent but often unnoticed social problems of the modern times. Before Shaw, because of the performance of Ibsen's plays, a section of English theatregoers was already prepared for serious, realistic plays. As such, Shaw's revolt against the extravagant, melodramatic theatre of his time through his first Ibsenite naturalist play *Widowers Houses* in 1892 earned him immense reputation. This play also officially begins the era of modern English drama.

Though modern English drama started with Naturalism, it changed its course through different movement and approaches of theatre. While John Drinkwater and Clifford Bax were involved in historical and imaginative plays, as a reaction to naturalist plays, James Matthew Barrie war writing romances for the same reason. The Irish nationalist movement also played a significant role in the development of English drama. The plays of W. B. Yeats, and especially those of J. M. Synge, have enriched English drama with a native grandeur of a very rare kind. T. S. Eliot is also a significant name in the history of modern drama because of his contribution to the revival of verse plays. Another important phenomenon of modern English drama is Harold Pinter, who, after the French absurdist Samuel Beckett, has mastered the art of writing absurd plays. While reading this unit, it has to be kept in mind that modern drama in Europe is a very dynamic field of experimentations. Playwrights writing in English have also participated, in varied degrees, in most of the movements and experiments in theatre. As such, the international context of the socio-cultural and literary-artistic background of the playwrights and their plays cannot be ignored. The reader must try to relate English drama in its contemporary international context for a better understanding of the plays. As such, it is advisable that the readers treat this unit as a window to the vast realm of modern English

drama and do read more on the contexts and the playwrights for a proper comprehension of the plays.

6.3 THE EMERGENCE OF MODERN ENGLISH DRAMA

The last few decades of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th witnessed the emergence of modern drama in Europe. Drama was not recognised in England as a powerful literary force by the Victorians. All the conditions operating against the development of Drama during the Victorian age were gradually removed, and hard efforts were taken by actors, theatregoers and theatre managers in popularising drama and making it a force to reckon within the field of literature. So many new trends were introduced in drama and dramatists tried a lot to make drama life-like, realistic and appealing to the common man. The new social problems created in the new social set up of values cried for solution, and drama was the fitting medium in which justice could be done in solving the social and economic problems of the time.

The scene of theatre in the Victorian England was dominated by some minor groups. Theatre activists like T. W. Robertson, Sir Squire Bancroft and Lady Bancroft introduced certain renovation of the structure of the theatres and stagecraft and also in production of the plays. Apart from these technical innovations, progress in various kinds of drama was also discernible. Practice of melodrama marked a swing from the vulgar staginess to a considerable degree of dignity, and from fidelity to reality. In the naturalistic burlesque performed by the likes of Madam Vestris and Charles Mathews, a piquant contrast between the extravagances of sentiment and situation and the quietness of acting and deportment was prominently noticeable. Before 1865, a decidedly realistic kind of acting had appeared in the London theatres. The problem was the absence of playwrights to write plays for the actors of the new school.

The effort made by Thomas William Robertson (1829-1871) was towards naturalism in dialogue, feeling, and situation and the creation of the atmosphere of modern life with no artificialities of plot or violence of passion. Lady Bancroft, actress-manager, appreciated Robertson's views

and she, in her small, intimate theatre, allowed Robertson to put into practice Robertson's ideal of restrained acting and contemporaneousness of effect. However, his technique seems elementary and his dialogue flat or stilted, his fidelity to actuality was not beyond question. The literary value of his plays is rather slight. Even then, in the history of modern English drama, he can claim the position as a pioneer. Another important playwright of the period Sir William S. Gilbert (1836-1911) wrote many farces and pantomimes and in several comedies combined something of Robertson's technique with a cynicism that was all his own. There are motives in his comedies and also in his Bab Ballads (1867-1869) which he wrote for Sir Arthur Sullivan's music. These operettas are unique in the sense that they were enjoyable even apart from their musical element. Lyric charm and lightly parodied romantic themes were combined with a cynicism that was often quietly ruthless to mordant satire and contemporary fashion. However, he could not pass the hazards of his time and emerge as an influential dramatist.

Modern English drama got the major impetus with the influence of Henrik Ibsen. The Norwegian playwright Henrik Ibsen (1828-1906) spearheaded the realistic movement of the 19th century and also served as a bridge to 20th century symbolism in Europe. His realistic dramas of ideas surpassed the other trends in practice because they blend a complex plot, a detailed setting, and middle-class yet extraordinary characters in an organic whole. A quality that makes him one of the most performed dramatists after Shakespeare is that he made these issues concrete and specific in the human dramas, which he unfolded before the audience. With *A Doll's House* (1879) and *Ghosts* (1881), Ibsen leapt into the position of the leading European dramatist. He was the first playwright to make the theatre the site for the serious consideration of contemporary issues and to show that high drama could take place within the confines of the domestic sitting room. Furthermore, his characters were not types, but ordinary yet complex individuals questioning the rules under which society made them live. His questions may be unanswerable and his characters inexhaustible but as actors and directors take up the challenge and engage in the exploration and questioning the audience too become involved as readers and

theatregoers.

Ibsen's Influence and the Naturalist Theatre:

Modern drama in Europe started to flourish with the advent of Ibsen into the scenario. Edmund Gosse, known as the "discoverer" of Ibsen in England, wrote several essays bringing Ibsen to notice. In 1876, he translated *Emperor and Galilean*. William Archer's translation of *Pillars of Society* in 1880 invited tremendous opposition under the leadership of Clement Scott, the drama critic. Sir Henry Irving, the foremost actor of the period turned his face away from the "new" drama. In 1891, the Lord Chamberlain refused licence to *Ghosts*. However, against these social protests, his followers continued supporting his ideals. George Bernard Shaw's The *Quintessence of Ibsenism* appeared in 1891. Simultaneously, the organisation of the Independent Theatre in London (1891), in imitation of the Theatre Libre in Paris (1887) let loose a current of serious, realistic drama. With Elizabeth Robins' production of *Hedda Gabbler* in 1892, appreciation of Ibsen began to flourish, and the controversy gradually withered.

Two of the most successful playwrights of the period were vividly anti-Ibsenite. Henry Arthur Jones wrote about hundred plays but owned nothing of Ibsen's ability to universalise the characters and situations of a particular time and place and with a quiet conscience, he avoided rebellion against "things as they are". He remained involved in the prejudices of the age, and criticised, the social affairs for which he did not cherish much discontent. He preached that the art of drama was not only a matter of cleverly devised situations and artistic stagecraft, but also portrayal of life as a whole. Although he preached so, he never wavered from the demand of the commercial theatre. Jones wrote with his eyes on the actor-manager and the box office. The other playwright is Sir Arthur Wing Pinero (1855-1934). As a playwright, he never ignored the conventions of over-imaginative plot construction, great scenes, conventional exposition and a little bit abundance of 'asides'. Beginning in 1877, he produced a series of comedies and farces. Although the plays were, for natural reason, light in substance, they had the imprints of the dramatist's expertise in creation and resolution

of comic complications. Gradually, Pinero became serious and started to write tragic plots. Pinero set examples of 'formal excellence' in theatre and is noteworthy for the contribution to the revival of theatre.

George Bernard Shaw imported the real Ibsen spirit into English Drama. Highly original and independent in many ways, Shaw was immensely influenced by the plays of Ibsen and, like him he became a champion of conferring the new freedom of subject matter and technique on English drama. Since the appearance of his first play *Widowers Houses* in 1892, Shaw strode on the English stage like a versatile Titan almost till the end of his days. Among modern English dramatists, he proved the most powerful advocate of rationalism and realism, brushing aside Victorian cobwebs, producing a proper climate for a drama of ideas. He succeeded in enlarging the fellow dramatists' vision and slowly forged an appreciative and responsive intellectual audience for his problems plays. With his extremely wide and varied volume of dramatic production, he rendered great services to British drama. His *Arms and the Mans, Candida, Man Superman Saint Joan,* to mention only some of his best plays, brought English drama again into its own and provided inspiration and guidance to other playwright.

The plays of Shaw are followed by a conscious iconoclastic John Galsworthy (1867-1933) and an actor turned director and playwright Harley Granville-Barker (1877-1946). The two great luminaries of modern drama gave a version of realism in their work. Their realism has been described as naturalism i.e. an attempt to present "both fair and foul, no more no less." The naturalistic play is intended to be objective and impersonal, though both Galsworthy and Barker could not be absolutely dispassionate. Both were revolutionaries in their own way. Barker revolted against the tyranny of Victorian convention over the individual and Galsworthy resisted against the heartless but mighty social forces, which crush the individual. Barker expounds the ideal of self-realization, which Galsworthy strives to make out a case for tolerance and mutual understanding and accommodation.

History and Imaginative Plays:

The history plays were immensely popular during the second and third decade of the 20th century. The exploitation of historical themes is the

result of a deliberate endeavour to escape from the trammels of Naturalism and to bring back something of the poetic expression to the theatre. The close association between the poetic school and historical school is well exemplified by John Drinkwater and Clifford Bax. Though Shaw used some historical themes, he cannot be called a practitioner of history plays. It was John Drinkwater who was responsible for setting the trend of history plays. After writing four short plays, he produced *Abraham Lincoln* (1918) which expressed the popular sentiments and achieved great success. The study of Lincoln, at once the statesman of vision and ideals and the homely family man was interspersed with the poetical choruses to produce an overall sense of dignity. Drinkwater was, however, not so successful with his *Oliver Cromwell* (1921) and *Robert E. Lee* (1923). Clifford Bax has written several poetic plays, of which the important ones are *Socrates* (1930), *The Venetian* (1932). *The Immortal Lady* (1931), and *The Rose Without the Thorn* (1932). They are all lyrical and philosophical plays, and the characters in them are developed within a pattern, based on historic facts, but shaped by his imagination. Besides Drinkwater and Bax, other dramatists who have written historical and imaginative plays, are Ashley Dukes and Rudolf Besier.

Romance Theatre:

The popularity of realism and naturalism did not oust the romantic element altogether from the domain of modern drama. Scottish novelist and playwright, James Matthew Barrie turned to romance in order to the drab and cruel reality portrayed in the realist or naturalist plays. He found solace in magic isles and imaginary dream islands and was at best with children. With his children's play, Peter Pan (1904) he came to prominence. All his plays like *Quality Street, Admirable Circhton, Every Woman Knows, Dear Brutus, Mary Rose* are far removed from realism; they present impossible characters, who behave impossibly. Barrie created a new type of play, which can best be described as "Barriesque", a blending of romance, whimsicality and quaintness. A perfect master of technique, he produced plays, which despite all their fantasy and romance are compact and well knit.

Irish Nationalist Movement and Modern Drama:

The influence of the Irish nationalist Movement and the Provincial Repertory Movement is undeniable in the history of modern English drama. The new Irish Theatre was founded in 1892 by a group of prominent Irish writers under the leadership of W. B. Yeats. Later on Abbey Theatre in Dublin was constructed in 1904. The Irish Movement, also known as Celtic Revival, was essentially national in character, and concentrated on Irish themes and ideas. It also aimed at reforming the stage and turning it into a thing of beauty. The movement, however, was not intended to espouse the cause of realism or naturalism. Its main aim was not to make people think, but to make them feel emotional and spiritual uplifting. The Irish playwright turned to the past of their country, its myths and legends. In a sense, their approach was romantic and poetical. In his plays, Yeats glorified the national myths and legends and depicted primitive human emotions. Essentially a poet, he gave beautiful ideas and first-rate lyrical poetry but failed in characterisation and plot construction. His contribution to drama lies essentially in the realism of poetry and symbolism.

The Irish Movement also inspired a new type of native comedy drawing its inspiration from Irish folklore and Irish peasantry. The best exponent of this comedy was the talented J. M. Synge (1871-1909), who, while working as a journalist in Paris, avidly observed the human nature both at its best and at its worst. He also picked up the native speed and picturesque idiom of the people he met in this profession. Synge's best comedies are in the *Shadow of the Glen, the Tinker's Wedding* and particularly *The Playboy of the Western World*. The last was at once recognised to be his masterpiece after its performance at the *London Theatre* in 1907. *Synge* also wrote a few tragedies, the best of which in *Riders to the Sea* (1904). His dramatic work is limited but it is of such a high order that he remains an important figure in modern British drama. His greatness as a dramatist lies in his acute dramatic instinct and a keen insight into the native forces of human character. Besides, he had the rare gift of transmuting pathos and ugliness into poetry and beauty, and the exuberance inseparable from all great geniuses. He never used to moralise and showed no sympathy

with the didactic school of drama.

Poetic Drama:

English poetic drama in the 20th century arose as a reaction to the naturalistic prose drama of Ibsen, Shaw and Galsworthy. The drama in their hands ceased to be the representation of 'emotional reality' and became a handmaid of social criticism. The language used by the dramatist while presenting social problems was tough and because of that drama was prosaic rather than poetic in the early decades of the 20th century. In the inter-war period poetic drama was highly appreciated because of theatre-lovers' dissatisfaction with realism and naturalistic prose dialogue. In spite of considerable experiments by rich talents, the inter-war period was not congenial for poetic drama. The minds of the war-ravaged people temporarily sought to forget their bloody experience, but after a period incubation, the real world, now more horrible, regained their consciousness. 20th century poetic drama has assumed different forms and shapes in the hands of different dramatists. Poetic dramas have been written on a variety of subjects, like exaltation of religion and the church, glorification and denunciation of God etc. Some poetic plays are symbolic and mystical in character and a number of them have Celtic Mythology and Irish life as their subjects. The dramatists like, Stephen Phillips (1964-1915), Oscar Wilde (1854-1900), John Davidson (1857-1909), John Masefield (1878-1967), Laurence Binyon (1869-1943), John Drinkwater (1882-1937), J. M. Synge (1871-1909), T. S. Eliot (1888-1965), W.H. Auden (1907-1973), Christopher Isherwood (1904-86), Stephen Spender, Sean O'Casey (1884-1964), Christopher Fry, all these dramatists played a significant part in the movement for the revival of verse play.

However, the most significant contributor to the revival of poetic drama in England was T. S. Eliot. Eliot's belief was that a play's language was most dramatic when it was most intensely poetic. Modem verse drama, including Eliot's own *Murder in the Cathedral* was a remote historical drama distanced from the banalities of everyday reality. The practitioners of verse drama were of the opinion that in order to delineate full human experience on the stage, dramatic speech should be in verse. However, it proved to be

impossible to write dramatic verse of any intensity to depict the ordinary actions. It was often criticised that Poetic drama, instead of speaking to and expressing the sensibility of the modem world, turned out to be an escapist fantasy from it.

Pinter and the Theatre of the Absurd:

'The Theatre of Absurd' as a product of the disillusionment of the effects of World War II came to the front in the context of European modern drama with the writings of Samuel Beckett. Beckett abandoned the traditional devices of the drama, including logical plot development, meaningful dialogues, and intelligible characters to convey modem humanity's feelings of despair, bewilderment, and alienation. Beckett's most important play *Waiting for Godot* (1952) is about two tramps Vladimir and Estragon waiting ceaselessly and motionless for an imagined Godot. Their boredom, fear of pain, shreds of love and hate are all a surprisingly effective version of the whole human condition in a tragic world of uncertainty. His *Krapp's Last Tape* (1953) deals with nostalgia, the contrast between a lost past and the sour present. The play is more humane, deals with grief rather than with depression, allows memory its due, becoming vulnerable to the malignant disease of Time. With his plays, Beckett created an image of the appalled, motionless world. However, 'The Theatre of Absurd' of Samuel Beckett, which was revolutionizing the French stage, had not gained firm ground in England by 1956. *Waiting for Godot* (1952) was translated into English in 1954. This play did have some influence on the English playwrights like Harold Pinter. Pinter, later through his plays like *The Room* (1957), *The Birthday Party* (1958), *The Dumb Waiter* (1959), *The Caretaker* (1960), *The Homecoming* (1965), *No Man's Land* (1975) became the most prominent absurdist playwright from England.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q 1: Discuss the condition of modern English drama before the advent of George Bernard Shaw.

Q 2: Trace the influence of Ibsen in the development of modern English drama.

Q 3: How does the Irish Nationalist Movement contribute to modern drama?

Q 4: Write a note on the revival of English verse drama in the 20th century.

Q 5: Write a note on the 'Theatre of the Absurd' and its practice in England.

6.4 IMPORTANT THEORISTS/PRACTITIONERS OF MODERN ENGLISH DRAMA

The following is a reference to the important modern English playwrights who dominated the theatre in the 20th century.

George Bernard Shaw:

George Bernard Shaw (1856-1950) is considered the greatest among the modern English dramatists. Born and brought up in Ireland, he left for London in 1876 and left Ireland for good. He tried his hand at different works like writing novels, taking part in debates of all sorts, etc. Inspired by Karl Marx, he became a Socialist and joined the Fabian Society in 1884, which was responsible for creating the British Labour Party. Being a voracious reader, he came under the influence of writers Samuel Butler and Nietzsche. From Butler, he started finding faults in Darwin's theory of natural selection while from Nietzsche, he took his admiration for the intellectually strong, the aristocrats of the human species, the supermen who know their own minds, pursue their own purpose, win the battle of life and extract from it what is worth having. The third important writer to inspire Shaw was Henrik Ibsen. Working under the influence of Butler, Nietzsche and Ibsen, Shaw was mainly concerned in learning, in propagating ideas, in debating, and persuading people to accept his views about society and morals till the age forty. Then he decided to express his opinion to the world through the medium of the theatre. He studied the stage through and through, and came out with his plays, which were theatrically perfect and bubbling

with his irrepressible wit. As result he immediately attracted attention and became the most popular and influential dramatist of his time.

Shaw's plays were filled with his propaganda. He prepared the minds of the audience by written prefaces to his plays, which are far more convincing than the plays themselves. That is why, his plays were more successful when they were produced a second or third time and when the audience had read them in their published forms. In most of his plays, Shaw himself is the chief character appearing in different disguises. Other characters represent types, which Shaw had studied thoroughly. The only exceptions are Candida, Saint Joan and Captain Shotover in *Heartbreak House.* However, most of the characters in his plays are mere puppets in his hands taking part in the conflict of ideas. In all his plays, he is a propagandist or prophet. He criticises mental servitude, moral slavery, superstition, sentimentalism, selfishness and all rotten and irrational ideas. As his plays are concerned with ideas, and he is a staunch enemy of sentimentalism, he passes by the subtler, finer elements in the individual, and fails to arouse emotions. However, in spite of his being the severest critic of contemporary society, his inherent sense of humour, joviality and generous temperament produced no bitterness. His frankness and sincerity compelled the people to listen to him even when he provoked, exasperated and shocked many of them.

The chief characteristic of Shaw's plays is that all his plays deal with some problem concerning the modern society. In *Mrs. Warren's Profession,* Shaw showed that for the evils of prostitution the society, and not the procuress, was the blame. In *Widower's House,* he again put the blame on society, and not on the individual landlord for creating abuses of the right to property. In *Man and Superman,* Shaw dealt with his favourite theme that it is the Life Force, which compels woman to hunt out man, capture and marry him for the continuation of the race. In *Getting Married,* he showed the unnaturalness of the home-life as at present constituted. In *The Doctor's Dilemma,* he exposed the superstition that doctors are infallible. In *John Bull's other Island,* the hero talks exactly like Shaw, and the Englishman represents the worst traits in English character. *Caesar and*

Cleopatra has no particular theme, and that is why it comes nearer to being a play than most of Shaw's works. In *The Apple Cart* Shaw ridiculed the working of democratic form of government and hinted that it needed a superman to set things right. In *Back to Methuselah* he goes to the very beginning of things and forward as far as thought can reach in order to show the nature of the Life Force and its effect on the destiny of Man. It was in *St. Joan* that Shaw reached the highest level of his dramatic art by dealing in a tragic manner a universal theme involving grand emotions. Shaw's importance in the history of English drama lies in the fact that he is the most powerful force behind the revival of modern drama in England.

Oscar Wilde:

Oscar Wilde (1856-1900) took an important part in the revival of drama in the later part of the 19th century. During his short career as a dramatist, his plays became very popular, and they were thought to represent a high mark in English drama. Though his plays were merely the work of a skilled artisan, it was their style – epigrammatic, graceful, polished and witty – that made them attractive to the audience. Oscar Wilde had the skill of discovering the passing mood of the time and expressing it gracefully. Some important plays of Wilde are *Lady Windermere's Fan* (1892), *A Woman of No Importance* (1893), *An Ideal Husband* (1895) *and The Importance of Being Earnest*. The first three plays are built on the model of the conventional social melodramas of the time ornamented by the flashing wit of the dialogue. *The Importance of Being Earnest,* on the other hand, is built on the model of the popular farce of the time. It is successful because of its detachment from all meaning and models. In fact, this play proved to Wilde that the graceful foolery of farce was the form, which was best suited to the expression of his dramatic genius. The playfulness of the farce helped Wilde to comment admirably on the frivolous society. Encouraged by the success of *The Importance of Being Earnest,* Wilde would have written more such plays and perfected this form of artificial comedy. However, his literary career was untimely closed by his imprisonment in 1895.

John Galsworthy:

John Galsworthy (1867-1933), a novelist of the first rank, is also

considered a great dramatist of modern times. He practised the naturalistic technique both in the novel and in drama. Galsworthy desired to reproduce, both upon the stage and in his books, the natural spectacle of life, presented with detachment. Of course, his delicate sympathies for the poor and unprivileged classes make his heart melt for them, and he takes sides with them. The important plays of Galsworthy are *Strife* (1909), *Justice* (1910). *The Skin Game* (1920), and *The Silver Box.* All these plays deal with social and ethical problems. *Strife* deals with the problem of strikes, which are not only futile but do immense harm to both the parties. *The Skin Game* presents the conflict between the old-established landed aristocracy and the ambitious noisy, new rich manufacturing class. *Justice* is a severe criticism of the prison administration of that period. *The Silver Box* deals with the old proverb that there is one law for the rich and another for the poor. Though the plays of Galsworthy are important because of the ideas, which they convey, they are no less remarkable for their technical efficiency. He affects in all of them a strict economy of style and characterisation and they are denuded of all superfluity. However, sometimes he carries simplicity of aim and singleness of purpose too far and the result is that his plays lack human warmth and richness, which are essential elements in literature. Galsworthy remains an important figure in the history of modern English drama because of his contribution in keeping alive the momentum set by Shaw.

William Butler Yeats:

William Butler Yeats, primarily a lyrical poet and dramatist, is an important name in the context of the Irish nationalist movement. He was highly interested in the Gaelic League, which had been formed to revive popular interest in the old fairy stories and folklore of the Irish people. He believed that through a wide dissemination of these Celtic myths, not alone Ireland but the whole world might be stimulated. As at that time, drama was the most popular literary medium for moving a large number of audiences, Yeats turned to drama. However, as commercial theatre with its elaborately decorated stage and other technical devices was unsuited to his simple, poetical and symbolic plays, he, with the help of Lady Gregory, established the Irish Literary Theatre. This theatre gave performances of

Yeats' plays, and in course of time, it became so important that out of it grew the Irish National Theatre Society, which constructed the famous Abbey Theatre in Dublin.

Yeats wrote about thirty plays. Among them, the most important and widely known ones are *The Countess Cathleen* (1892) and *The Land of Heart's Desire* (1894). The popularity of these plays depended more upon poetic charm and strangeness than upon their dramatic power. Yeats' plays are defective in their organic constructions, and they do not maintain the proper balance between poetry, action and characterisation. The poetic element obtrudes too much and prevents the creation of the illusion of possible people behaving credibly and using an appropriate speech medium. As the characters have to speak long passages in verse, they look artificial, arrogating to themselves an exaggerated importance. The fact is that Yeats was essentially as romantic lyric poet and, therefore he did not handle the dramatic form with ease. Even then, Yeats remains an important playwright because of his contribution to the Cultural Revolution as part of the Irish movement. Besides, he is significant because of the influences he had on J. M. Synge, the most prominent Irish dramatist of the Nationalist movement.

J. M. Synge:

John Millington Synge (1871-1909), is one of the most influential modern dramatists from Ireland. He spent a number of years of his youth among the peasants of Ireland. This association with the peasants helped him understand the lives of the peasants, their language, their tales, and observe closely their customs and characters, which would later influence his plays. Synge exercised strictest economy in his plays, and he rarely admitted a superfluous word. The result is that sometimes his humour becomes too grim and his tragedy bitterly painful. Hailed as the greatest dramatist in the rebirth of the Irish Theatre, he did not write many plays, but the few that he wrote have occupied for him a place in the history of English drama. *The Shadow of the Glen* (1903), a comedy founded on an old folktale presents a romantic picture of Irish peasant life, but the play did not enjoy appreciation. *The Riders to the Sea* (1904), a one-act play, that followed *The Shadow of the Glen* is a powerful, deeply moving tragedy that deals

with the omnivorous sea swallowing up the islanders who are bound to stay in despite their helplessness before the sea that represents the malicious fate. Apparently simple, the play has a grandeur that a spectator or a reader without a discerning eye would miss. *The Well of the Saints* (1905) is a fantastic comedy based on a legend of Franco-Irish character. It was not staged for three years, and meanwhile was produced *The Tinker's Wedding* (1907), a two-act play, of not much merit. *The Playboy of the Western World* (1907) took Synge to the peak of success. Though based on an old legend, it is broader in scope, woven around Christy Mahon, the central character. A funny comedy, full of vitality, the play was not well received in Ireland for the satirical treatment of the Irish character, but in England, it was received with high enthusiasm. Synge's last play, *Deirdre of the Sorrows* (1910), also based on a legend, deals with the themes of love and death tragically interwoven.

T. S. Eliot:

T. S. Eliot started his dramatic career with *The Rock.* However, his second play *Murder in the Cathedral,* is considered a proper poetic play. It was written to be performed in Canterbury Cathedral at the yearly Canterbury Festival, commemorating the death of St. Thomas Backet, Canterbury's famous martyr, who had been murdered in the very Cathedral where Eliot's play was first performed. Obviously, the impulse behind this play was also religious rather than a properly theatrical one, as in the case of *The Rock.* However, *Murder in the Cathedral* is closer to being a drama than *The Rock* is. Here, Eliot made a very effective use of the chorus, which is made up of the women of Canterbury, who were presented very realistically. St. Thomas, though a dignified and impressive character, is more of a symbol than a person. Other characters in the play are also personifications of various simple, abstract attitudes. The most important 'action' in the play is St. Thomas' triumphing over various temptations, which takes place in his mind. Thus, *Murder in the Cathedral* is strictly 'interior', and the outward value of the play is rather that of a spectacle and a commemorative ritual.

Unlike *The Rock* and *Murder in the Cathedral* Eliot's next play, *The Family Reunion* is not a religious play. Its primary aim is not edification or

commemoration. It deals with the return of a young nobleman, Harry, Lord Monchensey to his ancestral home, where his widowed mother, Amy, wants him to settle as the head of the aristocratic country-house. However, Harry feels restless, as he is obsessed with the ideas of having killed his wife, and on account of that, he is pestered by Furies. This is nothing but hallucination produced from the inherited, unconscious memory of his father's desire to kill his mother, because he (the father) was in love with his wife's (Amy's) sister Agatha. This fact is revealed to Harry by his aunt Agatha. Harry believes that the Furies are not instruments of blind revenge, but rather of purification, and so he decides to leave his ancestral home, and sets out again on his travels. His mother is so much shocked by Harry's decision that she dies. *The Family Reunion* does not contain so many memorable and eloquent passages as *Murder in the Cathedral,* because here T. S. Eliot tried to catch the tones, idioms, and rhythms of contemporary speech. However, on account of this *The Family Reunion* conveys the illusion of reality. There are also more minor characters in this play than in the previous plays. Moreover, T. S. Eliot has deliberately written it in a plain manner in order to convince his audience of the reality of what they are listening to.

The Cocktail Party, his last play, deals with a more profound and serious theme, that of the various kinds of self-deceptions in which even cultivated and pleasant and well-meaning people tend to indulge. The play begins with a cocktail party, which has been arranged by the wife, and the husband does not know all the guests. The disappearance of the wife adds to the embarrassment of the husband. When the party is over, one of the guests, who is psychiatrist, stays behind. He knows the secret. The husband does not love his wife, and has a mistress. The wife, on the other hand, has been having her own love affair with a young man, who is secretly in love with her husband's mistress. The psychiatrist solves the tangle by advising the husband and wife that they should not expect too much from each other. Instead of yearning for a romantic drama, they should honestly realise their limitations, and accept a moral basis for successful marriage. So they are reconciled to each other. The husband's mistress becomes a missionary

and after a short time becomes a martyr in a primitive country. The young man, who has been in love with her as well as with the wife, joins film industry in Hollywood. In *The Cocktail Party,* T. S. Eliot has dealt with a typical problem of ordinary behaviour in modern time. Moreover, he has managed to write a play, which at once keeps us continually amused and expectant. Of course, it does not have the poetic richness of *Murder in the Cathedral,* though it does have a few eloquent passages. Overall, The *Cocktail Party* is the most successful of T. S. Eliot's plays from the theatrical point of view.

J. B. Priestley:

J. B. Priestley is another important modern English playwright. He wrote more than thirty plays beginning with *Dangerous Corner* (1932). He achieved great popularity for the width of his range – comedy, farce, morality and social criticism. Fascinated by *The Serial Universe* (1934) and *An Experiment with Time* (1927) of J.W. Dunne, he took to handling the theme of time in his plays–*Time and the Conways* (1937), *I have Been Here Before* (1937), *An Inspector Calls* (1946). *An Inspector Calls* contains unexpected time-shift in order to illustrate Priestley's humanitarianism and his repulsion against social affectation. Priestley's plays show him as a serious social reformer and yet as a plain man. His characters are soundly drawn, the dialogue pungent, and his plays are theatrically successful. He lacked poetic insight and that was the cause of his plays not being works of excellence while he handled the theme of metaphysical problems that absorbed his mind. *Laburnum Grove* (1933), *Eden End* (1934) and *When We are Married* (1938) are his conventional comedies.

Harold Pinter:

Harold Pinter was highly influenced by the 'Theatre of the Absurd' practiced by Samuel Beckett. Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* (1952) was translated into English in 1954. This play had major influence on Pinter and he later came out with *The Birthday Party* (1958), *The Dumb Waiter* (1960) and *The Caretaker* (1960) which are considered absurd plays by virtue of their themes. These plays, marked by the influence of Beckett, build up the sense of menace and unrestrained violence. The plays are quite short and

set in an enclosed, claustrophobic space; the characters are neurotic and schizophrenic. Pinter's more recent works include *A Night Out* (1961), *The Home Coming* (1965) written on a larger scale, but his preference for shorter play impelled him to produce *Silence* (1969), and *Old Times* (1971). Pinter's chief contribution lies in his ability to transform radio and television plays to suit the stage. He also showed that traditional drama could gain enough from the techniques used by the radio and television plays.



6.6 LET US SUM UP

After going through this unit, you must have learnt about the growth and development of modern English drama. The earliest modern English dramas were influenced by Ibsen's Naturalism. George Bernard Shaw is considered the father of English modern drama. After Bernard Shaw, important contributions were made to English drama by dramatists like Galsworthy, W.B. Yeats, J.M. Synge, Oscar Wilde, J. B. Priestly, T. S. Eliot, Harold Pinter etc. These playwrights followed different approaches to theatre and were participants in different literary movements. You must remember that English modern drama was a component of the modern European drama as a whole; as such, English modern drama shares many tendencies with modern dramas at different parts of Europe. Therefore, it is always important to read modern English drama in its pan-European context.



6.6 FURTHER READING

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6.7 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS (HINTS ONLY)

Ans to Q 1: Theatre in the Victorian England dominated by minor groups… …practice of melodrama… …vulgar staginess… …naturalistic burlesque… …extravagances of sentiment… …T. W. Robertson, Sir Squire Bancroft and Lady Bancroft introduced certain renovation… ...naturalism in dialogue, feeling, and situation… …William S. Gilbert's farces and pantomimes.

Ans to Q 2: Realistic movement… …dramas of ideas… …problem plays… …complex plot, detailed setting… …middle-class society… …questioning the rules of society… …George Bernard Shaw… …new freedom of subject-matter and technique… …forged an appreciative and responsive intellectual audience.

Ans to Q 3: New Irish Theatre… …Abbey Theatre in Dublin… …Irish themes and ideas… …reforming the stage and turning it into a thing of beauty… …emotional and spiritual uplifting… …past of their country, its myths and legends… …Yeats glorified the national myths and legends and depicted primitive human emotions… …Lady Gregory, J. M. Synge… …Irish folk-lore and Irish peasantry… …native forces of human character.

Ans to Q 4: Reaction to the naturalistic prose drama of Ibsen, Shaw and Galsworthy… …drama ceased to be the representation of 'emotional reality'… …language was tough… …dissatisfaction with realism and naturalistic prose dialogue… …during inter-war period poetic drama was highly appreciated… …variety of subjects - symbolic and mystical… …many dramatists… …Eliot's belief that play's language is most dramatic when it is most intensely poetic.

Ans to Q 5: Samuel Beckett… …disillusionment of the effects of World War II… …illogical plot development, obscure dialogues, unintelligible characters… …humanity's feelings of despair, bewilderment, and alienation… …*Waiting for Godot, Krapp's Last Tape*… ….translation into English… …plays of Harold Pinter.



6.8 POSSIBLE QUESTIONS

Q 1: Trace the growth and development of modern English drama from the 1890s to the 1950s.

Q 2: How did the different continental movements in art and literature influence different English playwrights of the 20th century? Discuss.

Q 3: Write an elaborate note on the different dramatic movements and approaches involved in the whole course of modern English drama.

Q 4: Explore the contributions of Bernard Shaw to the field of modern English drama.

Q 5: Examine how the early English modern playwrights including Shaw and Galsworthy responded to the naturalist theatre of Ibsen.

Q 6: What is the Theatre of the Absurd? How did the English dramatists react to the Theatre of the Absurd?

Q 7: How did the Irish nationalists use drama as a political and cultural apparatus to mould public imagination? How did their experiments with theatre contribute to the body of modern English literature and theatre?

Q 8: Write a detailed note on the processes involved in the revival of English verse drama. How do you estimate T.S. Eliot's role in it?

Q 9: What are the different forms of drama that emerged as reactions to the naturalist and realist theatres of Shaw and Galsworthy? Discuss in detail.

Q 10: Explore the significance of the 'history plays' and 'imaginative plays' in the context of modern English drama.

Q 11: Discuss the scenario of theatre in the Victorian England before the advent of George Bernard Shaw and modern English drama.

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UNIT 7: THOMAS STEARNS ELIOT: LIFE AND WORKS *MURDER IN THE CATHEDRAL* (PART I)

UNIT STRUCTURE

7.1 Learning Objectives

7.2 Introduction

7.3 Poetic Drama in the 20th Century

7.4 T. S. Eliot: The Playwright

- 7.4.1 His Life
- 7.4.2 His Dramatic Career

7.5 Sources of the Play *Murder in the Cathedral*

7.6 Critical Reception of Eliot

7.7 Let Us Sum Up

7.8 Further Reading

7.9 Answers to Check Your Progress (Hints Only)

7.10 Possible Questions

7.1 LEARNING OBJECTIVES

After going through this unit, you will be able to

- *trace* the development of poetic drama in the 20th century England
- *discuss* the life and works of T. S. Eliot as a playwright
- *read* T. S. Eliot as one of the greatest modern playwrights although he is more acclaimed as a modern poet
- *assess* the reception of the play *Murder in Cathedral* as a landmark in modern drama.

7.2 INTRODUCTION

T. S. Eliot, the 1948 winner of the Nobel Prize for Literature, is one of the giants of modern literature, highly distinguished as a poet, literary critic, dramatist, and editor/publisher. Eliot articulated distinctly modern themes in forms that were a marked departure from those of 19th century

poetry. Among his best-known works were "Gerontion" (1920), and within a couple of years, one of the most famous and influential poems of the century, "The Waste Land" (1922). However, Eliot is also considered one of the greatest poetic playwrights of the 20th century. This unit will help you to discuss Eliot as a modern playwright through a reference to his play *Murder in the Cathedral,* which has been prescribed for your studies.

7.3 POETIC DRAMA IN THE 20TH CENTURY

Poetic Drama or verse drama is a form of drama written as verse to be spoken. For a very long period, verse drama dominated the drama in Europe as well as other non-European cultures. For instance, Greek tragedies were written in verse, and almost all of Shakespeare's plays are written in verse. You should note that verse drama was particularly popular mainly because it was associated with the seriousness of tragedy, providing an artistic reason to write in this form. At the same time, verse lines were seen easier for the actors to memorise.

You perhaps know that in the 20th century prose dramatic literature began to rule the stage with Bernard Shaw, John Galsworthy, Noel Coward, J. B. Priestley, Granville Barker and others dominating much of the English stage culture. However, along with their prose dramas, there also developed the poetic dramas popularised by writers like T. S. Eliot, Gordon Bottomley, Lascelles Abercrombie, Stephen Phillips, W. B. Yeats, J. M. Synge, Christopher Fry and many others. However, before discussing the development of poetic drama in the early part of the 20th century, it is more pertinent to know how the idea of the poetic drama was conceived and received in a very different intellectual and cultural environment of the 20th century. Mention must be made of the "New Critic" like I. A. Richards who made a clear distinction between 'scientific language' and 'emotive language'—scientific language, as was supposed to be available in prose, aimed at directness, simplicity and straightforwardness, while emotive language, used mainly in poetry, aimed at upholding universal emotions that could stand the test of time. Subsequently, in the field of drama it was thought that poetry could be one of the best possible mediums for expressing

the exuberant emotion. Poetic drama therefore, began to be popular as it could elevate and ennoble human thought. It could be used as an escape from the banalities of our humdrum existence. In similar contexts, we may be reminded of Lascelles Abercrombie who, in order to make a distinction between prose and poetry, stated that while prose concentrated its imitation on the outermost reality, poetry dealt with the innermost. This way, he believed, poetry could bring to the readers the 'joy of life.' Eliot, whose contribution to the revival of poetic drama is known to all, has this to state about his practice:

"I believe…that poetry is the natural and complete medium of drama, that the prose play is a kind of abstraction capable of giving you only a part of what the theatre can give; and that the verse play is capable of something much more intense and exciting."

The poetry in poetic drama does not necessarily mean verbal play of words. It need not be written in blank verse or any kind of rhetorical devices. Poetic drama may very well written in prose. J. M. Synge's *Riders to the Sea* written in the form of prose is a poetic play, and Granville Barker has the following to say about Synge:

"It was no paradox, but a matter of direct significance that when the revival of poetic drama did come, it came, seemingly, in prose. If so, why is Synge's play a poetic drama? It is because this play turns inward and lays bare human soul."

You must be quite aware of the fact that most of the dramatists of the Elizabethan age chose to write their plays in verse. The Elizabethans had an ear for poetry and therefore the poetry in the drama they had watched appealed to them immensely. Many of the great dramatists were themselves great poets. For example, take the case of William Shakespeare who had also been one of the most significant lyric poets of the Elizabethan times. However, there were many difficulties in the subsequent history of poetic drama as it passed through a declining phase during the Jacobean period again reviving during the Romantic period through Wordsworth's plays *The Borderers*, P. B. Shelly's *The Cenci*.

Perhaps the first revival of poetic drama in the 20th century can be

traced back to the efforts made by the Irish poets like W. B. Yeats, J. M. Synge and Lady Gregory. They felt that poetry was very much close to the national culture. Subsequently, the establishment of the "Irish National Theatre" in Dublin marked the beginning of a new movement in playwriting. Yeats and Synge strongly reacted against realism, and tried to exploit the beauty of the legends and folklore of Ireland. Known as the Celtic revival, the Irish national Theatre rendered a great service to the revival of poetic drama. It did not want to make people think, but to make them feel and give them an emotional and spiritual uplifting. Yeats, Synge, Gregory, Edward Martyr etc. sought to 'reclothe' the ancient heroes and make them live again in prose or verse. They also tried to penetrate into the beliefs and hidden secrets which lie behind the customs and superstitions of the folks—for Ireland was one place in the world where the actual and the ideal were inseparable. Although Yeats was lyrical in many of his dramas, Synge's poetic dramas were written in prose. Synge believed that in Ireland, the imagination and language of the people were rich and copious in words, and that was the very essence of poetry. Synge's style was to influence Sean O'Casey, for he also wrote poetic dramas in prose. Among his plays *Juno the Paycock*, *Within the Gates*, and *The Star turns Red*—are the play that deserve mention.

The Celtic Revival influenced the English dramatists to a considerable extent. Stephen Phillips wrote a few poetic plays, which were compared to the plays of Sophocles by many. John Masefield wrote a few poetic plays, the most notable of which is *The Tragedy of Nun* in which the playwright wanted "to find an equivalent for Synge's poetic prose."—as Kenneth Muir observed. Thomas Hardy wrote two poetic dramas—*The Dynasts* and *The Tragedy of the Queen of Cornwell*. The *Dynasts*, an epic drama of the Napoleonic wars, is a vast work having nineteen acts and one hundred and ninety scenes. Lascellous Abercrombie wrote plays like *Deborath*, *The Adder*, *The End of the World*, *The Staircase* etc. all experiments in poetic techniques. In many of his plays, Abercrombie sought to find a form of blank verse, which might adequately convey to modern spectators immediate emotions of our time in terms of poetry. Slightly different was Gordon Bottomley who

did not try to translate ordinary speech into poetic terms. Instead, in writing plays like *King Lear's Wife* and *Gruach*, based on Lady Macbeth, he turned to classical drama of Greece and Japanese Noh drama.

However, it was T. S. Eliot who should be credited with popularizing the tradition of poetic plays in England. In his introduction to S. L. Bethers's *Shakespeare and Popular Dramatic Tradition*, Eliot writes:

"A verse play is not play done in verse, but a different kind of play. In a way more realistic than naturalist drama, because instead of clothing nature in poetry, it should remove the surface appearance…so the poet with ambitions of the theatre, must discover the laws, both of another kind of verse and of another kind of drama."

Most interestingly, in his "A Dialogue on Dramatic Poetry", a character called G. states:

"We must find a new form of verse which shall be as satisfactory a vehicle for us as blank verse was for the Elizabethans."

W. H. Auden and Christopher Isherwood wrote two poetic plays *The Dog Beneath the Skin* and *The Ascent of F6* representatively but with marked deviation from Eliot, because instead of bringing back classical matters, they sought to establish the importance of the pantomime, and the music hall, which were the popular theatrical forms of our time. Auden influenced Louis MacNeice's *Out of the Picture*. Christopher Fry, on the other hand wrote two verse plays—*A Phoenix Too Frequent* and *The Lady is Not for Burning*. In subsequent times, authors like John Osborne, Samuel Beckett, N. F. Simpson, Dylan Thomas etc. also wrote poetic plays.

You should have understood by now that many of the playwrights writing poetic drama are themselves great poets and they have covered wide areas and a wide variety of subjects that could be treated in the field of drama. However, Eliot proclaims that poetic drama should never aim at mere poetry. He says: "Possibly, the majority of attempts to connect a poetic drama have begun at the wrong end. They have aimed at small public which wants 'poetry'". What he perhaps hinted at is the fact that drama should purely be a form of entertainment and this can be achieved if poetic drama can cover wide range of human experience and values. In the second

half of the 20th century, however, verse drama fell almost completely out of fashion. Dramatists like Christopher Fry and T. S. Eliot are possibly the end of a long tradition.

In order to justify verse as a stage worthy medium, Eliot dealt with some of the major Elizabethan playwrights and ultimately tried to find out answers to certain questions like the following:

a. How can the complex thoughts and feelings of the poet be conveyed through characters in action. Eliot in his lecture "The Three Voices of Poetry" (1953) said: "The first voice is the voice of the poet talking to himself or to nobody. The second is the voice of the poet addressing an audience. The third is the voice of the poet when he attempts to create a dramatic character speaking in verse…"
b. How would people today speak if they could or are to speak in poetry?
c. What changes should be expected in the play as a whole? Eliot suggested that to work out a play in verse is to see the thing as a completely musical pattern, which intensifies our excitement by reinforcing it with feelings from a deeper and lesser articulate level.
d. Against the background of stern realism there is an increasing tendency, as witnessed in contemporary realistic theatre, towards the imaginative and poetic drama. However, Eliot's concern was that if the drama were to escape from the surface of life what dramatic conventions, devices are allowable in order to free the stage from the grip of realism?

Thus, we can see that Eliot wanted a poetic drama that was more than a drama in verse. He was not entirely a theorist of drama, and it is to his credit that the sense of experiment never died in English drama.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q 1: What is a poetic play? Name some of the practitioners of poetic play in the 20th century.

Q 2: Why did Poetic drama become so popular in the early part of the 20th century?

Q 3: Briefly discuss the Irish tradition of poetic plays?

Q 4: Mention some of the important poetic plays from England.

7.4 T. S. ELIOT: THE PLAYWRIGHT

Although we know Eliot as a poet, there is also a few play to his credit. The following subsections will help you to discuss the life and dramatic works of T. S. Eliot.

7.4.1 His Life

Thomas Stearns Eliot was born in St. Louis, Missouri, USA in 1888. He attended Smith Academy, a preparatory school from 1898 to 1905. In 1906, he got admission into Harvard University and subsequently received his Masters degree in 1910. At Harvard, he became interested in philosophy and comparative literature. It was from the philosopher, poet, humanist George Sanatyana, that he took a course on modern philosophy, while with Irving Babbitt, Eliot studied 19th century French literary criticism. Another influence on his early career was the theory of the dynamic flux and movement of consciousness propounded by Henri Bergson, the French philosopher. However, the crucial experience during the Harvard years influenced his poetry and criticism to a considerable extent. His own reading of Arthur Symons' *The Symbolist Movement in Literature* (1899), introduced French symbolist poetry to English and American readers. Between 1909 and 1911, Eliot wrote "Portrait of a Lady" and "The Love Song of J Alfred Pruffrock", drawing heavily on the 19th century French poets especially Charles Baudelaire, Arthur Rimbaud and Jules Laforgue.

Eliot moved to England and became a British citizen before World War I. The publication of *The Sacred Wood* (1920) and of "The Waste Land" (1922) soon earned him reputation and critical acclaim; whereas "The Waste Land" established him as an indispensible poet in the English-speaking world. Some of the essays written by him included in *The Sacred Wood* conveyed a new and

distinctive critical attitude whose impact on contemporary as well as subsequent strains of critical thought was clearly visible. As the editor of the quarterly *The Criterion* till 1939, he published leading English modernists (including Virginia Woolf and James Joyce) and significant European writers such as Marcel Proust, Andre Gide, Thomas Mann, Jean Cocteau and so on. This was also the time when he started working on his play *Murder in the Cathedral* (1935); later he enjoyed considerable success with his drama of the 1950s. In 1948, Eliot won the Nobel Prize for Literature as well as the Order of Merit, England's most distinguished honour. He was one of the most influential and authoritative literary figures of the 20th century and a publisher of great distinction at Faber and Faber, where he published W. H. Auden, Louis MacNeice, and Stephen Spender.



LET US KNOW

Eliot's articles and lectures were reissued and preserved in a steady stream of books: *The Sacred Wood* (1920); *For Lancelot Andrewes* (1928); *Selected Essays* (1932); the Charles Eliot Norton lectures at Harvard as *The Use of Poetry and the Use of Criticism* (1933); the Page-Barbour lectures at the University of Virginia as *After Strange Gods* (1934), three lectures at Corpus Christi College, Cambridge, as *The Idea of a Christian Society* (1939), *Notes towards the Definition of Culture* (1948), *On Poetry and Poets* (1957) and *To Criticise the Critic* (1965). In 1953, Penguin Books published Eliot's *Selected Prose*, edited by John Hayward, in a printing of forty thousand copies—an appropriate tribute to a man whose critical writings had set the agenda for the best part of the 20th century.

Despite unprecedented success and popularity, Eliot was a private person and the idea of a life not fully lived, is the central, animating idea of Eliot's poetry. He died in London aged seventy-seven. For many years, Eliot had been suffering from lung-related

health problems including bronchitis and tachycardia caused by heavy smoking. Subsequently, he died in London on January 4, 1965, and was cremated at Golders Green Crematorium.

7.4.2 His Dramatic Career

We all know Eliot to be a great modernist poet. However, it is in terms of his attempt at reviving verse drama in England that his importance as a dramatist is discussed in this unit. Eliot's dramatic career perhaps starts with *Sweeny Agonistes: An Aristophanic Fragment.* After finishing *The Waste Land* (1922), he took up a project to write a play in verse. The new play featured "Sweeney", a character who had appeared in a number of his poems. Although Eliot did not finish the play, he did publish two scenes *Fragment of a Prologue* (October 1926) and *Fragment of an Agon* (January 1927). They were however published together in 1932 as *Sweeney Agonistes*. Scenes from the play are frequently performed as a one-act play although Eliot never intended it to be a one-act play.

Eliot's first full-length dramatic work is *The Rock* (1934), a pageant play written to raise money for forty-five churches in the northern suburbs of London. Jointly authored with E. Martin Browne, as part of a collaborative effort, Eliot accepted credit only for the authorship of one scene and the choruses. George Bell, the Bishop of Chichester, had been instrumental in connecting Eliot with producer E. Martin Browne for the production of *The Rock*, and later commissioned Eliot to write another play for the Canterbury Festival in 1935. This play was a popular success but alienated many of Eliot's former admirers who found it poetically tepid.

In 1935, the brilliantly titled *Murder in the Cathedral*, about the martyrdom of St. Thomas à Becket, was performed in Canterbury Cathedral. *Murder in the Cathedral* and the succeeding verse plays offered a double advantage; it allowed him to practice poetry but it also offered a convenient home for his religious sensibility. Then followed some "commercial" plays for audiences that are more

general. *The Family Reunion* (1939) was produced in the Westminster Theatre. Then, after an interregnum there appeared in 1948, *The Cocktail Party. The Confidential Clerk* followed in 1953. In 1958, *The Elder Statesman* was opened at the Edinburgh Festival. These plays were favourably received and now they are of interest largely because they show Eliot addressing the problem of contemporary poetic drama, and how it might be successfully crafted. Sometimes, these plays are read as covert autobiography. The plays address Eliot's lifelong preoccupation with discovering what we *really* feel under the carapace of convention. They attempt to access the buried lives of their protagonists. None of the plays is as genuinely dramatic as *The Waste Land.*

Eliot's *Murder in the Cathedral*, *The Family Reunion*, *The Cocktail Party* and *The Confidential Clerk* are the illustrations of his own theory about poetic drama. However, *Murder in the Cathedral* turned out to be a phenomenal success. The verse of the play reminds us of those of *Everyman*. *The Family Reunion* reminds of the Aeschylean trilogy of Orestes. *The Cocktail Party* is a comedy, while *The Confidential Clerk* has a serious vein.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q 5: How did the experience at Harvard influence Eliot's upbringing as a poet critic?

Q 6: Mention some of the plays of Eliot.

7.5 SOURCES OF THE PLAY *MURDER IN THE CATHEDRAL*

The play we are discussing in this unit is based on an actual story—the story of Thomas à Becket (1118–70) who, by 1154, had become the **archdeacon** of Canterbury, the chief aid to the **archbishop** of Canterbury, foremost in authority among the English prelates. When the archbishop introduced Becket to the newly crowned king, Henry II, the two became friends; Becket was made his Chancellor, the chief civil administrator after

the crown. Then, in 1161, on the death of the seated archbishop, Henry, seeing an opportunity to strengthen his own hand by placing such a close friend in the most powerful religious position in his realm, named Becket the new archbishop of Canterbury. In his new role, Becket saw his first allegiance now as being to the authority of the church. Therefore, when Henry sought to extend his power further by bringing any clergy charged with wrongdoing under the authority of the king's courts, Becket defied the order. Henry reacted by changing the pertinent laws, a move to which Becket refused to agree. Henry's next step was to question Becket's handling of finances during his period as Chancellor, making it clear to Becket that the king was aiming to bring charges of theft against him unless he relented. Instead of surrendering to the King, Becket fled to France, which at that time was also under the influence of English rule.

After six years, in November 1170, Becket returned to Canterbury, but he still refused to absolve several bishops whom he had earlier excommunicated for siding with Henry in the original dispute. Henry is reported to have been driven into a murderous rage by this continuation of Becket's apparent stubbornness, demanding of no one in particular, "Who will rid me of this mettlesome priest?" Four knights at court—Reginald Fitz Urse, William de Traci, Hugh de Morville and Richard Brito—took the opportunity for gaining the King's favour, reached Canterbury on December 29. They sought out Becket, who, realising their intent fled to the cathedral where a service was in progress. However, they all found him and slew him at the altar with repeated blows from their broad swords. Becket quickly became recognised as a martyr, and subsequent reports of miracles occurring at his tomb led to his canonisation.

In 1174, Henry did public penance at the site of his tomb for his own questionable part in the murder of the archbishop, and Canterbury became a popular shrine visited by many pilgrims for the next several hundred years.



LET US KNOW

You must have already read that in the 14th century, the English poet Geoffrey Chaucer would use the annual spring pilgrimage to the martyr's tomb at Canterbury as a plot device for his "Canterbury Tales". Eliot too allegedly alluded to Chaucer's famous opening lines, "When April with her sweet showers…" in his own equally famous opening to "The Waste Land": "April is the cruellest month."

The idea of writing a play on the martyrdom of Thomas Backet had originally been proposed to Eliot by George Bell, the Anglican bishop of Chichester, in June 1935, while Eliot was staying as a guest at Bell's Episcopal palace. After Browne and Eliot's successful collaboration on *The Rock,* it seemed inevitable that, when Bell suggested that Eliot prepare an original work for that next year's Canterbury Festival, Eliot should again turn to Browne for his expertise with staging and directing. Alternately, called *Fear in the Way* and *The Archbishop's Murder Case,* the verse play that ultimately emerged as *Murder in the Cathedral,* could benefit from an increasing focus on the public uses of poetry in Eliot's verse writing and criticism. Given the fact that the play would be performed within 50 yards of the site where Becket's murder actually occurred, the play's theme could also be seen as something of a foregone conclusion. As Nevill Coghill rightly observes:

"The story is richly documented, but all the documents issue from the supporters of Becket; there exists at least eleven eyewitness accounts, written down immediately after the event, by monks of Canterbury for most part, and these are the sources on which Eliot drew for the facts of the case."



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q 7: What is the story related to Thomas Becket of Canterbury?

7.6 CRITICAL RECEPTION OF ELIOT

Anglo-American reception of T. S. Eliot was initially tinged with critical reactions, from excited recognition of the playwright's talent as a revolutionary modern poet to openly avowed perplexity about what he was doing. By the 1930s, his works were not only acknowledged as important, they became the subject of increasing critical interest. The next few decades were primarily devoted to studies of his sources, style, critical theories, and poetic development. By the 1970s, new emphases developed. Reconsiderations in the light of feminist theory, studies of his representations of Jews and minorities, cultural studies, postcolonial theory, and queer theory opened up divisions in critical evaluation. In more recent times, publications of the of "The Waste Land", his *Letters*, his revival of Metaphysical Poetry etc. have both challenged and reinvigorated Eliot's poetic primacy.

However, despite all such developments in Eliot criticism and evaluation, the focus has remained Anglo-American, and largely on interpretation and analysis of form. Elizabeth Däumer's and Shyamal Bagchee's collection on Eliot's international reception in their book *The International Reception of T. S. Eliot* comes as a valuable contribution to our understanding of the various new directions for Eliot studies. It comprises eighteen essays, which examine Eliot's reception and influence in discrete and disparate cultures. While many questions overlap, notably problems of translation, cultural differences, alternative literary traditions, and differing histories of relationship with England and America, it is possible to suggest, very broadly, major approaches to the larger topic—contrasting theories of modernism, comparisons and/or contrasts of Eliot and individual authors, Eliot as a liminal figure whose own status in between cultures and traditions highlights the complexities of cross-cultural reading, and changing evaluations against the context of a country's literary and political history—especially in the light of wars and social ruptures.



7.7 LET US SUM UP

From your reading of this unit, you must have understood that the emergence of poetic drama after three hundred years of virtual silence can be regarded as one of the most significant events in the history of 20th century drama. Eliot's entry into the world of poetic drama, began with an unlikely mission to discover what made the Elizabethan poetic stage workable and how to re-create in verse a moral or religious drama for a modern 20th century audience. Because he wanted to take his audience back to the historical event, he had to use vocabulary and style that resembled modern conversation as best exemplified by *Murder in the Cathedral*. At the same time, he wanted to make the audience aware of the contemporary relevance of the situation because Eliot's plays are about situations, and *Murder in the Cathedral* is mainly about a situation and a quality of life resulting out of the conflict between Crown and Church. In this unit, you have learnt about the plot of the play, the relevance of the thematic aspects of the play, and the significance of the characters both as humans and as symbols.



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Websites and Electronic Resources:

http://www.novelguide.com/MurderintheCathedral/characterprofiles.html



7.9 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS (HINTS ONLY)

Ans to Q 1: It's a form of drama written as verse to be spoken… …for instance, Greek tragedies, and almost all of Shakespeare's plays are written in verse… …it became popular because it is associated with the seriousness of tragedy, and verse lines were seen easier for the actors to memorise… …T. S. Eliot, Gordon Bottomley, Lascellous Abercrombie, Stephen Phillips, W. B. Yeats, J. M. Synge, Christopher Fry etc, were the greatest poetic playwrights of the 20th century.

Ans to Q 2: A specialised interest in the promotion of 'art theatre'… …the belief that poetry could be one of the best possible medium for expressing the exuberant emotion… …elevation of human thought… … an escape from the banalities of our humdrum existence… …influence of Japanese Noh drama.

Ans to Q 3: First attempt was made by W. B. Yeats, J. M. Synge and Lady Gregory… … establishment of the "Irish National Theatre" in Dublin… … reaction against realism… … exploitation of Irish legends and folklore… …Yeats, Synge, Gregory, Edward Martyr etc. sought to 'reclothe' the ancient heroes and make them live again in prose or verse.

Ans to Q 4: John Masefield's *The Tragedy of Nun*… …Thomas Hardy's *The Dynasts* and *The Tragedy of the Queen of Cornwell*… …Lascellous Abercrombie's *Deborath*, *The Adder*, *The End of the World*, *The Staircase* etc… …Gordon Bottomley's *King Lear's Wife* and *Gruach*, and so on.

Ans to Q 5: At Harvard, Eliot became interested in philosophy and comparative literature… …George Sanatyana inculcated his interest in modern philosophy… …Irving Babbitt encouraged him to read 19th century French literary criticism… …Henri Bergson's theory of the dynamic flux and movement of consciousness.

Ans to Q 6: *Sweeny Agonistes: An Aristophanic Fragment*… … *The Rock*, a pageant play written to raise money for churches in the northern London… … *Murder in the Cathedral,* about the martyrdom of St. Thomas à Becket… …*The Family Reunion*… …*The Cocktail Party*… … *The Confidential Clerk*… …*The Elder Statesman.*

Ans to Q 7: Becket and Henry II were good friends… …Becket was appointed the new archbishop of Canterbury… …Henry trying to bring the clergy under his control… …changed pertinent laws… …Becket refuses to agree… …Instead of surrendering he flees to France… … After six years, in November, 1170, Becket returns… …Henry driven into a murderous rage at Becket's stubbornness… …subsequently, four knights slay Becket at Canterbury… … miracles occurring at Becket's tomb leading to his canonisation.



7.10 POSSIBLE QUESTIONS

Q 1: Trace the development of poetic drama in the 20th century England with particular reference to T S Eliot's plays.

Q 2: What, according to you, are the causes of T. S. Eliot's becoming one of the greatest modern playwrights although he is more acclaimed as a modern poet? Discuss.

Q 3: Comment on the sources of the play and explain all the related aspects.

Q 4: Make an assessment of the reception of the play *Murder in Cathedral* as a landmark in modern drama.

Q 5: How would you like to differentiate Eliot's play from its Elizabethan counterparts? Discuss Eliot's 'return to poetry' as a new dictum to mark a beginning in modern drama.

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UNIT 8: THOMAS STEARNS ELIOT: *MURDER IN THE CATHEDRAL* (PART II)

UNIT STRUCTURE

8.1 Learning Objectives

8.2 Introduction

8.3 Summary of the Play

8.4 Critical Commentary on the Play

8.5 Major Themes

8.6 Major Characters

8.7 Let Us Sum Up

8.8 Further Reading

8.9 Answers to Check Your Progress (Hints Only)

8.10 Possible Questions

8.1 LEARNING OBJECTIVES

After going through this unit, you will be able to

- make a summary of the play *Murder in the Cathedral*
- discuss the play in terms of its various thematic aspects
- identify the major character and explain the role they play in the play
- comment critically on the reception of the play.

8.2 INTRODUCTION

This is the third unit of the Block on modern English drama. In this unit, we shall deal with Eliot's play *Murder in the Cathedral.* You will note that the wave of poetic drama in England seems to have its genesis in a specialised interest in the promotion of 'art theatre' as something distinct from popular theatre, and in the development of Canterbury festival plays. Popular success was gained by the plays of Christopher Fry and T. S. Eliot. The play *Murder in the Cathedral* deals with the assassination of Archbishop Thomas Becket in Canterbury Cathedral in 1170. This play

was first performed in 1935. While writing this play, Eliot seems to have drawn heavily on the writing of Edward Grim, a clerk who was an eyewitness to the event. By the time you finish reading this unit, you will find that this play, while dealing with an individual's opposition to authority, was written at the time of rising Fascism in Central Europe, and can also be taken as a protest to individuals in affected countries to oppose the Nazi regime's subversion of the ideals of Christianity.

8.3 SUMMARY OF THE PLAY

[Adapted from Russell Murphy's Book]

Go through the following subsections carefully to get a better grasp of the play we are discussing in the unit.

Part I

The setting of the first act is the Archbishop's Hall on December 2, 1170, the day that Thomas Becket returns to Canterbury. Eliot remains true to the historical detail. Following the straitened circumstances of the strained relationship between Becket and Henry, his arrival led to celebration. A chorus composed of Canterbury women sets the mood and tone of the opening scene and the entire play with their expressions of a sense of foreboding, "some presage" to which they feel themselves to be compelled "to bear witness." Here Eliot borrows from the traditions of classical Greek drama by introducing a chorus, and by virtue of this structural allusion to ancient tragedy, he also implies that a drama of cosmic proportions is about to transpire.

The chorus in Greek drama, more than setting a mood and tone, is free to feel and express the common woes, confusions, and fears. The women of Canterbury throughout the play give its language as they describe the dull drudge of their daily lives. Their role is to speak of the duties and obligations of the common sphere. They are simple women used to hardship and suffering, and they are reluctant to take even a subsidiary part in some great moment that they know they cannot stop and may never understand. From the chorus of Canterbury women the audience gets a taste of local colour, and from the priests will come the factual details, such as that it has

been seven years since Becket's self-imposed exile, and that the king is as much at odds with the barons as with the stubborn archbishop. Shortly, after Becket lands in England and is on his way to the cathedral, Eliot uses the three distinctly different responses from three priests to express the events, from a religious point of view.

The first priest is fearful of what now may ensue for both Becket and the church, knowing that the conflict between the king and his archbishop, the state and the church, is about to end one way or the other. **The second priest** is joyous and confident that Becket is back in England and will now offer guidance that they have been missing so that the church can once again be a balancing force between the contending centres of power that are dividing the nation. **The third priest** is resigned, and is ready to accept whatever may happen. He views the coming conflict in terms of the working out of forces.

Becket appears onstage soon after his approach has been announced by the herald. First, the chorus of women speak out again, sensing the violence that is to come. Mistrustful of the motives of the great and powerful, they know little more than that whatever may come, it will not relieve the misery that they have been born to endure. They plead for Becket to return to France, to leave them "to perish in quiet." It is ironical as Becket now appears on stage, with their fatalistic foretaste of doom, the first word out of his mouth is, "Peace". Eliot portrays Backet as sympathetic to the fear and foreboding that the women are experiencing, and that response quickly establishes his selflessness as well.

Like the three priests, who, despite being real characters, also represent a particular aspect of the response among his devoted followers, **the four tempters**, too, besides being clearly defined characters, each represents an aspect of the sorts of psychological and spiritual confusions that can spoil Becket's destiny. He has no focused mission, after all, no specific course of action, for he knows that "acting is suffering / And suffering is action," and all are fixed on the wheel of fortune now, playing their part as it spins and comes to a stop. Failure can come only if he allows any one of the tempters to distract him from achieving that end, and he faces them,

each in succession and confidence.

The **first tempter** calls back to Becket's mind the good old days when he was "Old Tom, gay Tom, Becket of London," the king's great friend and confidante. However, Becket knows it for sure that one cannot "turn the wheel on which he turns." Becket sends the first tempter on his way. Then he faces the **second tempter**, who tries to convince him to make the best use of the opportunity that this turmoil among the powers has created. According to him, Becket should grab the very sort of temporal power that he used to enjoy when he was Henry's trusted chancellor. That would however, require Becket to abandon his spiritual calling or mission, thereby giving up the principles that he has sought to assert and defend, all for the expediencies of power and glory. Once more, Becket rejects such a choice. **The third tempter** is much trickier: The possibility of any reconciliation with Henry for the sake of forging"happy coalition" with Henry's enemies, including the French and the Pope. Becket rejects this temptation to commit treason for the sake of what may be a greater good for both himself and for England. However, there was one thing that Becket had not banked on. **This fourth tempter** represents the worst temptation of all: one's own desires—to be true to oneself but to neglect God as the source of one's being and action. This is not as subtle a temptation as it may sound on the surface, and that may be why Eliot has Becket invoking Samson in Gaza just before this fourth and final, unexpected tempter appears. The idea is to do what is necessary, but not to do it because one wills it for himself, but because God wills it. The fourth tempter allows Becket to realize that even becoming a martyr can be regarded an act of vanity and pride: "To do the right deed for the wrong reason"—not for God's glory, but for one's own (even if that glory then seems nevertheless to serve God).

Becket had thought that he had already encountered and overcome all those possible weaknesses—the lust for glory and power, along with those personal failings and misgivings that might conceivably sidetrack him from fulfilling God's purpose for him and for the sacrifice of his martyrdom. It is in this confrontation with the fourth tempter that his struggle begins. Becket must overcome the prospect of martyrdom, not because that very

likely is going to be his fate in any case, but because he cannot desire it. Thus, Part I ends with the chorus, the priests, and the tempters all distracting Becket in every possible direction. The man who had earlier proclaimed that "acting is suffering, / And suffering action," now sees the impossible light: "I shall no longer act or suffer." He is instead prepared to wait.

The Interlude

During the interlude between part I and part II, Becket gives a sermon on Christmas morning. While from the point of view of the dramatic action, Becket's tragic murder is yet to come, from the point of view of the theme, which is to describe through Becket's martyrdom the way of the saint, the rest of the drama looks anti-climatic. Becket has come to know his true purpose, which is that he has no purpose that he should know if he is truly to serve and follow God. Becket now must wait for God to act. This becomes the theme of Becket's homily, in which he muses on the Christian paradox that allows for mourning and rejoicing "at once for the same reason." Just as each Mass celebrates the Passion and Death of Jesus, so does the Christmas Mass in particular also celebrate His birth, Becket observes, and then he calls to his congregation's attention to the fact that the following day's Mass will honour the first martyr, St. Stephen. Here again, Becket notes, just as there is a simultaneous mourning and rejoicing found in the birth and the death of Christ, there is also the opportunity to "rejoice and mourn in the death of martyrs."

He had already taken an opportunity to comment on the present troubled state of affairs in England, where the king and the barons are at odds, to illustrate the nature of Christ's peace, by taking for his text Luke 2:14: "Glory to God in the highest, and on earth, good will toward men." Now he takes the opportunity of the reference to Stephen to comment on the martyrdom that appears to be awaiting him. In doing so, he is able to bring to bear the lesson that he learned from the earlier encounter with the fourth tempter. Martyrdom, Becket concludes, is "no accident," but still less is it the result "of a man's will to become a Saint," as another man might will to rule. Rather, and quite to the contrary, a martyr or saint is "always made by the design of God," in order "to warn them…and bring them back to his

Way." Eliot, using the device of the sermon, thus enables Becket to clarify his commitment in no uncertain terms. He has found his peace in "submission to God". With that, the central principle of the action established, Becket and the drama at hand are now prepared to move on into the closing action of part II. There will occur the martyrdom that has been looming as the inevitable conclusion of Becket's agony, and he closes the sermon with the observation that this likely will be his last sermon.

Part II

Part II is divided into two scenes. The first in the archbishop's hall, the second in the cathedral on the day of Becket's murder. The same characters will be appearing on the stage as in part I—the chorus of women, the three priests, and Becket. It is an effective dramatic strategy that the tempters of part I, who had represented psychological, social, political, and spiritual forces preventing Becket from accepting his destiny, are replaced by the **four knights,** who are the instruments not of the king's wrath but of the fulfilment of Becket's destiny as God has designed it. As part II opens, the chorus picks up the note of Becket's just-ended sermon from the interlude. The idea that there should be peace on earth and good will among men leaves them puzzling out the ceaseless conflict that characterizes the affairs of men. Meanwhile, they know that they must go on with their labours and duty, being obliged only to wait.

The **knights** make two things clear from the outset: They have not come to pay a social call, and they are not pleased with the way in which Becket either has handled the power and station bestowed upon him by the king or has repaid the kindness of the king's mercy by permitting Becket to return peaceably to Canterbury. As they see it, in fact, Becket has at every juncture served either his own interests or those of the French king and the Pope—has, in other words, betrayed both the king's trust and his own loyalty. Becket defends himself, arguing that he has only been doing what the responsibilities of the office that the king has bestowed upon him compel him to do, not to mention his duty to the church. The knights start to attack Becket soon after their interview with him begins. Their violence is prevented only by the intervention of the priests and other attendants on hand. Becket

continues to give them a hearing, and they boldly tell him that the king commands him to return to France, a command that Becket regards dubious. He proposes that he shall not desert his flock again. The knights then accuse him of treachery.

The chorus now apologise to Thomas for their inability to be stronger and more supportive at such an hour, and Thomas consoles them. All this suffering and death and confusion, he tells them, shall bring "a sudden painful joy" when God's purpose is completed; for now, he counsels, they should know that "[h]uman kind cannot bear very much reality," an observation that Eliot will repeat in the soon-to-be-penned "Burnt Norton." The chorus is aware that something of a great and terrible significance is occurring, but they have no way of putting the impending event into any kind of perspective. The priests, too, know that a terrible moment is at hand, and they urge him to flee to safety.

Thus begins the second scene of part II. The chorus sings a "Dies Irae," or Day of Wrath, pleading for God's help in the "last fear," the fear of impending doom. However, for the ordinary person that doom is death, while for Becket, once more, it is the death of the soul. The priests, caught up in a temporal distress—Becket's life is at stake—order that the doors be barred, whereas Becket, who knows that it is in fact the fate of his immortal soul that is at stake, orders that the doors be kept open, for the church can endure any assault. He proclaims that he is willing to give his life to "the Law of God above the Law of Man." Obeying his command, the door is opened, and the knights, slightly tipsy now, enter the cathedral. As might be expected, that single event toward which the entire drama has been leading, the murder of Becket, takes place in fairly short order on the re entrance of the knights.

The chorus of women cries out with a passion that far exceeds their previous resignation. Blood has blinded them, they exclaim, and nothing will ever again be the same. Not only has Becket been murdered, but he has been struck down and blood has been shed in the house of God. The whole world has been rendered "wholly foul" by such a dastardly deed, and they cry out that not just the stones, but the sky, the wind, the sinew, and

the bone be cleaned as a result. For their part in this bloody history, Eliot now strips bare the mask of myth, ritual, and drama in which that history has been cloaked until now to give the four knights the honour of their actual identities as they all four advance to address the audience, identifying themselves one by one. **Reginald Fitz Urse** speaks first, pulling the old warrior's ploy of excusing himself as a man of action rather than words. Fitz Urse, the group's leader (it was he whom Becket had condemned by name only moments before his murder), now lets the others speak, all in their own behalf. The youngest, **William de Traci**, speaks next. The poetic drama of a martyr's murder is done, Traci identifies himself and his three buddies as "four plain Englishmen who put our country first." While admitting that it may not have been quite right to kill an archbishop, he clarifies that they did not get a penny for doing the dirty deed. Now **Hugh de Morville speaks**. He argues that they were only executing the will of the people, people like those sitting in the audience, people who know that a man cannot serve two masters. The final speaker, **Richard Brito**, makes the most specious case of all: Becket was his own executioner. Brito argues that it was Becket's own desire for martyrdom that put him on the collision course with the king in the first place. **The verdict**: Becket died a "Suicide while of Unsound Mind." There is, of course, as strong a measure of the ironic as of the ludicrous here.

After the knights depart, it is left for the priests. The first priest, who had, at the beginning expressed his fearful misgivings, sees a church withered and in disarray because of the catastrophe, those they have just witnessed. It is, however the third priest who now speaks the play's final summation before the chorus will launch into the "Te Deum" a song of praise, on which the drama ends. In his estimation, this in fact is the day on which the church will have been seen to triumph, for it finds its strength in the adversity and suffering that produces martyrs while the world, in the persons of the knights, proceeds on its merry way "forever in the hell of make-believe / That is not belief." As a result, the third priest now finds cause for rejoicing instead in the fact that God has "given us another Saint in Canterbury," for, in his view, that is what endures in the nature of belief.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q 1: What are the classical elements introduced in the play?

Q 2: Mention the role played by the four tempters. State what they told Becket.

8.4 CRITICAL COMMENTARY ON THE PLAY

The numerous performances in the first two or three years of its publication made *Murder in the Cathedral* a landmark in world drama. Earlier Eliot had written poems, that resembled the dramatic monologue, like—"Love Song", "Gerontion", or "The Waste Land.". However, this play came about in response to specific requests from Bishop George Bell, the then Dean of Canterbury who had in 1929 founded the Religious Drama Society and needed new plays in the annual festival in Canterbury. That it was also a historical subject helped in designing its costume and décor and raised itself close to authenticity. That it had told a familiar story from the history of the church, under festive celebrations, meant that the audience was partial and also they had an impact on the writer's perspective. As for the language and convention, the two were governed by the context of church performance. Therefore, Eliot could easily face any trouble that could suddenly emerge. At the same time, he proved that the new treatment of conventions could shake the drama free from realism.

Eliot's was not an easy way for establishing certain things in a world much newer and more artistically different from the earlier. The use of convention was a real problem for Eliot. Because the best conventions are those, which are accepted and assumed, so completely that participation is very quick. The idea of Chorus from Greek plays is one of the significant conventions that Eliot establishes in modern drama. Already a continuity of traditional form was available to Eliot because of the subject of the play. Eliot's chorus does everything its Greek counterpart would be expected to do: interpret the past, intensify the present, and anticipate the future; and besides all, it represents the secular world of the common people that keeps

the play at an authentic human level. Therefore, a careful reading of the play will show that in the whole action of the play, Eliot is not merely writing the history of Thomas Becket but also dramatising the contemporary consciousness of separation and martyrdom. Part I of the play begins with the voice of the chorus:

> "Here let us stand, close by the cathedral. Here let us wait.
> Are we drawn by danger? Is it the knowledge of safety,
> That draws our face.
> Towards the Cathedral? What danger can be
> For us,…"

Such speech is made up of a spoken verse, reminiscent of the alliterative verse of the medieval plays.

One may also question to what extent this play is poetical. Because the basic Aristotelian requirements of plot and character did not work well in this play. Martyrdom focused nearly all the interest of a single character, encouraging the poet to speak and thus limiting dramatic values. There is no tragic flaw as such for which the murder of the Bishop occurs. Even the 'tempters lack individuality as their temptations are without hope of success, the knights too lack depth because their actions have foregone conclusion. In fact, Elliot's text had to face all the problems of dramatising a moral history without the possibility of surprise or tragedy. At last, the success of tragedy is minimised by the sense of moral triumph of Becket. However, the idea of the 'ritual' makes the context of the play explained by Eliot in a much convincing manner. Because Eliot believed that like drama, **ritual is a communal act**. It brings together gesture and movement, mind and body, emotions and senses in a single expressive form. Ritual drama can also create in us the 'willing suspension of disbelieve', which makes possible a full imaginative response. Thus, when Eliot speaks of poetic drama through *Murder in the Cathedral*, he is actually thinking of a religious drama. In an article published in the *Criterion*, Eliot turns to the failure of the contemporary stage to satisfy the craving for ritual. He reminds, "It cannot afford to depart far from religious liturgy."

So, Eliot perhaps was not attempting to write verse of the 20th century. He only wanted to deal with the living speech symbolic of the English countryside. However, he also comments that poetry is not merely poetry of theatre; it enhances and sustains the dramatic narrative. The speech will record dramatic consistency. He wanted to 'shock the audience out of their complacency' and that is why perhaps, he used prose in the Knight's speech. At the same time, the influence of Japanese Noh drama can also be seen because it enhanced the idea of theatre as a performing art. Thus, Eliot's language was to reflect experimentative, decorative way of dramatic representation without losing the immediacy of meaning. Thus, poetic drama is a move towards an artistic whole. Eliot also states that the greatest dramatists had also used prose. In the essay "Poetry and Drama" Eliot says, "Whether we use prose or verse on the stage, they are both but means to an end." Of course, any character speaking in prose has to suit the dramatic situation. The immediacy of feeling was all-important in Eliot, and thus, he justifiers his use of poetry and prose at the same time.

In *Murder in the Cathedral*, for example, there is the discrepancy between the youthful, worldly Becket and the spiritually fastidious archbishop, whose consent to martyrdom is mystical: 'It is out of time that my decision is taken / If you call that decision / To which my whole being gives entire consent.' The Fourth Tempter voices the temptation buried so deep inside Becket that he is initially unprepared, surprised, to discover that spiritual pride is a factor in his willingness to embrace martyrdom. Eliot's challenge as a dramatist is to negotiate his two registers—the prosaic and the poetic—registers that reflect his overall theme of the gap between the individual's real personality and the social construct. This theme means that Eliot always requires a stylistic contrast and cannot merge the two registers. There has to be a pronounced demarcation. However, it is also true that though poetic drama by definition requires poetry, the poetry has to be naturalised in some way. In 1951, in 'Poetry and Drama', Eliot makes it clear that the great ambition is transparency, so the audience attends to the meaning of the poetry, not to the poetry. As the plays go on, it is true to say that Eliot becomes less poetic, more and more prosy and humorous.

Despite Eliot's phenomenal success as a poetic playwright, his play failed to have a widespread appeal for several reasons. Most of his plays had a ritualistic character and were placed in the classical framework. According to Nevill Coghill, unlike Shakespeare's plays, all of which delight in the excitements of narrative, Eliot's plays are about situations, not stories. *Murder in the Cathedral* is about a situation and a quality of life.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q 3: Comment on Eliot's use of rituals in the play.

Q 4: Justify Eliot's use of poetry for playwriting.

8.5 MAJOR THEMES

The following are some of the major themes that we may examine in the context of the play.

Idea of Martyrdom:

At the end of Becket's Sermon in the play, Eliot very beautifully puts his ideas on martyrdom like this: "A martyrdom is always made by the design of God, for His love of men, to warm them and to lead them, to bring them back to His ways. It is never the design of man; for the true martyr is he who has become the instrument of God, who has lost his will in the will of God, and who no longer desires anything for himself, not even the glory of being a martyr." The meaning of this is that Becket must will himself to suffer a pre-ordained martyrdom and give himself to it by an action that is wholly free, the action of a witness to the will of God, not for the glory of becoming a saint. In one sense, the **interlude** widens the fact of martyrdom. Eliot is depersonalising the concept of a martyr. Becket is just an instrument of God. Mourning and joy are the part of the same design.

Return of Poetry to the Stage:

As Nevil Coghil states in his 'Introduction' to the book, 'Return of poetry' is one of the revolutions that Eliot single-handedly accomplished. It was revived not by going back to the Shakespearean style, but to the root of dramatic imagination—based on religion, ritual, purgation and renewal.

This meant a structural as well as verbal poetry, a reflection on a theme mirrored in the intensity of the 'situation' itself. While based upon history, it needs a human part in sainthood. A vision of this kind is something that makes the play poetic. Regarding his method of playwriting, Eliot explained, "If I set out to write a play, I start by an act of choice. I settle upon a particular emotional situation, out of which characters and a plot will emerge. And then lines of poetry may come into being: not from the original impulse but from a secondary stimulation of the unconscious mind." (T.S. Eliot. *Voices and Visions Series*. New York Center of Visual History: PBS, 1988).

Idea of Transcendence:

This theme, clearly an expression of the Anglo-Catholicism Eliot embraced during his life, appears most vividly throughout *Murder in the Cathedral*. It informs the entire text of the play, as the commentary above has demonstrated. In *Murder in the Cathedral*, the "inert resignation" of modern life manifests itself in the Chorus's refusal to embrace transcendence: the women of Canterbury are content to go on "living and partly living." As they state, even imploringly to Becket, on several occasions, they "do not wish anything to happen." They do not want the wheel of God's pattern to begin turning. As do all moderns in Eliot's estimation, they "fear the injustice of men less than the justice of God." They are not ready to live, as Becket was, "out of time." Yet, through Becket as he portrays him, Eliot forcefully argues that such transcendence must be achieved.

8.6 MAJOR CHARACTERS

The following are some of the major characters in the play. However, besides being physically present, many of these characters also symbolize one or the other aspect of religion and psychology.

The Chorus:

The Chorus is an unspecified number of Canterbury's women. They are wistful, leaderless women calling for spiritual guidance in their lives. They inhabit the gloomy cycles of time, death-brining winter, ruinous spring, disastrous summer and barren autumn. They need a leader and are happy

to look at the December only because the Son of Man was born in this month. They serve the same purposes, as does the Chorus in Greek drama: to develop and, more importantly, to comment on the action of the play. The women's initial speech fairly defines their dramaturgic role: "We are forced to bear witness." In commenting on the action of Thomas Becket's murder, the women are voicing insights into time, destiny, and life and death. In the end, they emerge as representatives of ordinary people-such as those who make up the audience of the play. As they state in the play's final moments, not everyone can bear the "loneliness, surrender, deprivation" necessary to become a saint.

Thomas Becket:

Becket is the Archbishop of Canterbury, former Chancellor to King Henry II, now estranged from the monarch because he insists upon the right of the Church to rule in spiritual matters-a rule that, in practice, has ramifications for how the king ought to rule in temporal matters. Unlike the Chorus, Thomas Becket is able to stare into the existential abyss-that "Void" behind death and judgment, mentioned in Part II of the play that is "more horrid than active shapes of hell." Becket is often accused of pride in the play, but he is actually humble in submitting himself completely to the will of God, as he comprehends it. His death offers a glimpse of how transcendence can be achieved: the only question that remains is whether the rest of humanity is able to trace the same path, to "give [its] life / To the Law of God above the Law of Man." The mind of Becket is fully aware of what he ought to be and nothing can make him change it. Eliot is presenting not merely the historical figure, but the 'man'. It's the nature of his mind that is dramatised.

The Four Tempters and the four Knights:

They present Becket, in Part I of the drama, with various ways of avoiding his impending death as a martyr. Their temptations correlate, to one degree or another, with the justifications of Becket's assassination offered to the audience by The Four Knights at the end of the play. In a prefatory note to the play's third edition (1937), Eliot indicated that the roles

of the Tempters had been intended to be doubled-that is, played by the same actors-as the roles of the Knights, thus underscoring the connection between the two quartets in an even stronger fashion.

The Three Priests:

They serve the dramatic action of Eliot's play, particularly in Part II, when they urge Becket to close the doors of the Cathedral against the knights-although they characterise them as savage beasts who seek his life. They could thus be seen as representing the temporal order. Becket at one point accuses them of thinking only as the world does: "You argue by results, as this world does." On the other hand, the Priests also are capable of offering insight into the spiritual order. For example, the Third Priest affirms the Church's endurance in the face of the world built on the ruins of the presumed absence of God; and earlier, he offers a key interpretive insight by stating, "Even now, in sordid particulars / The eternal design may appear." Like so many of us, then, the priests have one foot, so to speak, in the spiritual and the other in the temporal; and they struggle to balance the two orders as best as they can, as do we all.



8.7 LET US SUM UP

You have just finished reading about T. S. Eliot's play *Murder in the Cathedral.* From your reading of this unit, you have learnt that the plays ***Murder in the Cathedral***, is a poetic drama in two parts, with a prose interlude. This play, besides being one of the most critically acclaimed modernist plays, is also the most successful play by American English poet T. S. Eliot. The play was performed at Canterbury Cathedral in 1935, and was published the same year. Set in December 1170, it is a modern miracle play on the martyrdom of St. Thomas Becket, archbishop of Canterbury. The play's most striking feature is the use of a chorus in the Classical Greek manner. The poor women of Canterbury who make up the chorus nervously await Thomas' return from his seven-year exile, fretting over his volatile relationship with King Henry II. Thomas arrives and must resist four

temptations: worldly pleasures, lasting power as chancellor, recognition as a leader of the barons against the king, and eternal glory as a martyr. After Thomas delivers his Christmas morning sermon, four knights in the service of the king accost him and order him to leave the kingdom. When he refuses, they return to slay him in the cathedral. This is the main story of the play. However, the importance and popularity of the play as a 20th century poetic play shall remain forever.



8.8 FURTHER READING

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Websites and Electronic Resources:

http://www.novelguide.com/MurderintheCathedral/characterprofiles.html

https://www.britannica.com/topic/Murder-in-the-Cathedral



8.9 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS (HINTS ONLY)

Ans to Q 1: Use of the classical subject matter for the play… …introducing chorus… …this structural allusion to ancient tragedy implies that a drama of cosmic proportions is about to transpire… …the speech is made up of a spoken verse, reminiscent of the alliterative verse of the medieval plays.

Ans to Q 2: The four tempters represent different aspects of the sorts of psychological and spiritual confusions in Becket's mind… …first tempter reminds Becket about the days of friendship with the king… … second tempter tries to convince him to make the best use of the opportunity that this turmoil among the powers has created… …the third tempter discusses the possibility of any reconciliation with Henry… …the fourth tempter represents one's own desires to be true to oneself but to neglect God as the source of one's being and action.

Ans to Q 3: Eliot believed that ritual is a communal act… …it brings together gesture and movement, mind and body… …it also creates in us the 'willing suspension of disbelief' which makes possible a full imaginative response… …Eliot turns to the failure of the contemporary stage to satisfy the craving for ritual.

Ans to Q 4: Poetic drama by definition requires poetry, but the poetry has to be naturalised in some way… …in 'Poetry and Drama', Eliot makes it clear that the great ambition is transparency, so the audience attends to the meaning of the poetry, not to the poetry.



8.10 Possible Questions

Q 1: How does T. S. Eliot deal with the problem of exposition in the play *Murder in The Cathedral*? Discuss the main complications introduced by Eliot in the play.

Q 2: Do you consider *Murder in the Cathedral* as a unified artistic creation? Validate your answer with reference to the text.

Q 3: To what extent, does T. S. Eliot adhere to realism in the play *Murder in the Cathedral* in terms of characterisation? Alternatively, to what extent are these characters symbolic?

Q 4: How important are the relationships among the different characters in the play? Point out the connections between character and themes in the play.

Q 5: Comment on Eliot's use of the Chorus as a dramatic convention in the context of modern times.

Q 6: Do you think that Thomas Becket is a martyr? In what ways does Eliot present the idea of Martyrdom in the play?

Q 7: Comment on Eliot's use of the Interlude in the play. How does it widen the issue of martyrdom in the context of the play?

Q 8: Discuss the important themes in T. S. Eliot's play *Murder in the Cathedral.*

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UNIT 9: JOHN OSBORNE: *LOOK BACK IN ANGER* (PART I)

UNIT STRUCTURE

9.1 Learning Objectives

9.2 Introduction

9.3 John Osborne: The Playwright

9.3.1 His Life

9.3.2 His Dramatic Career

9.4 Sources of the Play *Look Back in Anger*

9.5 Critical Reception of Osborne

9.6 Let Us Sum Up

9.7 Answers to Check Your Progress (Hints Only)

9.8 Possible Questions

9.1 LEARNING OBJECTIVES

After going through this unit, you will be able to

- discuss the life and works of the dramatist John Osborne
- understand the concept of 'Angry Young' movement in the light of the play you are reading
- identify the elements of disillusionment in post-war drama
- explain the sources of the play
- trace the importance of Osborne's play as a literature of protest.

9.2 INTRODUCTION

This unit will introduce you to John Osborne who is yet another important English playwright as well as a figure of literature of protest, with reference to his play *Look Back In Anger*. The 20th century literature is characterised by a rebirth of an interest in drama. In England, the influence of Ibsen made itself strongly felt in the problem plays of G. B. Shaw and in the realism of John Galsworthy and Somerset Maugham. T. S. Eliot revived and enriched the verse drama. On the other hand, the English playwright

John Osborne expressed the rebellious attitude of the 'Angry Young Men' in his famous play *Look Back in Anger*. Written as a reaction against the drawing-room comedies and middle-class drama of Noël Coward and Sir Terence Rattigan, *Look Back in Anger* is a landmark in the history of English theatre. It was first performed in the Royal Court Theatre in 1956, when it spearheaded the post war revival of the British theatre. By the time you finish reading the play, you should be in a position to appreciate the role played by Osborne in the context of modern English drama in the 20th century.

9.3 JOHN OSBORNE: THE PLAYWRIGHT

John Osborne first won acclaim with the 1956 production of his play *Look Back in Anger*, which completely transformed post-war theater and established him as one of Britain's greatest playwrights. You are already told that Osborne is one of the playwrights of the "Angry Young Man" movement. He helped to make theatre artistically respected again, throwing off the formal constraints of the former generation, and once again turning the attention to language, theatrical rhetoric, and emotional intensity. He saw theatre as a weapon with which ordinary people could break down the class barriers. He wanted his plays to be a reminder of real pleasures and pains. Social realism and kitchen sink drama are his most chosen areas. In the following subsections, you will briefly read about the life and works of John Osborne.

9.3.1 His Life

Born on December 12, 1929, in London, John James Osborne was the son of Thomas Godfrey Osborne, a commercial artist, and Nellie Beatrice, a barmaid. Much of Osborne's childhood was spent in near poverty, and he suffered from frequent extended illnesses. He was deeply affected by his father's death from tuberculosis in 1941, when John was hardly twelve and World War II was gaining greater momentum. Osborne attended state schools until the age of twelve, when he was awarded a scholarship to attend a minor private school, St. Michael's College, in Barnstaple, Devon.

He was expelled at the age of sixteen after hitting the headmaster, who had struck him for listening to a forbidden broadcast by Frank Sinatra. He left school in 1949, and that was the end of his education. After spending some time at home, he took a series of jobs writing copy for various trade journals.

He became interested in theatre while working as a tutor for children touring with a repertory company. After an education inspector found him to be uncertified as a teacher, Osborne was relieved of those duties, but invited to stay with the company as assistant stage manager and eventually as an actor. He made his stage debut in Joan Temple's "No Room at the Inn" in March, 1948,at the Empire Theatre in Sheffield and went on to serve as an actor-manager for a string of repertory companies. Osborne began writing plays—many of them being collaborative efforts with other actors. Soon he became an actor-cum-manager-cum-playwright.

Osborne joined Anthony Creighton's provincial touring company and collaborated with him on two plays. Osborne's first important work *The Devil inside Him*, written with Stella Linden, was performed in 1950. It is a melodrama about a Welsh youth who kills a girl after she falsely accuses him of fathering her child. *Personal Enemy* (1955), written with Creighton, concerns the effect upon family and friends of a military prisoner's decision to refuse repatriation from Korea. With Anthony Creighton he collaborated afterwards again in the writing of *Epitaph for George Dillon*, a play which has been quite popular on the stage ever since. He was the first of Britain's "Angry Young Men"— a group of social critics and writers. He scathingly attacked many of the establishment's hallowed values in his numerous plays of the 1960s. Osborne eventually changed the face of British theatre.

Osborne continued his career as an actor-cum-dramatist. He appeared as an actor in *Don Juan*, in *The Death of Satan*, *Cards of Identity*, and in *The Good Woman of Setznan*. In a productive life of more than 40 years, Osborne explored many themes and genres,

writing for stage, film and TV. His personal life was extravagant and iconoclastic. He was notorious for the ornate violence of his language, not only on behalf of the political causes he supported but also against his own family, including his wives and children. Osborne was married five times: to actress Pamela Lane from 1951 to 1957; to Mary Ure, who played Alison in *Look Back in Anger,* from 1957 to 1962; to Penelope Gilliatt, film and later drama critic for *The Observer,* from 1963 to 1967; to actress Jill Bennett from 1968 to 1977; and to journalist Helen Dawson beginning in 1978. Through five marriages, his private life generated its own tumult and drama, farce and pathos. An impossible father, he denounced his teenage daughter as smug and suburban, threw her out of the house and never spoke to her again. Osborne died as a result of complications from Diabetes on December 24, 1994, in Shropshire, England. When he died, his last written words were "I have sinned."

John Heilpern, in his 2006 biography *John Osborne: The Many Lives of the Angry Young Man* believes that the death of his father and that of an older sister were the formative events of Osborne's life. Along with his unhappy first marriage (which informed the acidulous portrayal of Anger protagonist Jimmy Porter's fictional marriage), these deaths were the genesis of Osborne's anger. Osborne's hatred of society, as elucidated on stage, was rooted in his life, not in politics. For Osborne, the fact that May 8th was his father's birthday, as well as the day his career as a major dramatist was launched, assumed an almost mystical significance for him.

He left behind a large body of works for the stage as well as several autobiographical works. Several of his plays were also adapted to film including *Look Back in Anger* and *The Entertainer.* In 1963, Osborne won an Academy Award for his screen adaptation of *Tom Jones*.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q 1: Comment on the life of John Osborne.

Q 2: Why is Osborne addressed as an 'Angry Young Man'?

9.3.2 His Dramatic Career

Osborne tried his hand at writing plays with *The Devil Inside Him* (1950), with his mentor Stella Linden, who then directed it at the Theatre Royal in Huddersfield in 1950. His second play *Personal Enemy* (1955) which was staged in regional theatres before *Look Back in Anger* was written with Anthony Creighton, with whom he later also wrote *Epitaph for George Dillon*, staged at the Royal Court in 1958. The play tells the story of Kate Elliot's unhappy suburban South London family and the domestic havoc wrought when she decides to adopt George Dillon as a surrogate son. Typical Osborne themes, including religion, vegetarianism and the casual deception of everyday life and scorn of the theatre are present here. In common with Jimmy Porter in *Look Back in Anger*, George Dillon is an intelligent man unable to find his place in the world.

Look Back in Anger, after numerous rejections, became a West End and Broadway hit. It was largely autobiographical, based on his time, living and arguing with Pamela Lane (his first wife) in cramped accommodation in Derby while she cuckolded him with a local dentist. The play, written in a short period of only a few weeks, was summarily rejected by the agents and production companies to whom Osborne first submitted the play. It was eventually picked up by George Devine who placed a notice in "The Stage" in 1956 for production, with his failing Royal Court Theater. Both Osborne and the Royal Court Theater were struggling to survive financially and both saw the production of *Look Back in Anger* as a risk. The play received mixed reviews. Theatre critics rejected the revolutionary play until Kenneth Tynan, the most influential critic of the day

declared: “I doubt if I could love anyone who did not wish to see Look Back in Anger”. Gradually, many critics considered the play to be the turning point in postwar British theatre and Osborne was soon pronounced to be one of the most promising young playwrights in British theater. Osborne’s protagonist, Jimmy Porter, captured the angry and rebellious nature of the post-war generation, a dispossessed lot who were clearly unhappy with things as they were in the decades following World War II. Jimmy Porter came to represent an entire generation of “angry young men.”

In his next play, *The Entertainers* (1957), Osborne continued to examine the state of the country, this time using three generations of a family of entertainers to symbolise the decline of England after the war. The play metaphorically explores the decline of the British Empire through the lens of a failing music hall. Laurence Olivier played the lead role, a struggling comedian, in the production and the play received critical acclaim. Most critics agreed that it was an appropriate follow-up to the wild success of *Look Back in Anger.*

Following *The Entertainer*, Osborne continued to have a productive career, writing seventeen more stage plays, eleven plays for television, five screen plays (including *Tom Jones*, for which he received an Academy Award), and four books, including two volumes of autobiography. *A Better Class of Person* (1981) is an autobiography based on Osborne’s childhood and early life; it ends with the first performance of “Look Back in Anger” at the Royal Court Theatre in 1956. A sequel, *Almost a Gentleman*, was published in 1991.

A Patriot for Me is a 1965 play by Osborne, based on the true story of Alfred Redl. When the Royal Court Theatre produced the play in 1965, it was forced to change from a public theatre to a private members’ club. The play was deemed too sexually transgressive by the Lord Chamberlain’s Office, and denied a license for performance. The Royal Court suffered a considerable financial loss because of this denial. After this, however, the quality of

Osborne's output became erratic. Although he produced a number of hits including *Luther* (1961), a play about the leader of the Reformation (based on the life of Martin Luther), and *Inadmissible Evidence* (1964), the study of a frustrated solicitor at a law firm, he also produced a string of unimportant works. Critics began to accuse him of not fulfilling his early potential, and audiences no longer seemed affected by the Osborne rage.

Osborne continued to work in the artistic and entertainment worlds through the 1970's and 80's. He wrote plays, but also ventured into writing screenplays, television adaptations, and autobiography. Osborne made several appearances as an actor during this period. He starred in several popular Hollywood films including "Get Carter". Later in life, he received numerous awards for his work including a Lifetime Achievement Award from the Writer's Guild in Britain.

9.4 SOURCES OF THE PLAY *LOOK BACK IN ANGER*

The English Stage Company appointed George Devine as its director. The company's first two productions had been flops and it urgently needed a success for its survival. *Look Back in Anger* was written in seventeen days in a deckchair on Morecambe pier where Osborne was performing in a rep show called "Seagulls over Sorrento" and the play is largely autobiographical. Osborne was influenced by the existing socio-political reality in post-war England. He was also deeply influenced by Henrik Ibsen's realism, George Bernard Shaw, Oscar Wilde, D. H. Lawrence and Tennesse Williams.

In the post-war years, the English Empire melted into the concept of the "Commonwealth". At the same time, Britain's international position was steadily declining, with the former colonies like India, Pakistan, Ceylon, and most of the African colonies gaining independence by 1950s. Symptomatic of this decline was the fiasco of the Suez crisis (1956): when Egypt threatened to seize control of the canal and nationalize it. Britain's relationship with America became very close, especially after the foundation of NATO and British foreign policy suffered from the need to demonstrate some semblance of independence from its more powerful ally. During the

fifties, however, the general attitude became rather complacent. Britain was becoming an affluent, consumer society. By the Education Act 1944, all children had the right to have free secondary education. However, in the 50's, some people disagreed with the system because it did not give equal educational opportunities.

The influence of television became decisive. English people devoted less time to their hobbies and gave up going to theatre or sporting events or reading books. Such a habit led to the alienation of the individual. The most dangerous aspect being that young men watched spectacles of violence and sadism, and explicit sex, which distorted their perception of what, is normal. Society became more permissive and the early fifties saw a particular relationship on the part of the young people with the whole world of fashion image style music, dance Youth Culture.

The alienation and the dissatisfaction felt by many of the young led to a reaction against middle-class values and a release of working-class energies. The term "Angry Young Man" was applied for about ten years to writers of the time who expressed their disillusionment without having many positive values to put in the place of those they opposed. Kenneth Allsop defined in *The Angry Decade* (1958) this group of writers of the late 1950s to be irreverent, strident, impatient, vigorous, vulgar and so on. These feelings were founded in the sense of betrayal and futility, which succeeded the exalted aspirations generated by post-war reforms. Colin Wilson's study of alienation, *The Outsider* (1956), was judged by many as an important manifesto for the movement. However, the classic dramatic embodiment of these feelings can be traced in John Osborne's *Look Back in Anger* whose anti-hero Jimmy Porter has come to represent the definitive "angry young man".



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q 3: What are the reasons behind John Osborne's 'anger'?

Q 4: Briefly comment on the sources of the play.

9.5 CRITICAL RECEPTION OF OSBORNE

On May 8th 1956, *Look Back in Anger* was opened at the Royal Court Theatre as the third production of the newly formed English Stage Company. The English Stage Company had been founded in 1955 to promote the production of new plays by contemporary authors that might not find production in the commercial West End theatre (London's equivalent of Broadway in New York City). West End theatre provided quality acting and high standards of production, but very few dramas could relate to life in contemporary England. Most plays of the time were generally innocuous light comedies, thrillers, and foreign imports—fourteen American shows in 1955 alone. Osborne had submitted copies of *Look Back in Anger* to every agent in London and many West End producers, but had been rejected by all. When the script arrived at the Royal Court, the Artistic Director George Devine and his young assistant director Tony Richardson knew it was exactly what they were looking for. *Look Back in Anger* was viewed as a play that would, as Devine later put it, "blow a hole in the old theatre."

The critical reaction to Osborne and this play was mixed, but many critics, whether or not they liked the play, acknowledged its merits and those of its young author. Cecil Wilson in the Daily Mail assessed Jimmy Porter as a "young neurotic who lives like a pig," whose "bitterness produces a fine flow of savage talk, but is basically a bore because its reasons are never explained." But Wilson also said that the English Stage Company "have not discovered a masterpiece, but they have discovered a dramatist of outstanding promise, a man who can write with searing passion but happens in this case to have lavished it on the wrong play."

Kenneth Tynan and Harold Hobson were among the few critics to praise it, and are now regarded among the most influential critics of the time. For example, on BBC Radio's The Critics, Ivor Brown began his review by describing the play's setting—a one-room flat in the Midlands—as "unspeakably dirty and squalid" such that it was difficult for him to "believe that a colonel's daughter, brought up with some standards", would have lived in it. He expressed anger at having watched a something that "wasted

[his] time". On the other hand, Kenneth Tynan wrote that he "could not love anyone who did not wish to see Look Back in Anger", describing the play as a "minor miracle" containing "all the qualities...one had despaired of ever seeing on the stage—the drift towards anarchy, the instinctive leftishness, the automatic rejection of "official" attitudes, the surrealist sense of humour (e.g., Jimmy describes an effeminate male friend as a 'female Emily Bronte'), the casual promiscuity, the sense of lacking a crusade worth fighting for and, underlying all these, the determination that no one who dies shall go unmourned." Harold Hobson was also quick to recognize the importance of the play "as a landmark of British theatre". He praised Osborne for the play, despite the fact that the "blinkers still obscure his vision". Alan Sillitoe, author of *Saturday Night and Sunday Morning* and *The Loneliness of the Long Distance Runner* (both of which are also part of the "angry young men" movement), wrote that Osborne "didn't contribute to British theatre, he set off a landmine and blew most of it up".

In spite of the tremendous critical excitement it generated, *Look Back in Anger* was not financially successful during its first run. Part of the problem was thought to be the fact that rotating repertory—a practice new to 1950s London—was confusing to audiences who were unable to determine when any particular play was being performed. It was decided in August to cancel the other plays and run *Look Back in Anger* alone for eleven weeks, but even then, the ticket sales failed to meet expenses. BBC broadcast a twenty-five minute excerpt from the play on October 16, and following that, the play sold out for its run and a three-week run in another theatre. A production of *Look Back in Anger* then toured England. It received the *Evening Standard Award* as the best new play of 1956.

Look Back in Anger opened at the Lyceum Theatre on Broadway on October 1st 1957, with the original cast and received very strong reviews. It ran for 407 performances, had a second Broadway production beginning in November 1958, and toured the United States and Canada. It received the New York Drama Critics Circle Award as the best foreign play of 1957. It then played all over the world. It continues to be produced, both by professional and amateur theatre groups.

Look Back in Anger was adapted in 1958 as a film by John Osborne and Nigel Kneale. It was produced by Woodfall Films, a company formed by John Osborne and Tony Richardson. It was directed by Tony Richardson, and starred Richard Burton and Claire Bloom. A second film as made in 1980, directed by Lindsay Anderson (a former artistic director of the Royal Court Theatre). It starred Malcolm McDowell and Lisa Banes. The 1989 revival directed by Judi Dench for a very limited run in Belfast was filmed for Thames Television. The television version was directed by David Jones and starred Kenneth Branagh and Emma Thompson.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q 5: Discuss briefly the critical reception of the play *Look Back in Anger.*



9.6 LET US SUM UP

After reading this unit, you must have realised that Osborne was an English man to the core, and he cared passionately about England both as a land and a culture. Still, the plays he wrote were seldom overtly political. Like many of his countrymen, he felt betrayed by the false dawn of the post-war era, but the plays themselves had a tendency to 'point to the wound, not to the cure.' You have learnt from this unit that John Osborne expressed the rebellious attitude of the 'Angry Young Men' through his famous play *Look Back in Anger*. This play was written as a reaction against the drawing-room comedies and middle-class drama of Noël Coward and Sir Terence Rattigan, and it is a landmark in the history of English theatre.



9.7 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS (HINTS ONLY)

Ans to Q 1: Osborne was the son of Thomas Godfrey Osborne… …he made his stage debut in Joan Temple's "No Room at the Inn" in March,

1948, at the Empire Theatre in Sheffield… …he joined Anthony Creighton's provincial touring company… …he left behind a large body of works.

Ans to Q 2: Osborne expressed his disillusionment without having many positive values to put in the place of those he opposed… …through five marriages, his private life generated its own tumult and drama, farce and pathos… …Osborne's hatred for society, as elucidated on stage, was rooted in his life, not in politics.

Ans to Q 3: In the immediately post-war years, the English Empire melted into the larger concept of the "Commonwealth"… … Britain was well on the way to becoming an affluent, consumer society… …the alienation and the dissatisfaction led to a reaction against middle-class values and a release of working-class energies.

Ans to Q 4: While writing *Look Back in Anger*, Osborne was influenced by the existing socio-political reality in post war England… …In the post-war years, the English Empire melted into the concept of the "Commonwealth"… … During the fifties, the general attitude became rather complacent… …the alienation and the dissatisfaction felt by many young men led to a reaction against middle-class values and a release of working- class energies as reflected in the play.

Ans to Q 5: The critical reaction was mixed… …Kenneth Tynan and Harold Hobson praised it… …in spite of the tremendous critical excitement it generated, *Look Back in Anger* was not financially successful during its first run… …the play was broadcast by BBC on October 16… …it received the *Evening Standard Award* as best new play of 1956… …it was adapted in 1958 as a film by John Osborne and Nigel Kneale.



9.8 POSSIBLE QUESTIONS

Q 1: Discuss the concept of "Angry Young Man" with reference to *Look Back in Anger*. How does the play reflect the concerns of the Angry Young Generation?

Q 2: Assess and evaluate the contribution of Osborne as a dramatist in the light of *Look Back in Anger*.

Q 3: *Look Back in Anger* ushered in a new movement in British Drama. Do you agree?

Q 4: Does *Look Back in Anger* by John Osborne reflect the mood and temper of post-war England? Discuss.

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UNIT 10:JOHN OSBORNE: *LOOK BACK IN ANGER* (PART II)

UNIT STRUCTURE

10.1 Learning Objectives

10.2 Introduction

10.3 Act wise Summary of the Play

10.4 Critical Commentary on the Play

10.5 Major Themes

10.6 Major Characters

10.7 Let Us Sum Up

10.8 Further Reading

10.9 Answers to Check Your Progress (Hints Only)

10.10 Possible Questions

10.1 LEARNING OBJECTIVES

After going through this unit, you will be able to

- make an act wise summary of the play *Look Back in Anger*
- discuss the play in terms of its various thematic aspects
- identify the major character and discuss their role in the play
- comment critically on the reception of the play.

10.2 INTRODUCTION

In the previous unit, we have discussed the life and works of John Osborne. In this unit, we shall discuss Osborne's play *Look Back in Anger* (1956) in detail. In this play, Osborne focuses on the life and marital struggles of an intelligent and educated but disaffected young man of working-class origin, Jimmy Porter, and his equally competent yet impassive upper-middle-class wife Alison. The supporting characters include Cliff Lewis, an amiable Welsh lodger who attempts to keep the peace, and Helena Charles, Alison's snobbish friend. While writing this play, it is believed that Osborne drew inspiration from his personal life and failing marriage

with Pamela Lane. The play spawned the term “angry young men” to describe Osborne and those of his generation who employed the harshness of realism in the theatre in contrast to the more escapist theatre that characterised the previous generation. The play was received favourably in the theatre community becoming an enormous commercial success, transferring to the West End and Broadway, and even touring to Moscow. It is credited to have turned Osborne from a struggling playwright into a wealthy and famous personality, and also won him the Evening Standard Drama Award as the most promising playwright of 1956. By the time you finish reading the unit, you will learn that the play’s contemporary importance is not dependent on its flimsy plot, but on the articulate anger of the protagonist Jimmy Porter, whose tirades against the complacency of the English establishment won Osborne the reputation of being the leader of a group which gained popularity as the Angry Young Man.

10.3 ACT WISE SUMMARY OF THE PLAY

Act I

The play begins with Osborne’s very specific stage directions; with a description of the setting and the scene. Osborne attempts to give definition to each character through an analysis of their physical traits and their emotional makeup. Act I takes place on an evening in April.

The staging of the play is important for understanding the mood of domestic disturbance. Act 1 opens on a dismal Sunday afternoon in Jimmy and Alison’s cramped attic in the Midlands. It is a small room with simple, sparse furniture. It is cluttered with items such as “books, neckties, and odds and ends, including a large, tattered toy teddy bear and soft, woolly squirrel”. Their apartment flat is a symbol of 1950’s domesticity. This is representative of the characters and the characters’ lifestyle. Like a piece of junk or old furniture, Jimmy, Cliff, and Alison have literally been stowed away in an attic, out of sight from the upper class culture. Their emotions and ambitions do not fit in with the upper class world and this causes a great amount of consternation for Jimmy. The cramped space contains all of the trappings of a meagre domestic life. Jimmy’s political and social

persuasions become evident here as well when he mocks a faux column in the paper written by the "Bishop of Bromley." He considers himself unconventional and untied to traditional British politics and even declares that no political party would want him. Though his politics is often aligned with the Liberal party, he is also a bit of an anarchist, opposed to any kind of organization whether it be politics or religion.

It becomes apparent that there is a huge social gulf between Jimmy and Alison. Her family is upper-middle-class military, perhaps verging on upper class, while Jimmy is decidedly working class. He had to fight hard against her family's disapproval to win her. "Alison's mummy and I took one look at each other, and from then on the age of chivalry was dead", he explains. We also learn that the sole family income is derived from a sweet stall in the local market—an enterprise that is surely well beneath Jimmy's education, let alone Alison's "station in life".

As Act I progresses, Jimmy becomes more and more vituperative, transferring his contempt for Alison's family onto her personally, calling her "pusillanimous" and generally belittling her to Cliff. It is possible to play this scene as though Jimmy thinks everything is just a joke, but most actors opt for playing it as though he really is severely criticising her. The tirade ends with some physical horseplay, resulting in the ironing board overturning and Alison's arm getting a burn. Jimmy exits to play his trumpet off stage. Alison and Cliff play a tender scene, during which she confides that she's accidentally pregnant and can't quite bring herself to tell Jimmy. Cliff urges her to tell him. When Jimmy returns, Alison announces that her actor friend Helena Charles is coming to stay and it is entirely obvious that Jimmy despises Helena even more than he despises Alison. He flies into a total rage, and conflict is inevitable.

Act II

Act II opens on another Sunday afternoon, with Helena and Alison making lunch. In a two-handed scene, Alison gives a clue as to why she decided to take Jimmy on—her own minor rebellion against her upbringing plus her admiration of Jimmy's campaigns against the dereliction of English post-war, post-atom-bomb life. She describes Jimmy to Helena as a "knight

in shining armour". Helena says, firmly, "You've got to fight him".

Jimmy enters, and the tirade continues. When the women put on hats and declare that they are going to church, Jimmy's sense of betrayal peaks. When he leaves to take an urgent phone call, Helena announces that she has forced the issue. She has sent a telegram to Alison's parents asking them to come and "rescue" her. Alison is stunned but agrees that she will go. After a scene break, we see Alison's father, Colonel Redfern, who has come to collect her to take her back to her family home. The playwright allows the Colonel to come across as quite a sympathetic character, albeit totally out of touch with the modern world (as he himself admits). "You're hurt because everything's changed", Alison tells him, "and Jimmy's hurt because everything's stayed the same".

Helena arrives to say goodbye, intending to leave very soon herself. Alison is surprised that Helena is staying on for another day, but she leaves, giving Cliff a note for Jimmy. Cliff in turn hands it to Helena and leaves, saying, "I hope he rams it up your nostrils". Almost immediately, Jimmy bursts in. His contempt at finding a "goodbye" note makes him turn on Helena again, warning her to keep out of his way until she leaves. Helena tells him that Alison is expecting a baby, and Jimmy admits grudgingly that he's taken aback. However, his tirade continues. They first come to physical blows, and then as the Act 2 curtain falls, Jimmy and Helena are kissing passionately and falling on the bed.

Act III

Act III opens as a deliberate replay of Act I, but this time with Helena at the ironing-board wearing Jimmy's red shirt as we find in Act I. Months have passed. Jimmy is notably more pleasant to Helena than he was to Alison in Act I. She actually laughs at his jokes, and the three of them (Jimmy, Cliff, and Helena) get into a music hall comedy routine that obviously is not improvised. Cliff announces that he's decided to strike out on his own. As Jimmy leaves the room to get ready for a final night out for the three of them, he opens the door to find Alison, looking like death. Instead of caring for her, he snaps over his shoulder "Friend of yours to see you" and abruptly leaves.

After a scene break, Alison explains to Helena that she lost the baby—one of Jimmy's cruellest speeches in Act 1 expressed the wish that Alison would conceive a child and lose it—the two women reconcile but Helena realizes that what she's done is immoral and she in turn decides to leave. She summons Jimmy to hear her decision and he lets her go with a sarcastic farewell. The play ends with a sentimental reconciliation between Jimmy and Alison. They revive an old game they used to play, pretending to be bears and squirrels, and seem to be in a state of truce.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q 1: Narrate in your words the story of the play.

10.4 CRITICAL COMMENTARY ON THE PLAY

Look Back in Anger is a play that appeared crucial in the transition from Britain's Victorian past into the modern 20th century. The cultural backdrop of the play is the rise and fall of the British Empire. The beginning of the 20th century saw the peak of power and influence of British colonialism. By the 1950's, two World Wars, which devastated the British economy, and the rise of the United States as the new world military and political power meant that the British Empire had entered a steep decline. Jimmy Porter is representative of an entire culture that remained nostalgic for this past glory. He idealises the worthy causes of the past even while he mocks those who cannot understand why the times have changed as much as they have. Jimmy's rage and anger is his expression of pent-up emotion and his need for life in a world that has become listless and uninteresting. That anger became a symbol of the rebellion against the political and social malaise of British culture. His anger is destructive to those around him and the psychological violence of the play received a great deal of criticism. Critics today agree, however, that the play is central to an understanding of British life in the 20th century and, thus, a crucial piece of literature in the British canon.

Look Back in Anger has been characterised by Osborne himself as

'a formal, rather old-fashioned play'. The movement of the play is conventional enough neatly divided into acts and scenes. The action of the play takes place in a logical and coherent manner. The play follows the conventional unity of place, confining the action to jimmy's 'one-room flat in the Midlands'. It was the third play in the repertory of the English Stage Company at the Royal Court Theatre. However, it was not an immediate success. The English Stage Company's production of *Look Back in Anger* was significant in a different way as it "restored passion and vitality to the English stage, and established the Royal Court Theatre as a home for new drama." The play is often quoted as a watershed in modern dramatic history. Osborne's play gave voice to violent discontent in the character of a young man who was aware that he could find no place in the society around him. BBC broadcast a twenty-five minute excerpt of the play and following that, the play sold out for its run.

As Osborne's later work has proved, he was not really a political dramatist and his work bears little relation to those who followed after him. However, *Look Back in Anger* prepared the way for them by making managements and directors aware of a new direction in contemporary writing. The play abounds in recurrent images and symbols, which gather meaning as the action proceeds.

Reading *Look Back in Anger* today (as opposed to seeing it performed — Osborne's plays are not revived with any great regularity), you may find the work surprisingly small and immature. Most interestingly, rather than being a statement of great political intent, the play turns out to have been considerably simpler in its motivation and it served as a young playwright's exorcism of a failed marriage. Those parts hewing most closely to autobiography offer its more powerful truths, while the invented parts ring utterly false. Yet, despite all its flaws, the play changed the theatrical landscape in England. You would realize that what made *Look Back in Anger* thrillingly new is that it spoke directly to England in the blazing heat and vitality of its language. It was the first British play to openly dramatize bruising emotion, and it was the first to give the alienated lower classes and youth of England a weapon to raise their voice against the state.

10.5 MAJOR THEMES

The following are some of the important themes in the play *Look Back in Anger*.

Look Back in Anger as a Kitchen-sink drama:

Realism, in British theater, was practised in the late 19th and early 20th century by such playwrights as George Bernard Shaw. According to many critics, by the mid-20th century the genre of realism had become tired and unimaginative. Osborne's play returned imagination to the Realist genre by capturing the anger and immediacy of post-war youth culture and the alienation that resulted in the British working classes. The idea of the Kitchen Sink drama was a revelation for British theatre. Kitchen Sink drama is a term used to denote the plays that rely on realism to explore domestic social relations. This style of theater was given the name "Kitchen Sink" because of its focus on the interior domestic and emotional lives of ordinary people. In the case of *Look Back in Anger*, the kitchen is literally a part of the set. The styling of most British theatre before *Look Back in Anger* favoured Victorian dramas and comedies or staging of classical plays. In a general sense, the Victorian plays dealt mostly with polite themes from the late 19th and early 20th century upper ruling class. In contrast, Osborne's play depicted the raw emotions and living conditions of the working class. These types of plays had several characteristics that distinguished them as a break from the forms of theater before them. They can be compared against theatrical movements such as Avant-garde theater, or the Theater of the Absurd, characterised by the plays of authors such as Samuel Beckett.

Angry Young Generation:

Look Back in Anger was a comment on a range of domestic social dilemmas during Osborne's period. Most importantly, it was able to capture, through the character of Jimmy Porter, the anger of this generation that festered just below the surface of elite British culture. World War II left a tumultuous impact on the civilization. The adverse impacts of the War helped to create several new traditions in literature. One such movement made its way in the early 1950s. This radically new age was labelled as the Angry

Young Man Movement. The literature of this age is chiefly represented as rebellious and critical in attitude towards the post-war British society. The "angry young men" comprised a group of English novelists and playwrights, mostly having lower middle or working-class, and university background. They exhibited anger and frustration with modern British culture and showed an equally uninhibited disdain for the drabness of the postwar welfare state, and their writings frequently expressed raw anger and frustration as the postwar reforms failed to meet the exalted aspirations for genuine change.



LET US KNOW

The phrase "angry young man" is assumed to have been borrowed from Leslie Allen Paul's autobiographical book *Angry Young Man* (1951). After critical acclamation of Osborn's play *Look Back in Anger*, the British newspapers employed the label to encapsulate the mode and temperament of this group of writers. The trend that was evident in John Wain's novel *Hurry on Down* (1953) and in *Lucky Jim* (1954) by Kingsley Amis was crystallised in 1956 in the play *Look Back in Anger*, which became the representative work of the movement. When the Royal Court Theatre's press agent described the play's 26-year-old author John Osborne as an "angry young man," the name was extended to all his contemporaries who expressed rage at the persistence of class distinctions, pride in their lower-class mannerisms, and dislike for anything highbrow or "phoney." Their novels and plays typically feature a rootless, lower middle or working-class male protagonist who views society with scorn and sardonic humour and may have conflicts with authority but who is nevertheless preoccupied with the quest for upward mobility. Among the other writers embraced in the term are the novelists John Braine (*Room at the Top*, 1957) and Alan Sillitoe (*Saturday Night and Sunday Morning*, 1958) and the playwrights Bernard Kops (*The Hamlet of Stepney Green*, 1956) and Arnold Wesker (*Chicken Soup with Barley*, 1958).

The Major Characteristics of the 'Angry Young Men Movement' can be summarised as follows:

a. Revolt against Social Inequality

b. Criticism of Mannerism

c. Portrayal of Social Status of Youth

d. Revolt against conventionality

e. Unconventional Hero

The Rise and Fall of the British Empire:

The character of Colonel Redfern, Alison's father, represents the decline of and nostalgia for the British Empire. The Colonel had been stationed for many years in India, a symbol of Britain's imperial reach into the world. The Edwardian age which corresponded to Britain's height of power, had been the happiest time of his life. His nostalgia is representative of the denial that Osborne sees in the psyche of the British people.

Loss of Childhood:

A theme that affects the characters of Jimmy and Alison Porter is the idea of a lost childhood. Osborne uses specific examples – the death of Jimmy's father when Jimmy was only ten, and how he was forced to watch the physical and mental demise of the man — to demonstrate the way in which Jimmy is forced to deal with suffering from an early age. Alison's loss of childhood is best seen in the way that she was forced to grow up too fast by marrying Jimmy. Her youth is wasted in the anger and abuse that her husband levels upon her. Osborne suggests that a generation of British youth has experienced this same loss of childhood innocence. Osborne uses the examples of World War, the development of the atomic bomb, and the decline of the British Empire to show how an entire culture has lost the innocence that other generations were able to maintain.

Sloth in British Culture:

Jimmy Porter compares his quest for a more vibrant and emotional life to the slothfulness of the world around him. It is important to note that Jimmy does not see the world around him as dead, but merely asleep in some fundamental way. This is a fine line that Osborne walks throughout

the play. Jimmy never argues that there is nihilism within British culture. Instead, he sees a kind of slothfulness of character. His anger is an attempt to awaken those around him from this cultural sleep. This slothfulness of emotion is best seen in the relationship between Alison and Cliff. Alison describes her relationship with Cliff as "comfortable." They are physically and emotionally affectionate with each other, but neither seems to want to take their passion to another level of intimacy. In this way, their relationship is lazy. They cannot awaken enough passion to consummate their affair. Jimmy seems to subconsciously understand this, which is the reason he is not jealous of their affection towards one another.

Masculinity in Art:

Osborne has been accused by critics of misogynistic views in his plays. Critics accuse Osborne of glorifying young male anger and cruelty towards women and homosexuals. This is seen in this play in specific examples in which Jimmy Porter emotionally distresses Alison, his wife, and delivers a grisly monologue in which he wishes for Alison's mother's death. Osborne, however, asserts that he is attempting to restore a vision of true masculinity into a 20th century culture that he sees as becoming increasingly feminised. This feminisation is seen in the way that British culture shows an "indifference to anything but immediate, personal suffering." This causes deadness within which Jimmy's visceral anger and masculine emotion continues.

Identity Crisis and Class Conflict:

The prevalence of class system is the root cause of Jimmy's meaningless existence. He comes from a working class. Identity crisis forms another important theme of the play. Jimmy is trapped in his own problems of social identity. Running a sweet stall seems an odd occupation for an educated man like Jimmy Porter. Unfortunately, he does not fit in anywhere. To Jimmy, suffering the pain of life is the only way to find one's true identity.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q 2: Discuss *Look Back in Anger* as a kitchen-sink drama.

Q 3: In what way, can we call *Look Back in Anger* an "Angry Young Men" drama?

10.6 MAJOR CHARACTERS

The following are the major characters in the play.

Jimmy and Cliff:

Osborne wrote *Look Back in Anger* with a keen sense of binaries that interrelate the lead character Jimmy with others throughout the play. He illustrates the struggle of nature vs culture; past vs present; and solidarity vs companionship through this angry young man. Osborne attempts to give definition to each character through an analysis of their physical traits and their emotional makeup. As the curtain rises, the audience sees Jimmy Porter and Cliff Lewis seated in two shabby armchairs. They are reading newspapers, which cover the top half of their bodies so that the audience can only see their legs. Jimmy is smoking a cigar and wearing a tweed jacket and flannel pants. The opening of the play gives detailed descriptions of the disposition of each character. Jimmy, who is about 25 years old, is described as "a disconcerting mixture of sincerity and cheerful malice, of tenderness and freebooting cruelty; restless, importunate, full of pride, a combination which alienates the sensitive and insensitive alike." Cliff, who is about the same age as Jimmy, is almost the opposite of Jimmy. He is relaxed, "almost to lethargy," and easy going. Cliff demands other people's love, while Jimmy mostly repels it.

Jimmy and Cliff argue over the day's news, with most of the arguments consisting of Jimmy remarking on the absurdity of the present state of society. Although Jimmy is the more educated of the two, Cliff consistently strives for a reassuring sense of satisfaction regarding English culture. Jimmy comes off as rather primitive; he prefers to rely on his instinctive nature to alienate those close to him through his anger. Still,

there's a good reason for his anger: although he is naturally talented musically, he is forced to work a candy stand to make ends meet. After Jimmy and Cliff bicker some more, Jimmy eventually resorts to attacking Cliff physically. He overpowers Cliff in this manner and hurts Alison in the process, allowing her to lament, "Oh, it's more like a zoo everyday!" (26). It is clear that Jimmy, with such animalistic tendencies, just should not be forced to live with others.

Jimmy chooses to escape into his own fantasies when feeling crowded; aside from mourning the impending death of his musical career, he recalls memories of former lovers. Everyone knows he was 'born out of his time.' Jimmy cannot deal with the natural passage of time as well as Cliff, the last of his schoolmates, despite his intelligence.

Alison and Helena:

Alison, Jimmy's wife is the most elusive personality in the play. She is portrayed as tall, dark and slim. She seems passive and an ineffective character. However, her decision to leave Jimmy shows that she has self-respect and thus deserves admiration. Alison is a remarkable patient woman for she remains calm in the face of her husband's ruthless verbal assaults on her family. She is the embodiment of upper-class values, which Jimmy defies. Helena, on the other hand, is the antithesis of Alison. Vibrant and forceful, Helena strives to tell Jimmy what she feels about him. She is middle class not only by birth but also by instinct and conviction. She is responsible for Alison's decision to leave Jimmy on the one hand and also in forsaking Jimmy when Alison decides to return to her husband.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q 4: Give a brief outline of the main characters of the play.



10.7 LET US SUM UP

From your reading of the different sections of this unit, you have learnt that the play *Look Back in Anger*, also known as a play in three acts by John Osborne, was first performed in 1956 and published in 1957. Osborne as an "angry young man" was extended to apply to an entire generation of disaffected young British writers who identified themselves mostly with the lower classes and viewed the upper classes and the established political institutions with disdain. Although the form of the play was not revolutionary, its content was unexpected. Onstage for the first time were the 20- to 30-year-olds of Great Britain who had not participated in World War II and who found its aftermath lacking in promise. The hero, Jimmy Porter, is the son of a worker. Through the state educational system, he has reached an uncomfortably marginal position on the border of the middle class, from which he can see the traditional possessors of privilege holding the better jobs and threatening his upward climb. Due to its portrayal of the issues of the common people in a strategically important period of British history, this play is considered one of the most accomplished English plays.



10.8 FURTHER READING

1) Allsop, Kenneth. (1958). *The Angry Decade: A Survey of the Cultural Revolt of the Nineteen-Fifties*. London: Owen.
2) Batra, Shakti. (2008). *John Osborne: Look Back in Anger*. Delhi: Surjeet Publications.
3) Banham, Martin. (1969). *Osborne*. Edinburgh: Oliver and Boyd.
4) Evans, Gareth L. (1977). *The Language of Modern Drama*. London: Dent.
5) Nandwani, Aditya. (2009). *John Osborne: Look Back in Anger.* New Delhi: Anmol Publications.

6) Osborne, John. (1982). *Look Back in Anger.* London: Penguin.

Websites and Electronic Resources:

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Look_Back_in_Anger

https://www.britannica.com/topic/Look-Back-in-Anger

10.9 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS (HINTS ONLY)

Ans to Q 1: *Look Back in Anger* opens on a dismal Sunday afternoon in Jimmy and Alison's cramped attic in the Midlands… …there is a huge social gulf between Jimmy and Alison… … he had to fight hard against her family's disapproval to win her… …Jimmy becomes more and more vituperative, transferring his contempt for Alison's family… …the play ends with a sentimental reconciliation between Jimmy and Alison… …class conflict, identity crisis etc. form an important theme.

Ans to Q 2: Kitchen Sink drama is a term used to denote the plays that rely on realism to explore domestic social relations… …focus is on the interior domestic and emotional lives of ordinary people… …the kitchen is literally a part of the set in *Look Back in Anger*.

Ans to Q 3: *Look Back in Anger* was a comment on a range of domestic social dilemmas during Osborne's period… …it could capture, through Jimmy Porter, the anger of this generation that festered just below the surface of elite British culture… …the "angry young men" comprised a group of English novelists and playwrights, who exhibited anger and frustration with modern British culture and showed an equally uninhibited disdain for the drabness of the post-war welfare state… …the main features of the Movement are: Revolt against Social Inequality, Criticism of Mannerism, Portrayal of Social Status of Youth, Revolt against conventionality, Unconventional Hero.

Ans to Q 4: Jimmy, who is about 25 years old, is described as "a disconcerting mixture of sincerity and cheerful malice, of tenderness

and freebooting cruelty… …Cliff, who is about the same age as Jimmy, is almost the opposite of Jimmy… …Alison seems passive and an ineffective character… …remarkably a patient woman… …Helena is middle class not only by birth but also by instinct and conviction.



10.10 POSSIBLE QUESTIONS

Q 1: Critically analyse the themes and plot of *Look Back in Anger* by John Osborne. What according to you are the causes of popularity of the play?

Q 2: "Jimmy Porter is a highly complex personality at odds with the world." Discuss with reference to the text.

Q 3: Do you think that the views of Jimmy Porter are a mouthpiece of Osborne in *Look Back in Anger?*

Q 4: What are the features of the "Angry" Movement in general? Would you like to call *Look Back in Anger* an "Angry Young Men" drama? Justify your answer.

Q 5: Comment on the different themes of the play *Look Back in Anger* and discuss how the play addressed some important questions of the English society of Osborne's time.

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UNIT 11: INTRODUCING ABSURD DRAMA

UNIT STRUCTURE

11.1 Learning Objectives

11.2 Introduction

11.3 Absurd Drama According to Martin Esslin

11.4 Important Theorists and Playwrights of the Absurd

11.5 Reception of Absurd Drama

11.6 Let us Sum up

11.7 Further Reading

11.8 Answers to Check Your Progress (Hints Only)

11.9 Possible Questions

11.1 LEARNING OBJECTIVES

After going through this unit, you will be able to

- define the absurd drama and explain their characteristics
- trace the history of Absurd drama in the 20th century
- make a list of the important practitioners and playwrights of the Absurd
- explain their specific contributions of the absurd playwrights to the world of modern drama.

11.2 INTRODUCTION

This is the first unit of Block 3 of the course on modern drama. In this unit, we shall discuss the history and characteristics of Absurd drama. We shall also try to look at the practitioners of absurd drama in some detail. Marin Esslin who wrote the seminal book *The Theatre of the Absurd* (1961) probably coined the phrase 'Theatre of the Absurd'. The term Absurd is applied to the works of a group of dramatists who were active in the 1950s: Adamov, Beckett, Genet, Ionesco and Pinter. Among the less known playwrights were Albee, Arrabal, Gunter Grass, Pinget and N. F. Simpson. In the early 1950s, many diffused conceptions of the absurd began to be

resolved and articulated in a series of remarkable plays which dramatised the kind of vision of human beings struggling with the irrationality of experience, in a state of 'metaphysical anguish' as projected by the French writer Albert Camus. The so-called plays lack a formal logic and conventional structure, so that both form and content support (while emphasising the difficulty of communicating) the representation of what may be called the absurd predicament. Some of the major works of absurd plays are—*Waiting for Godot*, *Endgame*, *Happy Days* by Becket, *Rhinoceros* by Ionesco; *The Birthday Party*, *The Dumb Waiter* and *The Caretaker*, *The Homecoming*, *Landscape and Silence* and *No Man's Land* by Pinter. As you finish reading this unit, you will be able to discuss the history and background of Absurd drama, which shall further help you to discuss the plays *Waiting for Godot* and *The Caretaker,* which are prescribed for your study.

11.3 ABSURD DRAMA ACCORDING TO MARTIN ESSLIN

The term 'theatre of the absurd', coined by **Martin Esslin** for the title of his study of post-Second World War French theatre, came into vogue in the 1960s at a time when the so-called 'absurd' dramatists had written their major works and were already experimenting in other directions. The following is an attempt at exploring the history of Absurd drama. In his book *Absurd Drama*, Esslin wrote:

The Theatre of the Absurd attacks the comfortable certainties of religious or political orthodoxy. It aims to shock its audience out of complacency, to bring it face to face with the harsh facts of the human situation as these writers see it. However, the challenge behind this message is anything but one of despair. It is a challenge to accept the human condition as it is, in all its mystery and absurdity, and to bear it with dignity, nobly, responsibly; precisely because there are no easy solutions to the mysteries of existence, because ultimately man is alone in a meaningless world. The shedding of easy solutions, of comforting illusions, may be painful, but it leaves behind it a sense of freedom and relief. And that is why, in the last resort, the Theatre of the Absurd does not provoke tears of despair but the

laughter of liberation.

The decline of religious faith was masked until the end of World War II by the substitute religions of faith in progress, nationalism, and various totalitarian fallacies. All this was shattered by the World War II. By 1942, Albert Camus put the question why, since life had lost all meaning, man should not seek escape in suicide. In one of the great, seminal heart-searching stories of our time–*The Myth of Sisyphus*, Camus tried to diagnose the human situation in a world of shattered beliefs, "A world that can be explained by reasoning, however faulty, is a familiar world. But in a universe that is suddenly deprived of illusions and of light, man feels a stranger. His is an irremediable exile, because he is deprived of memories of a lost homeland as much as he lacks the hope of a promised land to come. This divorce between man and his life, the actor and his setting, truly constitutes the feeling of Absurdity." This view of Camus became Instrumental in popularising the concept of the 'absurd'.



LET US KNOW

The Meaning of the term 'Absurd':

'Absurd' originally means 'out of harmony', in a musical context. Hence its dictionary definition: 'out of harmony with reason or propriety; incongruous, unreasonable, illogical'. In common usage, 'absurd' may simply mean 'ridiculous', but this is not the sense in which Camus uses the word, and in which it is used when we speak of the Theatre of the Absurd. In an essay on Kafka, Ionesco defined his understanding of the term as follows: 'Absurd is that which is devoid of purpose…Cut off from his religious, metaphysical, and transcendental roots, man is lost; all his actions become senseless, absurd, useless.'

However, in the context of modern theatre the 'absurd' suggests a kind of unconventional mode of representation. The absurd plays are sure to frustrate the desire of watching a well- organised play expected by the conventional playgoers. However, critics would like to club some of these theatrical variations with other labels such

as—'theatre of revolt', 'theatre of derision', 'anti-theatre', or 'Meta theatre'**.** However, these labels also help to understand what is common between the plays because they appear to share a certain theatrical moment and movement.

Esslin further states that the sense of metaphysical anguish at the absurdity of the human condition is, broadly speaking, the theme of the plays of Beckett, Adamov, Ionesco, Genet, and some other writers. But it is not merely the subject-matter that defines what is here called the Theatre of the Absurd. A similar sense of the senselessness of life, of the inevitable devaluation of ideals, purity, and purpose, is also the theme of much of the work of dramatists like Giraudoux, Anouilh, Salacrou, Sartre, and Camus himself. Yet these writers differ from the dramatists of the Absurd in an important respect: they present their sense of the irrationality of the human condition in the form of highly lucid and logically constructed reasoning, while the Theatre of the Absurd strives to express its sense of the senselessness of the human condition and the inadequacy of the rational approach by the open abandonment of rational devices and discursive thought.

While Sartre or Camus express the new content in the old convention, the Theatre of the Absurd goes a step further in trying to achieve a unity between its basic assumptions and the form in which these are expressed. In some senses, the *theatre* of Sartre and Camus is less adequate as an expression of the *philosophy* of Sartre and Camus - in artistic, as distinct from philosophic, terms - than the Theatre of the Absurd. But, the Theatre of the Absurd is essentially French. It is broadly based on ancient strands of the Western tradition and has its exponents in Britain, Spain, Italy, Germany, Switzerland, Eastern Europe and the United States as well as in France. Moreover, its leading practitioners who lived in Paris and wrote in French were not themselves Frenchmen.



LET US KNOW

In the preface to his book, Martin Esslin writes:

- "Thus the type of theatre discussed in this book is by no means of concern only to a narrow circle of intellectuals. It may provide a new language, new ideas, new approaches, and a new, vitalized philosophy to transform the modes of thought and feeling of the public at large in a not too distant future."
- "Moreover, an understanding of this kind of theatre, which is still misunderstood by some of the critics, should, I believe, also cast light on current tendencies of thought in other fields, or at least show how a new convention of this sort reflects the changes in science, psychology, and philosophy that have been taking place in the last half-century. The theatre, an art more broadly based than poetry or abstract painting, without being, like the mass media, the collective product of corporations, is the point of intersection where the deeper trends of changing thought first reach a larger public."
- "There has been some comment on the fact that the Theatre of the Absurd represents trends that have been apparent in the more esoteric kinds of literature since the 1920's (Joyce, Surrealism, Kafka) or in painting since the first decade of this century (Cubism, abstract painting). This is certainly true. But the theatre could not put these innovations before its wider public until these trends had had time to filter into a wider consciousness. And, as this book hopes to show, the theatre can make its own very original contribution to this new type of art."

However, while dealing with the 'Theatre of the Absurd' following World War II, we should note that it emerged as a rebellion against the essentialist philosophy regarding human culture and art—the belief that human beings are fairly rational creatures who lived in an at least a partially intelligible universe. This philosophy also stressed the essential idea that

human beings are an integral part of an ordered social structure and hence capable of heroism and dignity even in most terrible situations. However, the existentialist philosophy that emerged out of some philosophical works such as Martin Heidegger's *Being and Time* (1927) and George Gadamer's *Truth and Method* came as a challenge to such an essentialist positioning. Writer- Philosophers such as Jean-Paul Sartre and Albert Camus viewed human life as an isolated existence that was cast into an alien universe. They viewed the universe as possessing no universal truth and meaning. Human beings, according to them were moving from nothingness to nothingness. Camus in *The Myth of Sisyphus* (1942) best captures the absurdity of modern human civilization by stating, "In a universe that is suddenly deprived of illusions and of light man feels a stranger. His is an irremediable exile…The divorce between man and his life, the actor and the setting, truly constitutes the feeling of absurdity". Similarly, Andre Breton's "Manifesto on Surrealism" (1924) launched Surrealism as a unified movement in France. The main idea was to overthrow logical reasoning, standard morality and social and artistic conventions in order to liberate art from the restrains of free creativity. For that purpose, they even advocated 'automatic writing'. Thus, Existentialism and then Surrealism captured the attention of the sensitive artists who rendered a visible influence on the emergence of Absurd drama as opposed to the idea of 'canonical' art.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q 1: Name some of the important absurdist plays.

Q 2: How does Martin Esslin view the 'absurd' in 'absurd plays'?

Q 3: State the significance of Camus' essays *The Myth of Sisyphus.*

11.4 IMPORTANT THEORISTS AND PLAYWRIGHTS OF THE ABSURD [Adapted from Claude Schumacher's essay "The Theatre of the Absurd"]

The origins of this form of drama are obscure, but it would be reasonable to suppose that its lineage is traceable from Roman mime plays,

through the aspects of comic business and techniques in medieval and Renaissance drama and commedia dell'arte, and thence to the dramatic works of Alfred Jarry, August Strindberg and Bertolt Brecht. The work of Jarry is vital and the possibilities of a theatre of the absurd are already apparent in *Ubu Roi* (1896), *Ubu Coca* (1897-8) and *Ubu enchatnd* (1898). Moreover, it is conceivable that the increasing popularity of nonsense verse from about the mid 19th century onwards is connected with this concept of the absurd. Almost certainly, **Dadaism** and **Surrealism** influenced the development of the theatre of the absurd, and did Antonin Artaud's theories on the 'Theatre of Cruelty.'



Dadaism: *A*n artistic movement in modern art that started around World War I. Its purpose was to ridicule the meaninglessn--ess of the modern world.
Surrealism: A 20th century avant-garde movement in art and literature, which sought to release the creative potential of the unconsci--ous mind, for example by the irrational juxtaposition of images.

In the evolution of a new vision of mankind in relation to his environment and the universe, one may expect to see a large number of cross-fertilising influences. Clearly, the idea that man is absurd is by no means new. An awareness of the essential absurdity of much human behaviour has been inherent in the works of many writers. Aristophanes, Plautus, Terence, Chaucer, Erasmus, Cervantes, Moliere, Swift, Pope, Samuel Butler, Anatole France, Balzac, Dickens, Goncharov, Thurber, Chesterton, Belloc, Damon Runyon—have all shown an acute feeling for man's comicality. However, the concept of 'Homo Absurdas' has acquired a rather more specific meaning in the last hundred years or so. This is partly owing to the need to provide an explanation of man's apparent purposeless in a universe, which is popularly imagined to have no discernible reason for existence.



Mathematically, absurd is that which cannot be expressed in finite terms of ordinary numbers or quantities. Hence, irrational rather than ridiculous. It is in the mathematical sense that the 'philosophy' of the absurd has been mostly expressed. However, it is also seen as a pervasive attitude rather than a system of thought.

However, we shall try to discuss the history of the emergence of absurd drama in terms of the extraordinary works of some writers and playwrights. For example, in his *La Tentation de l'occident* (1926), the French novelist **Andre Malraux**, who deliberated at length about the human condition, remarked that at the centre of European man, dominating the great moments of his life, there lies an essential absurdity. The theme recurs in a number of works by Malraux himself, and is apparent, particularly, in the works of **Jean Paul Sartre** and **Albert Camus**. The latter's collection of essays *The Myth of Sisyphus* (1942) contains some of the most interesting statements on the theme. Camus expounded in some detail a vision of life,

which was essentially absurd, without apparent purpose, out of harmony with its surroundings, sad to the point of anguish, and at the same time, in a laconic fashion, funny. He stresses the destructive nature of time, the feeling of solitude in a hostile world and the sense of isolation from other human beings.

Claude Schumacher in his article "The Theatre of the Absurd" provides an interesting analysis on the emergence of Absurd drama, its characteristics and practitioners. He views that theatre is the most social of art forms and, as such, requires a great many conventions so that the theatrical event, on and off the stage, can take place in an orderly fashion. You know already that it was in Ancient Greece that the theoretical foundations of our Western theatre were laid and that Aristotle is still invoked in the discussions concerning the structure of drama. Then, the Renaissance dramatists including Shakespeare gave a proper shape to classical drama. The influence of Shakespeare could be traced through the rules that came to govern French 17th century theatre (unities of time, place and action; unity of tone; verisimilitude, decorum etc.) aimed at creating an orderly, coherent, harmonious, rational dramatic poem.

The same rules came to embody the ideal of playwriting throughout the western world after neo-classicism established itself as the dominant aesthetic norm in the 17th century. A good play was a play with a strong, straightforward plot moving relentlessly to its logical, tragic or comic, conclusion, with clearly drawn and highly individualised characters, with well-written, rhetorical dialogue, to be clearly and evocatively spoken by actors. The actors are to convincingly portray their roles in a familiar setting or in some easily identifiable exotic locations. Such were the ideals upheld by all dramatists hoping to have their plays performed in the theatre, from Aeschylus to Ibsen. It can be said that, before the 20th century, the dramatic form was eminently logical and rational (even when dealing with extraordinary events) and that it aimed at providing spectators with an authentic picture of their world. When some modern playwrights recognised that the world was in a state of chaos, and the artists started aiming to construct meaning out of that same chaos, to create order out of disorder, to give shape to

what is shapeless, their 'New Theatre' soon came to be known as 'the theatre of the absurd', which overturned twenty-five centuries of tradition by rejecting all rules and by facing the chaos head-on.

A more radical onslaught on Western culture in general and Western theatre in particular was launched by **Antonin Artaud** in a series of programme notes, pamphlets, lectures and essays, collectively published in 1938 as *Le Théâtre et son double (The Theatre and its Double)*. Artaud's ideas were to become the basic tenets of the 'new theatre', which, from the outset, defined itself in total opposition to tradition. For Artaud, theatre must operate 'by every means at its disposal', but such means must be reassessed and new theatrical techniques must be invented. He stated clearly that he did not 'intend to do away with dialogue, but to give words something of the significance they have in dreams.' But, above all, he insisted on the concrete nature of the stage, on the importance of the physical presence of the actor: 'it seems to me that on stage, above all a space to be filled, somewhere something happens, word language must give way to sign language, whose objective aspect has the most immediate impact on us.' Artaud advocated a liberation of the subconscious and gave free rein to the imagination. He succeeded only partially in putting his ideas into practice, with his production of Shelley's verse drama *The Cenci* (Paris, 1935), and the task of bringing such innovative ideas to fruition was left to the next generation of playwrights and directors.

However, the harbinger of the 'absurd' era was **Eugene Ionesco's** *The Bald Prima Donna.* It has no plot, a deceptively naturalistic set, no consistent characters; it is based on an ever-shifting ground of nonsense dialogue, of arbitrary entrances and exits, of unexplained appearances. Chance rules supreme and everything is equally important (or unimportant). First seen in Paris on 16 May 1950 at 6 p.m. Ionesco was well aware of breaking new ground with this play:

The Bald Prima Donna which I had subtitled 'antiplay' (which frightened quite a few people) is a short burlesque comedy. Six vaguely English characters are under the delusion that you need only open your mouth to say something. In reality Mr and Mrs Smith, their guests the Martins,

the fire-brigade captain and the maid have nothing to say. That's why they talk and talk. Their speech full of clichés is a parody of speech, just as the play is a parody of theatre. The world appeared to me to be improbable; the behaviour of my characters must also appear improbable in its ordinariness. My aim is to make the commonplace look strange. (Ed. Latour, 1986, p. 57)

Ionesco reveals that the idea of the play *The Bald Prima Donna* came to him when he read the absurd phrases given as examples in language primers, e. g. 'the ceiling is above and the floor is below', which insidiously find their way into everyday speech. He also tells of his amazement when the 'antiplay' turned out to be a very effective comedy, since he thought he had written *the* 'tragedy of language'. A critic of the first night's performance warned, more than a decade before Esslin's book was written, "*The Bald Prima Donna* is exclusively for those spectators who are not frightened by the Absurd" (*Arts,* 19 May 1950) and another called it "a deliciously poetic absurdity." (*Match,* 24 June 1950).

The impossibility, together with the necessity of communicating, is the subject of Ionesco's masterpiece, *Les Chaises* (*The Chairs,* 1952). At the end of their lives, a couple of retired lighthouse keepers (he 95, she 94) invite 'distinguished people' to their lonely round tower in order to pass on the old man's 'message' to the world. The couple is garrulous beyond belief and there is no cliché that they do not use in the incessant jabbering between one another or to the crowd of invisible guests that, little by little, fill the stage: the people are invisible, but a chair is brought in as each guest enters. When eventually the end has arrived, the Emperor himself, no space remains for the hosts who jump into the sea secure in the belief that the professional speaker they have hired will expertly deliver *the* message. The 'Orator' is the only other real character, but he is only capable of uttering inarticulate sounds and of scribbling meaningless signs on a blackboard. In the programme note for the first production, Ionesco wrote, "At times the world seems to me to be void of meaning, reality to be unreal. It is the feeling of unreality, the search for an essential reality, forgotten, unnamed that I am trying to express through my characters who wander aimlessly, having nothing to call their own apart from their worries, their failures, the

emptiness of their lives. People drowning in meaninglessness can only be grotesque; their suffering can only appear tragic by derision." In addition, he adds,

Since I am unable to understand the world, how could I understand my own play? I hope someone will explain it to me' (ed. Latour, 1986, p. 260). The Orator's message is as grotesque, derisory and tragic as the final image of the play: an actor who has forgotten his lines tries lamentably to communicate something to an absent audience! However, something seems to emerge from the empty gibberish: 'ADIEU' or 'A DIEU' ('Goodbye' or 'To God'). Is Ionesco, in extremis, affirming not only the impossibility of communication, but also the impossibility of communicating in a world without God?

God was often invoked by the critics of **Beckett's** first play *En attendant Godot* (Paris, 3 January 1953) as they tried to explain the meaning of the play and the symbolic significance of 'Mr Godot' whose arrival is so eagerly expected by the two tramps, Didi and Gogo, but who fails to appear. 'In Godot, there is God', asserted one bold critic, but Beckett refuses to ratify that comment and the equation must remain 'Godot=X', 'X' being the highly speculative suggestion that each spectator or reader might honestly put forward. All that Beckett is prepared to say is that his plays are 'a question of fundamental sounds': a 'new play' is not a story 'about' something, IT IS. The performance is the event and does not refer to another, pre-existing reality that is somehow recreated on stage. In *Godot,* Didi and Gogo are waiting.

However, Beckett merely presents us with two men waiting and shows us *how* they are waiting and how they pass the time while they are waiting. He does not tell us *why* they are there. *Waiting for Godot* presents two tramps in a waste place, fruitlessly and all but hopelessly, waiting for an unidentified person, Godot, who may or may not exist and with whom they sometimes think they remember that they may have an appointment; as one of them remarks, "Nothing happens, nobody comes, nobody goes, it's awful." Like most works in this mode, the play is absurd in the double sense that it is grotesquely comic and also irrational and nonconsequential; it is a

parody not only of the traditional assumptions of Western culture, but of the conventions and generic forms of traditional drama, and even of its own inescapable participation in the dramatic medium. *Godot* confronts us with the theatrical image of man 'in situation', with the 'human condition' as Beckett understands it here and now—not for all times, not for all mankind, but as he and many of his contemporaries perceive the position of the individual lost in a hostile world. The situation of the individual in the world, invariably lost and unable to comprehend the meaning of his presence on earth in the face of the hostility of every other being or manifestation, is also the problem of Beckett's other plays, of the early plays of Genet and Adamov, although the latter gradually abandoned the 'absurdist' approach and adopted a more 'Brechtian' or political stance.

A similar evolution can be traced in the career of many 'absurd' dramatists, in France and elsewhere. For instance, **Harold Pinter** wrote his early plays (*The Birthday Party,* 1958; *The Caretaker,* 1960) under the direct influence of Beckett and *Godot,* but gradually he turned away from telling ambiguous, mystifying and confusing tales and in *Betrayal* (1978), he charts the course of an adulterous affair in a direct, hard-hitting manner, although the story is told in flashbacks. His more recent plays *One for the Road* (1985); *Mountain Language* (1988) are straightforward political statements, the first dealing with state torture and the second with genocide. Like Sartre, Genet and Adamov—all in their different ways, Pinter has left behind metaphysical speculations about man's place in the universe to grapple with the more immediate problems of how to live and survive in a precarious political situation.

Edward Albee, the chief American exponent of the theatre of the absurd, also started by starkly stating the absurdity of the world and the impossibility of human companionship in plays such as *The Zoo Story* (1958); *Who's Afraid of Virginia Wool*? (1962), but has come to try and make sense of the chaos. Two Swiss playwrights deserve to be mentioned among the masters of the absurd: **Friedrich Dürrenmatt** and **Max Frisch**. Dürrenmatt's plays—*The Visit* (1955) and *The Physicists* (1962) are technically dazzling, using every theatrical trick, but they present a grotesque, meaningless,

nihilistic world peopled by dangerous, self-seeking lunatics. Frisch's plays *The Fire Raisers* (1958) and *Andorra* (1961) are an even harsher and bleaker indictment of bourgeois complacency, racism and indifference to man's cruelty to man. Although both writers are directly inspired by problems facing Swiss society, their plays have universal significance and appeal.

Arthus Adamov (1908–1970) was yet another foremost exponent of the Theatre of the Absurd. He came from a wealthy, French-speaking, Armenian family who had fled the Russian revolution. The consequences of political exile and of his father's addiction to gambling landed him penniless in Paris in the early twenties. He began to write plays at the end of the Second World War, under the influence of Strindberg's theatre to which he was to devote a very perceptive study. His first play, *La Parodie* (*The Parody,* written in the late 1940s), a series of tableaux depicting feelings and moods which reflect isolation and a breakdown in communication, was not produced by Roger Blin until 1952, although his adaptation of Büchner's *Danton's Death* was staged at the Avignon Festival in 1948.



LET US KNOW

The plays of Tom Stoppard, such as *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead* (1966) and *Travesties* (1974), exploit the devices of absurdist theatre more for comic than philosophical ends. There are also affinities with this movement in the numerous recent works, which exploit black comedy or black humour: baleful, naive, or inept characters in a fantastic or nightmarish modern world play out their roles in what Ionesco called a "tragic farce," in which the events are often simultaneously comic, horrifying, and absurd. Examples are Joseph Heller's *Catch-22* (1961), Thomas Pynchon's *V* (1963), John Irving's *The World According to Garp* (1978), and some of the novels by the German Günter Grass and the Americans Kurt Vonnegut, Jr., and John Barth. Stanley Kubrick's *Dr. Strangelove* is an example of black comedy in the cinema.

Thus, the history of Absurd drama needs to be traced through the portrayal of man's helplessness in the face of the absurd as practised in the 'new theatre' by some modern playwrights from Europe and America.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q 4: What is Ionesco's play *The Bald Prima Donna* all about?

Q 5: What type of a play is *Waiting for Godot*?

Q 6: Name the world's greatest absurd playwrights.

11.5 RECEPTION OF ABSURD DRAMA

Today the foremost playwrights in the Western world combine in their work a concern for the political issues of the day and an awareness of the artistic and aesthetic problems that dramatists, directors and actors have grappled with for almost half a century. The aesthetics of the 'new theatre' or the 'theatre of the absurd' have now been integrated into mainstream dramatic writing and theatrical presentation. However, playwrights have grappled with the notion of the absurd since the beginning of our civilization. In *Oedipus,* Sophocles dramatises the search for the ultimate meaning of life, whereas in *Herakles,* Euripides posits the ultimate absurdity: Herakles, the absent father, returns home in the nick of time to save his children from certain death, only to kill them minutes later in a fit of madness, believing them to be dangerous and monstrous enemies. Shakespeare often paints a bleak and meaningless world, and never more so than in *King Lear* ('As flies to wanton boys are we to the gods, /They kill us for their sport') or in Macbeth's 'it is a tale/Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, /Signifying nothing'. Jan Kott, in his influential *Shakespeare Our Contemporary* (1964), convincingly argues that Shakespeare, although belonging to the Renaissance, is the most modern playwright, 'violent, cruel and brutal; earthly and hellish; evok[ing] terror as well as dreams and poetry; most true and improbable, dramatic and passionate, rational and mad, eschatological and realistic' (p. 223). What, however, differentiates the absurdists from Shakespeare is their dramaturgy: they strive to symbolise

the 'chaotic state of existence by a corresponding anarchy in the construction' of their plays.

Jean Paul Sartre stressed what he termed 'the three essential refusals in the contemporary theatre', namely, 'the refusal of psychology, the refusal of plot and the refusal of all realism'. The refusal of psychology has meant the death of the consistent, fully 'rounded' character who, seemingly, possessed all the attributes of humanity. The new hero is an anti-hero, only partially conceived, often with no past or any discernible future. Characters in contemporary plays are often parodic, grotesque, incomplete, self-contradictory. They do not understand who they are, they do not understand the world around them, they are baffled by all the events that occur while they are on the stage. As far as the actors are concerned, the traditional Stanislavskian identification with the role is no longer possible and a greater degree of playfulness, of invention, of fantasy is the key to a satisfactory 'portrayal'. A play without a plot seems to be a contradiction in terms, or so it seemed until *Waiting for Godot*.

Sartre's third point, the refusal of all realism, stems from the twin conviction (a) that realism/naturalism is an outmoded and reactionary aesthetic category and (b) that an artistic creation must create its own reality. In the case of 'new theatre' that reality is often fantastic, grotesque, oneiric; the action takes place in non-defined locations, within surrealist, distorted, subjective, dream-like settings; characters behave arbitrarily, without motivation, according to a principle of discontinuity; they are prone to parody themselves or one another. The dialogue follows its own logic and has recourse to interior monologues, streams of consciousness, rhythmic repetitions, flat contradictions, sudden ruptures, logorrhoea interspersed with long aphasia-like silences. Sartre's description of the theatre of the fifties and sixties still applies to the best of today's theatre.

Although strictly speaking the 'Theatre of the Absurd' already belongs to history (*Godot* and *The Bald Prima Donna* have long since acquired the status of 'classics'), it has successfully exerted profound influences on contemporary writers and directors. This type of plays has shattered the illusion that dramaturgical conformity can yield a satisfactory theatrical artefact or that an orderly discourse can make sense of this world of ours.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q 7: Do you think that elements of the absurd can also be found in ancient and traditional plays too?

Q 8: How does Camus view the 'new' characters in the 'New Plays'?



11.6 LET US SUM UP

As you finish reading this unit, you have learnt that the 'Theatre of the Absurd' is a post–World War II terming of a kind of plays or fiction focused largely on the idea of existential hopelessness and on what happens when human existence has no meaning or purpose and therefore all communication breaks down. The absence of logical construction and argument gives way to irrational and illogical speech and to its conclusion, silence. Critic Martin Esslin, who in fact, coined the term in an essay he wrote in 1960–"Theatre of the Absurd" reiterated that these plays based on a broad theme of the Absurd, are similar to the way Albert Camus uses the term in his 1942 essay, "The Myth of Sisyphus." The Absurd in these plays takes the form of man's reaction to a world apparently without meaning, and/or man as a puppet controlled or menaced by invisible outside forces. This style of writing was first popularised by the 1953 Samuel Beckett play *Waiting for Godot*. Though the term is applied to a wide range of plays, some characteristics coincide in many of the plays such as—broad comedy, horrific or tragic images, characters caught in hopeless situations forced to do repetitive or meaningless actions, dialogue full of clichés, wordplay and nonsense, plots that are cyclical or absurdly expansive etc. These plays are shaped by the political turmoil, scientific breakthrough, and social upheaval going on in the world around the playwrights during these times. While the often absurdists believed that life is absurd, they also believed that death and the "after life" were equally absurd if not more, and that whether people live or not all of their actions are pointless and everything

will lead to the same end (hence the repetitiveness in many of these absurdist plays).



11.7 FURTHER READING

1) Benedikt, Michael and Wellwarth, George E. (1964). (EDs.). *Modern French Theatre.* Dutton, New York.
2) Bradby, David. (1984). *Modern French Drama, 1940–1980.* Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.
3) Brustein, Robert. (1962). *The Theatre of Revolt.* Methuen, London.
4) Esslin, Martin. (1968). *The Theatre of the Absurd.* revised and enlarged edn. Penguin.
5) Hinchliffe, Arnold P. (1969). *The Absurd.* Methuen, London.
6) Schumacher, Claude. "The Theatre of the Absurd." in *Encyclopaedia of Literature and Criticism* by Martin Coyle, Peter Garside, Malcolm Kelsall, John Peck.

Websites and Electronic Resources:

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Theatre_of_the_Absurd



11.8 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS (HINTS ONLY)

Ans to Q 1: *Waiting for Godot*, *Endgame*, *Happy Days* by Becket, *Chairs, Rhinoceros* by Ionesco; *The Birthday Party*, *The Dumb Waiter* and *The Caretaker*, *The Homecoming*, *Landscape and Silence, No Man's Land* by Pinter and so on.

Ans to Q 2: The Absurd aims to shock its audience out of complacency… …it is a challenge to accept the human condition as it is, in all its mystery and absurdity… … because there are no easy solutions to the mysteries of existence, because ultimately man is alone in a meaningless world… …comforting illusions may be painful as it leaves

behind a sense of freedom and relief… …the Theatre of the Absurd does not provoke tears of despair but the laughter of liberation.

Ans to Q 3: The essay contains some of the most interesting statements on the themes.... …a vision of life, which was essentially absurd, without apparent purpose, out of harmony with its surroundings, sad to the point of anguish, and at the same time, and funny. He stresses the destructive nature of time, the feeling of solitude in a hostile world and the sense of isolation from other human beings.

Ans to Q 4: It has no plot, a deceptively naturalistic set, no consistent characters; it is based on an ever-shifting ground of nonsense dialogue, of arbitrary entrances and exits, of unexplained appearances.

Ans to Q 5: *Waiting for Godot* presents two tramps in a waste place, fruitlessly and all but hopelessly, waiting for an unidentified person, Godot, who may or may not exist… … they think and remember that they may have an appointment with Godot… …one of the characters remarks, "Nothing happens, nobody comes, nobody goes, it's awful"… … the play is grotesquely comic, irrational and non-consequential.

Ans to Q 6: Playwrights commonly associated with the Theatre of the Absurd include Samuel Beckett, Eugène Ionesco, Jean Genet, Harold Pinter, Luigi Pirandello, Tom Stoppard, Friedrich Dürrenmatt, Edward Albee, Arthur Adamov and so on.

Ans to Q 7: Yes… …In *Oedipus,* Sophocles dramatises the search for the ultimate meaning of life… …in *Herakles,* Euripides posits the ultimate absurdity… …Shakespeare often paints a bleak and meaningless world, and never more so than in *King Lear* ('As flies to wanton boys are we to the gods, /They kill us for their sport') or in Macbeth's 'it is a tale/Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, /Signifying nothing'.

Ans to Q 8: The new hero is an anti-hero, only partially conceived, often with no past or any discernible future… …the characters are often parodic, grotesque, incomplete, self-contradictory… …they do not understand who they are, or the world around them… …they are baffled by all the events that occur while they are on the stage.



11.9 POSSIBLE QUESTIONS

Q 1: Discuss the history and characteristics of Absurd drama with particular reference to the plays by some of the great absurd playwrights.

Q 2: Provide a detailed idea of the origin and development of the 'Theatre of the Absurd'.

Q 3: Who, according to you, are the most significant absurd playwrights of the modern world? Discuss the works of at least three of them.

Q 4: In what way, is an absurd play different from a traditional play? Discuss by making a comparison between the characteristics of the traditional plays and absurd plays.

Q 5: Claude Schumacher in his article "The Theatre of the Absurd" provides an interesting analysis on the emergence of Absurd drama, its characteristics and practitioners. Discuss.

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UNIT 12: SAMUEL BECKETT: *WAITING FOR GODOT* (PART I)

UNIT STRUCTURE

12.1 Learning Objectives

12.2 Introduction

12.3 Samuel Beckett: The Playwright

12.4 Sources of the Play *Waiting for Godot*

12.5 The Play's Repetitive Structure

12.6 Critical Reception of Beckett

12.7 Let Us Sum Up

12.8 Further Reading

12.9 Answers to Check Your Progress (Hints Only)

12.10 Possible Questions

12.1 LEARNING OBJECTIVES

After going through this unit, you will be able to

- discuss the life and works of Samuel Beckett, one of the greatest absurd playwrights of the world
- relate Beckett's ideas with the unique intellectual and socio-political climate of the time
- see Beckett's unique way of dramatic representation in modernist drama
- appreciate the various philosophical issues raised in the play *Waiting for Godot.*

12.2 INTRODUCTION

In this unit, we shall have a look at the life and works of Samuel Beckett, one of the greatest exponents of the 'Theatre of the Absurd.' Then we shall also very briefly touch upon his play *Waiting for Godot.* Together being a novelist, critic and playwright, winner of the Nobel Prize for literature in 1969, Samuel Barclay Beckett was born in the suburb of Dublin. His

works are shaped by the early experience of a society made of violent contradictions and layers of oppression and repression. He could very well apprehend the presence of contradictory forces of nationalism, and growing religious intolerance between the Catholic and the Protestant. In spite of his courageous handling of the ultimate mystery and despair of human existence, he was also a comic writer. As a writer playwright, he believed that the recognition of the triviality, senselessness, and the ultimate meaninglessness of life must be able to free and liberate human beings from their concern with senselessness and futile objectives. The laughter would ultimately arise from a self-imposed preoccupation with illusory ambitions and futile desires. Consequently, far from being gloomy and depressing, the ultimate effect of watching or reading a play like the *Waiting for Godot* is one of cathartic relief. After going through this unit, you will be able to appreciate both Beckett and his play *Waiting for Godot* in the context of the 'Theatre of the Absurd.'

12.3 SAMUEL BECKETT: THE PLAYWRIGHT

His Life:

Samuel Beckett was born in Dublin, Ireland, in 1906. He was the second son of middle-class parents who were a part of the Protestant minority in a predominantly Catholic society. He received excellent education graduating from Trinity College, Dublin, with a major emphasis in French and Italian. His first job was as a teacher of English in the Ecole Normale Superiéure in Paris. In 1931 however, he returned to Ireland as a lecturer in French literature, and then received his Master's Degree in French from Dublin and subsequently returned to Paris as a teacher in 1932. He has made Paris his home since that time, except for visits abroad and a retreat to the Unoccupied Zone in Vichy, France, during 1942–44.

However, Beckett found teaching very much uncongenial to his creative activities and soon turned all his attention to writing. During the 1930s and 1940s, most of his writings consisted of critical studies on Proust and others, poems, and two novels *Murphy* and *Watt*, all written in English.

In the late 1940s, he changed from writing in English to writing in French. Part of the reason for this was his basic rejection of Ireland as his homeland. When asked why he found Ireland uncongenial, he offered the same explanation that has been given by other famous Irish expatriates, such as Sean O'Casey and James Joyce. He could not tolerate the strict Irish censorship on various aspects of life, especially the arbitrary censoring of many works of literature by the Catholic clergy. In addition, the political situation created an oppressive anti intellectualism. Even after he attained fame, Beckett refused to allow some of his plays to be presented in Ireland. In 1958, during the International Theatre Festival in Dublin, a play of his compatriot O'Casey was banned, and Beckett, in protest, withdrew his plays, which have not been seen in Ireland since then.

Since the major portion of his dramas were composed in French and first presented in Paris, many critics find difficulty in classifying Beckett's works: should he be considered a French or an Irish writer? The nature of his characters, even when named Vladimir and Estragon, seems to be more characteristically Irish than any other nationality. Essentially, it should be a moot question because Beckett, when composing in French, was his own translator into English and vice versa. Thus, his works do not suffer from another translator's tampering with them, and his great plays now belong to the realm of world literature. With the appearance of *En Attendant Godot (Waiting for Godot)* at the Théâtre de Babylone in Paris in 1953, the educated world was shocked by the appearance of a drama so different and yet so intriguing that it virtually created the term— "Theatre of the Absurd", and the entire group of dramas which developed out of this type of theatre is always associated with the name of Samuel Beckett. While other dramatists have also contributed significantly to this genre, Beckett remains its single and towering figure.

You will note that in viewing the plays integral to this movement, we must forsake the theatre of coherently developed situations. Conventional characterisation is avoided, the settings do not bear an intrinsic, realistic, or obvious relationship to the drama as a whole, and the audience is forced to forget the use of language as a tool of logical communication and the cause-

and-effect relationships found in traditional dramas is not maintained. With the use of a number of puzzling devices, these playwrights have gradually accustomed their audience to a new kind of relationship between theme and presentation. In these seemingly perplexing plays, the external world is often depicted as menacing, devouring, and unknown; the world itself seeming incoherent, frightening and strange, but at the same time, it remains hauntingly poetic and familiar. However, very often, the viewers takes note of only the basic similarities and fails to note the distinctive differences in each dramatist. Since these writers do not belong to any deliberate or conscious movement, they should be evaluated for their individual concerns, as well as for their contributions to the total concept of the 'Theatre of the Absurd'. In fact, most of these playwrights consider themselves lonely rebels and outsiders, isolated in their own private worlds. Each playwright has developed along his own unique lines; each in his own way is individually and distinctly different.

Therefore, it is important to see how Beckett both belongs to the "Theatre of the Absurd" and, how he differs from the other writers associated with this movement. First, let us note a few of the basic differences. For example, one of Samuel Beckett's main concerns is the polarity of existence. In plays like *Waiting for Godot, Endgame,* and *Krapp's Last Tape,* we have such characteristic polarities as sight versus blindness, life vs death, time present vs time past, body vs intellect, waiting vs not waiting, going vs not going, being vs not being, and many more. Thus, Beckett often characterises man's existence in terms of these polarities. To do this, he groups his characters in pairs; for example, we have Vladimir and Estragon, Didi and Gogo, Hamm and Clov, Pozzo and Lucky, Nagg and Nell, and Krapp's present voice and past voice. Essentially, however, Beckett's characters remain a puzzle, which each individual viewer must solve. In contrast to Beckett, for example, Eugene Ionesco's characters are seen in terms of singularity. Whereas Beckett's characters stand in pairs *outside* of society, but converse with each other, Ionesco's characters are placed in the midst of society—but they stand alone in an alien world with no personal identity and no one with whom they can communicate. For example, the characters

in *The Bald Soprano* are in society, but they scream meaningless phrased at each other, and there is no communication. In the same way, Jean Genet's characters almost revile the audience from the moment that they appear on the stage. His theme is stated more openly. He is concerned with the hatred, which exists in the world. In *The Maids,* for example, each maid hates not just her employer and not just her own sister, but also her own self. Therefore, she plays the other roles so as to exhaust her own hatred of herself against herself. This revulsion derives partially from the fact that Genet's dramatic interest, so different from Beckett's and Ionesco's, is in the psychological exploration of man's predilection to being trapped in his own egocentric world, rather than facing the realities of existence. You will do well if you can trace such differences while reading or watching those absurd plays.

His Works: [Adapted from Wikipedia]

Beckett's literary career as a writer is divided roughly into three periods: his early works until the end of World War II in 1945; his middle period, stretching from 1945 until the early 1960s, and his late period, from the early 1960s until Beckett's death in 1989.

More Pricks than Kicks (1934) is one of Beckett's early works and it seem to be strongly influenced by the works of James Joyce. His first published novel *Murphy* (1938) also explores the themes of insanity and chess (both of which would be recurrent elements in Beckett's later works). The opening sentence of the novel hints at the somewhat pessimistic undertones and black humour that animate many of Beckett's other works, "The sun shone, having no alternative, on the nothing new." *Watt*, written during World War II, is similar in terms of themes but less exuberant in style. It explores human movement as if it were a mathematical permutation, presaging Beckett's later preoccupation—in both his novels and dramatic works—with precise movement. In 1930, he wrote an essay called *Proust,* which was strongly influenced by Schopenhauer's pessimism and laudatory descriptions of saintly asceticism.

After World War II, Beckett decided to turn to the French language as a vehicle. He realised that his art must be subjective and drawn wholly

from his own inner world—that would result in the works for which Beckett is best remembered today. During the 15 years following the War, Beckett produced four major full-length stage plays: *En attendant Godot* (written 1948–1949; ***Waiting for Godot***), *Fin de partie* (1955–1957; ***Endgame***), *Krapp's Last Tape* (1958), and ***Happy Days*** (1961). These plays, which are often considered, rightly or wrongly, to have been instrumental in the so-called "Theatre of the Absurd"—deal with a humorous way with themes similar to those of the roughly contemporary existentialist thinkers. When Esslin coined the "Theatre of the Absurd", Beckett and *Godot* were at the centre stage. Esslin argued that these plays were the fulfilment of Albert Camus's concept of "the absurd" and this is one reason Beckett is often falsely labelled as an existentialist.

Beckett's outstanding achievements in prose during the period were the three novels ***Molloy*** (1951), *Malone meurt* (1951; ***Malone Dies***) and *L'innommable* (1953: ***The Unnamable***). In these novels—sometimes referred to as a "trilogy", though this is against the author's own explicit wishes—the prose becomes increasingly bare and stripped down. *Molloy*, for instance, retains many of the characteristics of a conventional novel (time, place, movement, and plot) and it makes use of the structure of a detective novel. In *Malone Dies*, movement and plot are largely dispensed with, though there is still some indication of place and the passage of time. Finally, in *The Unnamable*, almost all sense of place and time are abolished, and the essential theme seems to be the conflict between the narrator's drive to continue speaking so as to continue existing. Despite the widely held view that Beckett's work is essentially pessimistic, the will to live seems to win out in the end, as it is evident in the final phrase of *The Unnamable*: "I can't go on, I'll go on."

After these three novels, Beckett struggled for many years to produce a sustained work of prose, as evident in the brief "stories" later collected as *Texts for Nothing*. In the late 1950s, however, he created one of his most radical prose works, *Comment c'est* (1961; *How It Is*). An early variant version of *Comment c'est*, *L'Image*, was published in the British arts review, ***X: A Quarterly Review*** (1959), and is the first appearance of the

novel in any form. This work relates the adventures of an unnamed narrator crawling through the mud while dragging a sack of canned food. Throughout the 1960s and into the 1970s, Beckett's works exhibited an increasing tendency—already evident in much of his work of the 1950s—towards compactness. This has led to his work sometimes being described as minimalist. The extreme example of this, among his dramatic works, is the 1969 piece *Breath*, which lasts for only 35 seconds and has no characters (though it was likely intended to offer ironic comment on *Oh! Calcutta!*, the theatrical revue for which it served as an introductory piece).

Of the theatre of the late period, the play called *Play* (1962) is important and it consists of three characters immersed up to their necks in large funeral urns. The television drama *Eh Joe* (1963), is animated by a camera that steadily closed in to a tight focus upon the face of the title character. The play *Not I* (1972) consists almost solely of, in Beckett's words, "a moving mouth with the rest of the stage in darkness." Following from *Krapp's Last Tape*, many of these later plays explore memory, often in the form of a forced recollection of haunting past events in a moment of stillness in the present. Beckett's most politically charged play *Catastrophe* (1982) was dedicated to playwright Václav Havel, and it deals with the idea of dictatorship. Beckett's prose pieces of his later period were not so prolific as his theatre. He experienced something with the novella *Company* (1980), which continued with *Ill Seen Ill Said* (1982) and *Worstward Ho* (1984), later collected in *Nohow On*. In these three 'closed space' stories, Beckett continued his preoccupation with memory and its effect on the confined and observed self, as well as with the positioning of bodies in space, as the opening phrased of *Company* make clear: "A voice comes to one in the dark. Imagine."

In the hospital and nursing home where he spent his final days, Beckett wrote his last work, the 1988 poem "What is the Word" ("Comment dire"). The poem grapples with an inability to find words to express oneself a theme echoing Beckett's earlier work, though possibly amplified by the sickness he experienced late in life.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q 1: Write a note on the works of Samuel Beckett.

Q 2: Why did Beckett state that Ireland was uncongenial for creative activities following which he left Ireland?

Q 3: What is the nature of the 'Theatre of the Absurd'?

Q 4: Why following the World War II, did Beckett decide to turn to the French language as a vehicle?

12.4 SOURCES OF THE PLAY *WAITING FOR GODOT*

Beckett wrote *Waiting for Godot* sometime between 1948 and 1949 in France and the play was first performed on 5th January 1953 at the Theatre de Babylone in Paris. However, it seems that Beckett draw the idea of the play from various sources. The history of the *'New Theatre'* can be an interesting starting point to read *Waiting for Godot*. Almost all Post-war European dramas responded to a world that seemed to be falling apart and becoming increasingly meaningless in the wake of capitalism, rampant individualism and the consequent loss of community feelings, large scale devastations of the two World Wars, threats of nuclear holocaust, the destruction of the liberal tradition of hope and faith in man's innate goodness, rationality and progress, and so on. Its ideological influence is reflected in the feelings of angst, boredom, alienation, meaninglessness that prevailed over the whole literary tradition of Proust, Musil, Kafka, Camus, Sartre and of course, Beckett.

In the aftermath of World War II, there emerged Surrealism unprecedentedly affecting the cultural ideas as well as the arts. The intellectual changes that occurred brought a critique of the ideological foundations of the entire Western civilization, and traditional values were fading away. Surrealistic thoughts and ideas resurfaced following the War making a direct appearance in a work like *Waiting for Godot*. The Surrealist poets were interested in "moments of intense perception that free the self from its bondage to ordinary consciousness". In Beckett's play, this can be seen in certain moments such as Lucky's speech, when a stream of

consciousness takes the characters away from their monotonous lives for a moment.

There is however another probable source for the play. In the Post War France, there was occurred a crisis of moral order. Moral standards had flip-flopped more than once with the occupation and exit of the Nazis in France. The eventual elimination of the Nazi-influence led to some vague, undefined, and unique philosophies of morality. The two sides in World War II had extremely different ideas about what was right and wrong for the human race. Such widespread rejection of the traditional organisation of morality also reflected in the philosophy of Post-structuralism, which focused on the instability of the human sciences. At this time, many established ideas of order themselves came to be seen as the cause of problems of injustice rather than a solution to problems of injustice. Beckett's unique portrayal of humans in *Waiting for Godot* therefore invites many different interpretations, and the complexity of the characters may prevent the audience from giving them an order, just as the human complexity prevents us from fully inspecting and recognising ourselves.

Beckett's writings are replete with allusions to a multitude of literary sources. The dominating influence however came from the Italian poet Dante, the French philosopher Rene Descartes, the 17th century French philosopher Arnold Geulinex, and finally his fellow Irishman James Joyce. But, towards his later life, he became more popular as a playwright. In between 1957 and 1961, he produced three very significant plays *Endgame* (1957), *Krapp's Last Tape* (1958) and *Happy Days* (1961) describing the trivialities of life. However, it was in the trilogy of narrative prose works—*Molloy, Mallone Dies* and *The Unnamable* where he raised the problems of self-identity.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q 5: What, according to you, could be the various sources of the play?

12.5 THE PLAY'S REPETITIVE STRUCTURE

As you have got sufficient hints, Samuel Beckett's plays created a great deal of confusion among the early critics. No definite conclusion or resolution can ever be offered to *Waiting for Godot* because the play is essentially circular and repetitive in nature. Again, you may look at the sections as well as the structure of each act, which looks exactly alike. A traditional play, in contrast, has an introduction of' the characters and the exposition; then, there is a statement of the problem of the play in relationship to its settings and characters. However, in *Waiting for Godot,* we never know where the play takes place, except that it is set on "a country road." Furthermore, in a traditional play, the characters are developed, and gradually we come to see the dramatist's worldview; the play then rise to a climax, and there is a conclusion. This type of development is called a linear development. In the plays of the 'Theatre of the Absurd', the structure is often exactly the opposite. We have, instead, a circular structure, and most aspects of this drama support this circular structure in one way or another.

The setting is also the same, and the time is the same in both acts. Each act begins early in the morning, just as the tramps are awakening, and both acts close with the moon having risen. The action takes place in exactly the same landscape—a lonely, isolated road with one single tree. Only in Act II, there are some leaves on the tree. We are never told where the road is located; all we know is that the action of the play unfolds on this lonely road. Thus, from Act I to Act II, there is no difference either in the setting or in the time and, thus, instead of a progression of time within an identifiable setting, we have a repetition in the second act of the same things that we saw and heard in the first act. More important than the repetition of setting and time, however, is the repetition of the actions.

There are many lesser actions that are repeated in both acts. At the beginning of each act, for example, several identical concerns should be noted. Among these is the emphasis on Estragon's boots. Vladimir, when first noticing Estragon, used virtually the same words: "So there you are

again" in Act I and "There you are again" in Act II. At the beginning of both acts, the first discussion concerns a beating that Estragon received just prior to their meeting. At the beginning of both acts, Vladimir and Estragon emphasise repeatedly that they are there to wait for Godot. In the endings of both acts, Vladimir and Estragon discuss the possibility of hanging themselves, and in both endings, they decide to bring some good strong rope with them the next day so that they can indeed hang themselves. In addition, both acts end with the same words, voiced differently:

ACT 1: ESTRAGON: Well, shall we go?
VLADIMIR: Yes, let's go.

ACT II: VLADIMIR: Well? Shall we go?
ESTRAGON: Yes, let's go.

And the stage directions following these lines are exactly the same in each case: *"They do not move."* With the arrival of Pozzo and Lucky in each act, we notice that even though their physical appearance has theoretically changed, outwardly they seem the same; they are still tied together on an endless journey to an unknown place to rendezvous with a nameless person. Likewise, the Boy Messenger, while theoretically different, brings the exact same message: "Mr. Godot will not come today, but he will surely come tomorrow." Vladimir's difficulties with urination and his suffering are discussed in each act as a contrast to the suffering of Estragon because of' his boots. In addition, the subject of eating, involving carrots, radishes, and turnips, becomes a central image in each act, and the tramps' involvement with hats, their multiple insults, and their reconciling embraces—these and many more lesser matters are found repeatedly in both acts.

You should therefore note that all the repetitions make the two acts almost look alike, circular in structure, and the fact that these repetitions clearly display Beckett's manner of breaking away from the traditional play and of asserting the uniqueness of his dramatic art.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q 6: In what way, do you feel that the play *Waiting for Godot* contains a circular structure?

12.6 CRITICAL RECEPTION OF BECKETT

By now, you must have realised that of all the modernist writers, Beckett's work represents the most sustained attack on the realist tradition of the previous ages. Because, he opened up the possibility of theatre and fiction that dispense with conventional plot and the unities of time and place in order to focus on essential components of the human condition. Playwrights such as Václav Havel, John Banville, Aidan Higgins, Tom Stoppard, Harold Pinter and Jon Fosse have publicly stated their indebtedness to Beckett's example. Besides, Beckett also had a wider influence on experimental writing since the 1950s. His works also influenced numerous international writers, artists and filmmakers such as Edward Albee, Paul Auster, J. M. Coetzee and many others.

Beckett is one of the most widely discussed of the 20th century authors, inspiring a critical industry to rival that. Even James Joyce had divided critical opinions on Beckett. Some early philosophical critics, such as Sartre and Theodor Adorno, praised him, one for his revelation of absurdity, the other for his works' critical refusal of simplicities. Whereas others such as Georg Lukács condemned him for 'decadent' lack of realism in his work.

Since Beckett's death, all rights for performance of his plays are handled by the Beckett estate, currently managed by Edward Beckett (the author's nephew). The estate has a controversial reputation for maintaining firm control over how Beckett's plays are performed and does not grant licensed to productions that do not adhere to the writer's stage directions.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q 7: In what way, do you think, Beckett rendered a significant influence on the successors?



12.7 LET US SUM UP

In this unit, you read about the life and works of Samuel Beckett, the French playwright commonly associated with the theatre movement known as the 'Theatre of the Absurd'. You have learnt that this movement was not a consciously conceived movement, and it has never had any clear-cut philosophical doctrines. Each of the representative playwrights of the movement seems to have developed independently of each other. The playwrights most often associated with the movement are Samuel Beckett himself, Eugene Ionesco, Jean Genet, and Arthur Adamov. The early plays of Edward Albee and Harold Pinter fit into this classification, but these dramatists have also written plays that move far away from the basic elements of 'Theatre of the Absurd.' You have learnt that when *Waiting for Godot* was first performed at the Théâtre de Babylone in Paris in 1953, the educated world was shocked by a drama so different and yet so intriguing that it virtually created the term— "Theatre of the Absurd", and an entire group of dramas which developed out of this type of theatre is always associated with the name of Samuel Beckett.



12.8 FURTHER READING

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8) Roberts, James L. *Cliff Notes on Samuel Beckett's Waiting for Godot & Other Plays*. Hungry Minds, Inc. New York.

Websites and Electronic Resources:

https://pages.stolaf.edu/th271-spring2014/background-waiting-for-godot/

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Samuel_Beckett

http://brainstorm-services.com/wcu-2004/godot-approaching.pdf

12.9 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS (HINTS ONLY)

Ans to Q 1: Beckett's early publication included two essays on James Joyce and French novelist Marcel Proust… …in 1930, he wrote his slim volume of poetry *Whoroscope*… …in 1934, he wrote *More Pricks than Kicks*, and in 1938, he published his *Murphy*… …in-between 1946 and 1949, while staying in Paris, he produced his major prose narratives-*Molly*, *Malone Dies*, *The Unnameable* and his ground-breaking *Waiting for Godot*.

Ans to Q 2: Beckett could not tolerate the strict Irish censorship on various aspects of life… …the arbitrary censoring of many works of literature by the Catholic clergy… …the political situation created an oppressive anti-intellectualism… …Beckett refused to allow some of his plays to be presented in Ireland… …In 1958, during the International Theatre Festival in Dublin, a play by O'Casey was banned, and Beckett, in protest, withdrew his plays too.

Ans to Q 3: Conventional characterisation is avoided… …the settings do not bear an intrinsic, realistic, or obvious relationship to the drama… …the audience is forced to forget the use of language as a tool of logical communication… …cause-and-effect relationships found in traditional dramas is not maintained… …use of a number of puzzling devices… …the external world is often depicted as menacing,

devouring, and unknown… …the world itself seeming incoherent, frightening and strange.

Ans to Q 4: He realised that his art must be subjective and drawn wholly from his own inner world… …Following the World War II, Beckett produced four of his major stage plays: ***Waiting for Godot, Endgame, Krapp's Last Tape*** (1958), and ***Happy Days*** (1961)… …these plays became instrumental in the so-called "Theatre of the Absurd"

Ans to Q 5: The history of the *'New Theatre'… …*all Post-war European dramas responded to a world that was falling apart and becoming increasingly meaningless… …rise of capitalism, rampant individualism and the consequent loss of community feelings… … havocs cause by the two World Wars, threats of nuclear holocaust… …the destruction of liberal tradition of hope and faith in man's innate goodness, rationality and progress… … feelings of angst, boredom, alienation, meaninglessness that prevailed over the whole literary tradition of Proust, Musil, Kafka, Camus, Sartre and Beckett.

Ans to Q 6: The setting and time in both the Acts is the same… …each act begins early in the morning, just as the tramps are awakening, and both acts close with the moon having risen… …the action takes place in exactly the same landscape—a lonely, isolated road with one single tree… …only in Act II, there are some leaves on the tree… …also important is the repetition of the actions.

Ans to Q 7: Beckett's work represents the most sustained attack on the realist tradition of the previous ages… …his works dispensed with conventional plot and the unities of time and place to focus on essential components of the human condition… …playwrights such as Václav Havel, John Banville, Aidan Higgins, Tom Stoppard, Harold Pinter and Jon Fosse have publicly stated their indebtedness to Beckett… …Beckett also influenced numerous other writers, artists and filmmakers such as Edward Albee, Paul Auster, J. M. Coetzee.



12.10 POSSIBLE QUESTIONS

Q 1: Write a note on the major achievements of Beckett as a playwright of the Absurd.

Q 2: As a writer playwright, Beckett believed that the recognition of the triviality, senselessness, and the ultimate meaninglessness of life must be able to free and liberate human beings from their concern with senselessness and futile objectives. Discuss.

Q 3: Discuss how Samuel Beckett both belongs to the "Theatre of the Absurd" and, how he differs from the other writers associated with this movement?

Q 4: No definite conclusion or resolution can ever be offered to *Waiting for Godot* because the play is essentially circular and repetitive in nature. Discuss.

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UNIT 13:SAMUEL BECKETT: *WAITING FOR GODOT* (PART II)

UNIT STRUCTURE

13.1 Learning Objectives

13.2 Introduction

13.3 Act wise Summary of the Play

13.4 Critical Commentary on the Play

13.5 Major Characters

13.6 Critical Reception of the Play

13.7 Let Us Sum Up

13.8 Further Reading

13.9 Answers to Check Your Progress (Hints Only)

13.10 Possible Questions

13.1 LEARNING OBJECTIVES

After going through this unit, you will be able to

- make an Act wise summary of the play *Waiting for Godot* and retell the story
- discuss the important themes and aspects of the play
- identify the various characters and explain the role they play in the world of the play
- appreciate the play which made an important breakthrough in the field of absurd drama.

13.2 INTRODUCTION

This unit is based on a reading of the various important aspects of the play Samuel Beckett's play *Waiting for Godot* that is often considered to be one of the greatest absurd plays of the 20th century. You have learnt from the previous unit that the post-war disillusionment and scepticism influenced the contemporary intellectuals as well as the European playwrights. Although they did not consider themselves belonging to a formal

movement, they did share certain common themes such as—the futility of human in their writing. They felt that human condition was entering into a state of 'absurdity'—a term coined by the French existentialist philosopher and novelist Albert Camus. As you finish reading this unit, you will learn that Beckett, through his various characters and landscapes in this play, presents a vision of the collapse and decay of western philosophy, culture and society. This vision, no doubt, has its origins in the contemporary war-ridden western world, but it belongs also to a tradition of dramatic representation. Beckett called this play a tragicomedy, and therefore, we can perhaps, translate the term 'absurd' as both 'comic' as well as 'tragic.'

13.3 ACT WISE SUMMARY OF THE PLAY

Waiting for Godot is now considered a classic of the modern theatre. In January 1953, when it was first performed in Paris, most spectators were confused and many left before the performance had ended. Those who stayed had difficulty in understanding what this new type of theatre was about. The normal dramatic structure had totally changed. The language very often did not have a sequential rational pattern; communication among the characters was difficult and they frequently resorted to incomplete, childish sentences in order to make themselves understood. At times, the visual actions spoke more directly than words. The set was composed only of a mound of dirt and a bare tree. Finally, there seemed to be no plot, nothing appeared to be happening. In the first Act, we are introduced to two elderly men, Vladimir and Estragon, who could be tramps. They are awaiting the arrival of one Mr. Godot, who is going to save them. Pozzo and Lucky pass by and, eventually, a young boy appears and says that Mr. Godot will not arrive that day, but will surely come the day after. This complete reversal of the traditional theatre techniques announced a major change in modern drama. The following is an attempt at reading what happens in both the Acts of the play.

Act I

The play opens with Estragon struggling to remove his boot, which he soon gives up saying "Nothing to be done." Estragon tells Vladimir that he has

spent the night in a ditch where he was beaten but now there are no signs of assault. When Estragon finally succeeds in removing his boot, he looks inside but finds nothing. Just before this, Vladimir has also checked inside his hat. They discuss the plight of the two thieves crucified alongside Jesus, and the fact that only one of the Gospel writers mentioned that one of them had been saved. Vladimir quickly expresses his frustration with Estragon's limited conversational skills: "Come on, Gogo, return the ball, can't you, once in a way?"



LET US KNOW

When Beckett brings in the reference to *'the thieves'* he is actually pointing to one of the chief tenets of Christianity—that human beings are essentially sinful, and that it was Jesus Christ who came to the earth to obliterate sin from us. Thus, the depiction of Christ as a saviour is central idea of this speech. In this line, Vladimir ruminates about the thief who was saved by Jesus Christ when they were both being crucified.

The reference here to the Bible seems to be deliberate in order to create some kind of hope among the characters as well as the audience. It is a hope of deliverance from this absurd world. The root of this hope is an unquestioning faith. It is only this faith, which can provide them the hope of salvation. Beckett's deliberate use of the Bible's reference no doubt generates humour.

Estragon stares at the audience and comments on the bareness of their surroundings. Estragon wants to leave but he is told they can't because they have to wait for Godot. However, the problem is also that they cannot agree that they are in the right place or on the right day. The only thing they are sure of is that they were to meet by a tree. Estragon doses off but when he wakes up, Vladimir is not interested in hearing about his dream. Estragon wants to hear an old joke about a brothel (one of the play's very few allusions to women) which Vladimir starts to tell, but he has to cut his story short to rush off and urinate, and does not even bother to finish it when he comes

back. He asks Estragon what else they might do to pass the time. Should they hang themselves as doing so might give them erections but they quickly abandon the idea because they might not be able to successfully kill themselves; and the notion of being left alone is intolerable. They decide to do 'nothing'. For once, it is Vladimir who struggles to remember, "Oh …nothing very definite." Estragon suddenly says that he is hungry and Vladimir provides a carrot, which he eats without much appreciation. This section ends, as it began, with Estragon concluding that they still have 'nothing to do'. However, the passing of a master and his slave Pozzo interrupts their waiting and Lucky who may, according to Beckett, "shatter the space of the play" but they also provide much needed distraction and entertainment.

"A terrible cry," heralds the entry of Lucky who crosses half the stage before his master appears holding one end of a long rope, the other of which is tied around Lucky's neck. Pozzo treats Lucky as a slave but is social to the other two. Vladimir and Estragon first mistake him for Godot but they do not recognise him. He condescends to rest a while and enjoy a meal of chicken and wine. When finished, he casts the bones aside and Estragon jumps at them arousing Vladimir's embarrassment. They want to know why Lucky does not put down his load. Pozzo explains that Lucky is trying to mollify him so, he won't be sold. At this, Lucky begins to cry. Pozzo provides the handkerchief, but it is Estragon who gets kicked in the shins, for trying to wipe away his tears.

Before leaving, Pozzo asks if he can do anything for the pair. Estragon tries to ask for some money but Vladimir cuts him short saying that they are not beggars. They nevertheless accept an offer for Lucky to dance and think. The dance turns out to be a clumsy shuffling; everyone is disappointed. Then, begins Lucky's starts his soliloquy relatively coherently, but it quickly dissolves into cacophony. Broadly speaking, Lucky's speech falls into four parts; "the first describes an impersonal and callous God; the second asserts that man 'wastes and pines'; the third mourns an inhospitable earth and the last attempts to draw the threads of the speech together by claiming that man diminishes in a world that does not nurture him." The

following is an attempt and summarising a part of Lucky's speech:

[A]acknowledging the existence of a personal God, one who exists outside time and who loves us dearly and who suffers with those who are plunged into torment, it is established beyond all doubt that man for reasons unknown, has left his labours, abandoned, unfinished.

The presentation becomes increasingly garbled, frenetic, unintelligible and only ends when Vladimir rips his hat–which he cannot think without–from his head. Once Lucky has been revived, Pozzo has him pack up his things and they leave.

At the end of the day, a boy messenger arrives. He purports to be a messenger sent from Mr. Godot to tell them that he will not be coming that "evening but surely tomorrow." Vladimir asks him if he came the day before, giving us an impression that they have been waiting for an indefinite period and will likely keep on waiting *ad infinitum*. They decide to leave but remain still.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q1: How do you feel that the play is different from the other plays you have watched or read?

Act II

Act II opens with Vladimir singing on a dog, which serves to illustrate the cyclical nature of the play's universe. Vladimir is trying to understand the world they are trapped in, and although there is a notional evidence of linear progression, it seems that he is living the same day over and over again. Once again Estragon mentions his night-stay in a 'ditch' and beating by "ten of them", but this time too, without any sign of injury. Vladimir tries to talk to him about the change in the tree (the sprouting of leaves) and the proceedings of the day before, but he has only a vague recollection, as his memory deceives him. Vladimir tries hard to make Estragon remember Pozzo and Lucky, but all he can remember are the bones of chicken and memories of getting kicked. With some difficulty, he gets Estragon to show him his leg. There is a wound, which is beginning to fester. It is then Vladimir

notices that Estragon is not wearing any boots.

Vladimir discovers the pair of boots, which Estragon insists are not his. Nevertheless, when he tries them on they fit. There being no carrots left, Vladimir offers Estragon the choice between a turnip and a radish. He opts for the radish, but it is black and he hands it back. He decides to try and sleep again and adopts the same position as the previous day. Vladimir even sings him a lullaby. Shortly after this, Vladimir notices Lucky's hat and he decides to try it on. This leads to a chaotic hat-swapping scene. They try to imitate Pozzo and Lucky but Estragon can barely remember having met them and simply does what Vladimir asks. They fire insults at each other and then make up. Then they attempt some physical jerks, which do not work out well, and even an attempt at a single yoga position fails miserably.

After this, Pozzo and Lucky arrive again, but both of them have undergone significant changes, Pozzo is now blind and he insists that Lucky is dumb. The rope is now much shorter and Lucky–who has acquired a new hat leads Pozzo, rather than being driven by, him. He has lost all notions of time, but assures them he cannot remember meeting them the day before. Nor can he expect to remember the current day's events, which were over now. They fall in a heap at one point. Estragon sees an opportunity to extract more food or to take revenge on Lucky for kicking him. Pozzo offers them money but Vladimir sees more worth in their entertainment value since they are compelled to wait to see if Godot arrives anyway. Eventually though, they all find their way onto their feet.

Since Posso has become blind, he appears to have gained some insights. His parting words–which Vladimir elaborates later–eloquently encapsulate the realities of human existence, "They give birth astride of a grave, the light gleams an instant, then it's night once more." Lucky and Pozzo depart. A boy arrives, possibly the same boy (typically played by the same actor), to inform them not to expect Godot that day, but he would definitely arrive the next day. The two tramps again contemplate on committing suicide but their rope, which served as Estragon's belt, is not up to the job. His trousers fall down but he does not notice it until Vladimir tells him to pull them up. They resolve to bring a more suitable piece and hang

themselves the next day, if Godot fails to arrive. Again, they agree to leave, but neither of them makes any movement and the play comes to an end.

Although the play is divided into two Acts, one cannot find any structural difference between them. In the previous unit, we have discussed the circular structure of the play. The circularity of the pattern provides a very prominent insight into the understanding of the play. In each Act, we are offered basically the same sequence: the two tramps wait, reunite, contrive ways of passing time, encounter Pozzo and Lucky, receive Godot's disappointing massage, contemplate suicide, decide to leave but do not move. Some variations like the leaves on the tree and change in the roles of the wayfaring duo do occur. However, they fail to bring in the change in the essential 'sameness' of the situation.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q 2: What would you like to say on the structure of the play?

13.4 CRITICAL COMMENTARY ON THE PLAY

Since the time of its first production in Paris in 1953, Waiting for Godot has been translated into many languages and performed all over the world. Perhaps the most striking feature of this play is its innovative design. Fascinated by modernist experiments with form and style, Beckett wanted a perfect fusion of structure and content. His relentless quest for a form led him to adopt a style in his fictions which systematically eschewing all references to the external world of social and historical experiences, became increasingly interiorised and auto-referential. This play is designed in such a way that, on the one hand, there is a certain emptiness in terms of plot, character, dialogue and setting; on the other, the emphasis moves from an immediate dramatic interest to some philosophical contemplation beyond history and society.

Like Henric Ibsen and Bertolt Brecht before him, Beckett too drastically changed our expectations for what can happen on a stage. Until

Beckett's arrival, people still expected the 'well made plays' although they were already familiar with Ibsen's 'Problem Plays' and Brecht's 'Alienation Effect. The contemporary audience expected a well-crafted, clever plot with intrigues and side-stories that amplify the main narrative. However, Beckett withheld all such expectations. There is no character 'development', there is no fictional 'story'; there is no 'linearity' in terms of action or dialogue that leads anywhere. As an audience we too are trapped in the web of their meaningless conversations and activities. However, towards the end, we actually realise the essential absurdity of the condition we are witnessing.

'Silence' plays a vital role in Absurdist drama. In addition, if we look at the play carefully, we can feel that Beckett too has used 'silence' for a number of times. As far as the stage direction is concerned, 'silence' is an integral part of experimental drama. It helps the audience to involve themselves in a stage situation. 'Silence' is also relevant thematically as it means 'no speech' but can be more meaningful than spoken language. In a world where words have lost their relevance, 'silence' definitely works as a potential medium of expression.

When we are reading or watching the play, the sudden arrival of Lucky and Pozzo on the stage arouses confusion in the mind of the audience. The relationship between the two is ambiguous and can be interpreted in a number of ways. Lucky does not seem to have any command over the language system, but he can make certain sounds when he put on the 'thinking' hat. Lucky's long speech is either full of meaning, or has no meaning at all—it leads us to rethink the systems of communication that we use as a vehicle to express our feelings and emotions. His speech is a negation of language itself and hence he uses a language that is really no language.

Reading the pay minutely, we can also say that the entire play is based on the notion of 'waiting' itself. The overriding importance of 'waiting' nullifies not only what we are doing but also the time in which we are doing it. It erases the 'past' and diminishes the significance of the 'present' by producing a sense of helplessness in terms of waiting. To Didi's comment, "Things have changed here since yesterday," Gogo replies, "everything ooses." The idea of 'yesterday' itself is a vague one. Only the audience can

remember the difference between 'yesterday' and 'today'. Because, as they arrive in Act II from Act I, they are almost sure that Godot will not come 'today'. This leads us to consider 'time' as an elusive category in this play, and that each character has his own way of relating to it.

Once Beckett stated, "I am interested in the shapes of ideas even if I do not believe in them… It is the shape that matters." Ruby Cohn has listed the incidence of doubling in the play. There are two Acts, two days, and two similar sets of incidents within the play. Moreover, the characters are also in pairs. They are couples of the opposite natures. This doubling is given a physical presence on the stage. If we look at the play from this perspective, we will find that Beckett's *Waiting For Godot* is a carefully structured play. Here we confront an unfamiliar pattern, which repeatedly forces us to make sense out of the nonsense. Perhaps this is the one of the most interesting ironies associated with avant-garde theatre.

Their only hope for salvation from this nothingness is the arrival of Godot, who is expected to provide the sense of coherence and purpose they lack. While waiting for Godot, the characters are forced to go through their suffering but hoping for salvation. One of the ways that Didi and Gogo get through their suffering is by following a series of habitual routines that allow them to "pass the time" without thinking too much. Yet, in spite of their many activities, nothing really changes and they have moments when they are agonisingly aware of this. All they can do is to wait for the salvation that they hope Godot will bring. At the same time, their lives sometimes assume an arbitrary brutality.



LET US KNOW

Although Beckett's works are essentially comic, his characters are 'antiheroic'. Besides, his themes are evocative of the absurdity and meaninglessness of human existence. He is widely recognised by his followers as having a keen sense of the condition of modern life, especially the impotence and ignorance of a world that has purportedly reached an advanced stage of technological and intellectual sophistication. A 'non-hero'

or the antithesis of a 'hero' is one who is capable of heroic deeds, who is dashing, strong, brave and resourceful. But, an anti-hero is a type who is incompetent, unlucky, tactless, clumsy, stupid, buffoonish and so on. An antihero is one who is given the vocation of failure. There are various examples of fictional anti-heroes the best of which may be the eponymous knight of *Don Quixote*. With the emergence of Absurd drama, the notion of an antihero got some new impetus in the field of drama also.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q 3: In what ways is Beckett different from Ibsen and Brecht?

Q 4: Mention the significance of the use of 'silence' in the play *Waiting for Godot*?

Q 5: What idea of salvation do you derive from your reading of the play *Waiting for Godot*?

Q 6: How do the characters in the play look anti-heroic?

13.5 MAJOR CHARACTERS

The following are the important characters in the play *Waiting for Godot.*

Godot

The identity of Godot has been the subject of much debate. His identity indeed, the very reality of his existence is doubtful. Throughout the play, he has been perceived as the saviour, God, a vindictive tyrant, a rich employer or somebody who holds the 'future' of the two tramps. In order to solve the mystery regarding Godot's identity, critics have delved deeper into Beckett's own life history to know who Godot might be. Beckett's own angry response to it is that if he knew who Godot is, he would have said so in the play. Actually, Godot cannot be made to represent any one idea, ideal or person, precisely because he is believed to have represented the notion of an 'absence'.

Vladimir

Vladimir is the one who constantly reminds Estragon that they must wait for Godot. All implications suggest that Vladimir knows more about Godot than does Estragon, who tells us that he has never even seen Godot, and thus has no idea what Godot looks like. Vladimir often sees religious or philosophical implications in their discussions of events, and he interprets their actions in religious terms; for example, his concern over the stories of the two thieves who were crucified alongside Jesus. Vladimir correlates some of their actions to the general concerns of mankind. In Act II, when Pozzo and Lucky fall down and cry for help, Vladimir interprets their cries for help as his and Estragon's chance to be in a unique position of helping humanity. Nevertheless, Vladimir maintains, "It is not every day that we are needed…but at this place, at this moment in time," they are needed and should respond to the cries for help. Similarly, Vladimir questions Pozzo, Lucky, and the Boy Messenger, while Estragon remains, for the most part, a silent listener. Essentially, Vladimir must constantly remind Estragon of their destiny—that is, they must wait for Godot. In addition to the larger needs, Vladimir also looks after their physical needs. He helps Estragon with his boots, and had he been with Estragon at night, he would not have allowed his friend to be beaten. Besides, he also looks after and rations their meagre meals of turnips, carrots, and radishes.

Estragon

In contrast to Vladimir, Estragon is concerned mainly with matters that are more mundane. He prefers a carrot to a radish or turnip, his feet hurt, and he blames his boots. He constantly wants to leave, and it must be drilled into him that he must wait for Godot. He remembers that he was beaten, but he sees no philosophical significance in the beating. He is willing to beg for money from a stranger (Pozzo), and he eats Pozzo's discarded chicken bones with no shame. Estragon, then, is the more basic of the two. He is not concerned with either religious or philosophical matters. First, he has never even heard of the two thieves who were crucified with Christ, and if the Gospels do disagree, then "that's all there is to it," and any further discussion is futile and absurd. Estragon's basic nature is illustrated in Act II when he shows so little interest in Pozzo and Lucky that he falls asleep;

also, he sleeps through the entire scene between Vladimir and the Boy Messenger. He is simply not concerned with such issues. Estragon, however, is dependent upon Vladimir, and essentially, he performs what Vladimir tells him to do. For example, Vladimir looks after Estragon's boots and his food, he comforts Estragon's pain, and he reminds Estragon of their need to wait for Godot.



LET US KNOW

As you read the play, both the similarities and differences you notice in the two characters is important. Both are tramps dressed in costumes, which could be interchanged. They both wear big boots, which don't necessarily fit, and both have big bowler hats. Their costumes recall the type found in burlesque or vaudeville houses, the type often associated with the character of the "Little Tramp," portrayed by Charlie Chaplin. Throughout the play the couple refer to each other by pet names, "Didi" and "Gogo". However, their relationship is full of contradictions and confusions. They are perceived, 'at this place, at this moment of time,' not as two distinct personalities but as two truncated and generalised images of all 'mankind'. Incapable of any meaningful action or initiative, they imply an utterly pessimistic view of man as a helpless victim of existential circumstances.

When Beckett started writing this play, he perhaps, did not have an image of these two. They are never ever referred to as tramps in the text. There are no physical descriptions of either of the two characters however; the text indicates that Vladimir is likely to be the heavier of the pair. They have been together for fifty years but when asked by Pozzo they do not reveal their actual ages. Vladimir stands through most of the play whereas Estragon sits down a number of times and even doses off. Estragon's defeatist nature and sense of despair and his preoccupations with various physical needs like hunger and sleep are contrasted to Vladimir's optimism and intellectual preoccupation s with philosophical questions.

Pozzo

Pozzo appears on stage after the appearance of Lucky. A long rope ties them together; thus, their destinies are fixed together in the same way that Pozzo might be a mother figure, with the rope being the umbilical cord, which ties the two together. Everything about Pozzo resembles our image of the circus ringmaster. However, Vladimir and Estragon first mistook him for Godot or God. Like a ringmaster he arrives brandishing a whip, which is the trademark of the profession. In fact, we hear the cracking of Pozzo's whip before we actually see him. Also, a stool is often associated with an animal trainer, and Pozzo constantly calls Lucky by animal terms or names. Pozzo commands and Lucky obeys. In the first Act, Pozzo is shown as an authoritarian figure. He lords over the others, and he is decisive, powerful, and confident. He gives the illusion that he knows exactly where he is going and exactly how to get there. When he arrives on the scene and sees Vladimir and Estragon, he recognises them as human, but as inferior beings. Pozzo's superiority is also seen in the manner in which he eats the chicken, and then casts the bones to Lucky with an air of complete omnipotence.

In contrast to the towering presence exhibited by Pozzo in Act I, a significant change occurs between the two Acts. The rope is shortened, drawing Pozzo much closer to his antithesis, Lucky. Pozzo is now blind; he cannot find his way alone. He stumbles and falls. He cannot get along without help; he is pathetic. He is no longer in command now. Rather than driving Lucky as he did earlier, he is now pathetically dragged along by Lucky. From a position of omnipotence and strength and confidence, he has fallen and has become the complete fallen man who maintains that time is irrelevant and that man's existence is meaningless.

Lucky

Lucky is the obvious antithesis of Pozzo. At one point, Pozzo maintains that Lucky's entire existence is based upon pleasing him; that is, Lucky's enslavement is his meaning, and if he is ever freed, his life would cease to have any significance. Given Lucky's state of existence, his very name "Lucky" is ironic, especially since Vladimir observes that even "old dogs have more dignity." All of Lucky's actions seem unpredictable. In Act I, when Estragon attempts to help him, Lucky becomes violent and kicks him

on the leg. When he is later expected to dance, his movements are as ungraceful and alien to the concept of dance as one can possibly conceive. We have seldom encountered such ignorance; consequently, when he is expected to give a coherent speech, we are still surprised by his almost total incoherence. Lucky seems to be more animal than human, and his very existence in the drama is a parody of human existence. In Act II, when he arrives completely dumb, it is only a fitting extension of his condition in Act I, where his speech was virtually incomprehensible. Now he makes no attempt to utter any sound at all. Whatever part of man that Lucky represents, we can make the general observation that he, as man, is reduced to leading the blind, not by intellect, but by blind instinct.



LET US KNOW

Together both Pozzo and Lucky represent the antithesis of each other. Yet they are strongly and irrevocably tied together—both physically and metaphysically. Any number of polarities could be used to apply to them. If Pozzo is the master (and father figure), then Lucky is the slave (or child). If Pozzo is the circus ringmaster, then Lucky is the trained or performing animal. If Pozzo is the sadist, Lucky is the masochist. Or, Pozzo can be seen as the Ego and Lucky as the Id. An inexhaustible number of polarities can be suggested.

When Beckett was asked why Lucky was so named, his reply was, "I suppose he is lucky to have no more expectations…"Although it has been contended that Pozzo and Lucky are simply Didi and Gogo writ large" there is a different kind of dynamics at work here. Pozzo may be mistaken for Godot by the two tramps but, as far as Lucky 'thinks', Pozzo is *his* Godot, which is another reason for his being lucky. Their association is not as clear cut as it first seems however, it becomes evident that Lucky always rendered more influence in the relationship, for he danced, and more importantly, thought – not as a part of his service, but in order to fill a vacant need of Pozzo. Pozzo credits Lucky with having given him all the culture, refinement, and ability to reason that he possesses.

The Boys

The boy in Act I, a local lad, assures Vladimir that this is the first time he has seen him. He says he was not there the previous day. He confirms that he works for Mr. Godot as a goat herder. His brother, who is coincidentally beaten by Godot, is a shepherd. Godot feeds both of them and allows them to sleep in his hayloft.

The boy in Act II also assures Vladimir that it was not he who called upon them the day before. He insists that this too is his first visit. When Vladimir asks what Godot does, the boy tells him; “He does nothing, sir.” We also learn he has a white beard–possibly, the boy is not certain. This boy also has a brother who it seems is sick but there is no clear evidence to suggest that his brother is the boy that came in Act I or the one who came the day before that.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q 7: How is the character called Godot perceived in the play?

Q 8: What are the similarities one observes between the characters—Vladimir and Estragon?

Q 9: How is the relationship between Pozzo and Lucky?

13.6 CRITICAL RECEPTION OF THE PLAY

The critical reception of *Waiting for Godot* met with both appraisal and intense criticism. Though the play was received with suspicion, nobody could ever imagine that this play would revolutionize theatre and theatrical history for all time. The first staging of the play in Paris in 1953, caused immediate sensation. Gradually, later audiences started to respond more sympathetically to Didi and Gogo’s absurd paralysis as they began to think that it represented ‘our condition’. One critic memorably said that ‘nothing happens twice’ in the play. And, the theatrical vitality and versatility of the play have been demonstrated by various performances throughout the world.

It was only after the 50s, it had received popular acclaim among the literary artists and filmmakers for its immense possibilities. Miodrag

Bulatoviæ in 1966 in his *Godo je došao* (*Godot Arrived*) presents Godot as a baker who ends up being condemned to death by the four main characters. Another example was Ian McDonald's 1991 novel *King of Morning, Queen of Day* (partly written in Joycean style). Two main characters were clearly meant to be the original Vladimir and Estragon. Another unauthorised sequel was written by Daniel Curzon in the late 1990s: *Godot Arrives*. *Rosencrantz & Guildenstern Are Dead*, written by Tom Stoppard and first staged in 1966, contains a set of characters whose dialogue and themes seem to have been strongly influenced by the characters in *Godot*. *Waiting for Guffman* is a film co-written and directed by Christopher Guest. The plots share enough similarities Godot here is meant to reveal things about Guffman.



13.7 LET US SUM UP

As you finish reading about the play and its different aspects in the various sections of this unit, you have learnt that Samuel Beckett happened to be writing at the same time as a number of other dramatists, all independently transforming the shape of theatre, writing plays that would later be classified under the rubric of the 'Theatre of the Absurd', the New Theatre or Anti-theatre. All of these new playwrights were expressing the absurdity, meaninglessness and hopelessness of the human condition, and Beckett's play *Waiting for Godot* took the lead.



13.8 FURTHER READING

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5) Cohn, R. (1975). (Ed.). *Samuel Beckett: A Collection of Criticism.* Mc Graw-Hill.

6) Conor, Steven. (1992). (Ed.). *New Case Books, Waiting For Godot and Endgame, Contemporary Critical Essays,* London , Macmillan.

7) Esslin, Martin. (1983). *The Theatre of the Absurd.* Penguin.

8) Pendergast, Sarah. & Tom Pendergast. (2003). (Ed.). Reference Guide to World Literature. Vol 2. Works. Index. Thomson Gale.

Websites and Electronic Resources:

http://brainstorm-services.com/wcu-2004/godot-approaching.pdf

13.9 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS (HINTS ONLY)

Ans to Q 1: *Waiting for Godot* does not contain a plot in the Aristotelian sense… …the play just displays babbling and loitering around of two men under a tree, near a mound, and passing of time in vain…. …the play does not have any structure and the action does not lead to any logical sequence… …dialogue is also enigmatic and leads nowhere.

Ans to Q 2: The play has a circular structure… …you will also look at the various repetitions used in both Acts of the play.

Ans to Q 3: Until Beckett's arrival, people still expected the 'well made plays' although they were already familiar with Ibsen's 'Problem Plays' and Brecht's 'Alienation Effect… …the audience expected a well-crafted, clever plot with intrigues and side-stories that amplify the main narrative… …Beckett withheld all such expectations… …there is no character 'development', 'story', and 'linearity'… …he made his audience remain trapped in the web of their meaningless conversations and activities.

Ans to Q 4: 'Silence' plays a vital role in Absurdist drama… …'silence' has always been integral to the experimental drama… …it helps the audience to involve themselves in a stage situation… …'silence' also means 'no speech' but can be more meaningful than spoken language… …in a world where words have lost their relevance, 'silence' definitely works as a potential medium of expression.

Ans to Q 5: Their only hope for salvation from this nothingness is the arrival of Godot, who is expected to provide the sense of coherence and purpose they lack… …While waiting for Godot, the characters are forced to go through their suffering but hoping for salvation… …in spite of their meaningless activities, nothing really changes and they have moments when they are agonisingly aware of this… …all they can do is to wait for the salvation that they hope Godot will bring.

Ans to Q 6: An anti-hero is a type who is incompetent, unlucky, tactless, clumsy, stupid, buffoonish… …an antihero is given the vocation of failure… …Beckett's works are essentially comic, his characters are 'antiheroic'… …his themes are evocative of the absurdity and meaninglessness of human existence… …he had a keen sense of the condition of modern life, especially the impotence and ignorance of a world of technological and intellectual sophistication.

Ans to Q 7: The identity or existence of Godot is doubtful… …throughout the play, he has been perceived as the saviour, God, a vindictive tyrant, a rich employer or somebody who holds the 'future' of the two tramps… …Godot cannot be made to represent any one idea, ideal or person, precisely because he is believed to have represented the notion of an 'absence'… …Beckett's own angry response to it is that if he knew who Godot is, he would have said so in the play

Ans to Q 8: Much similarities… …both are tramps dressed in costumes, which could be interchanged… …both wear big boots, which don't necessarily fit… …both have big bowler hats… …the couple refer to each other by pet names "Didi" and "Gogo"… …they are perceived 'at this place, at this moment of time,' not as two distinct personalities but as two truncated and generalised images of all 'mankind'… …both are incapable of any meaningful action or initiative.

Ans to Q 9: As they appear on stage, a long rope ties them together… …Pozzo resembles our image of the circus ringmaster brandishing a whip which is the trademark of the profession… …Pozzo commands and Lucky obeys… …in Act I, Pozzo is shown as an authoritarian figure, he is decisive, powerful, and confident… …however, a

significant change occurs in Act II… …Pozzo is now blind; he cannot find his way alone…. …he stumbles and falls… …he is now pathetically dragged along by Lucky… … this is suggestive of the fact that time is irrelevant and that man's existence is meaningless.



13.10 POSSIBLE QUESTIONS

Q 1: What ideas do you get about the Theatre of the Absurd from your reading of the two Acts of the play *Waiting for Godot?*

Q 2: Comment on the critical reception of the play *Waiting for Godot* with particular reference to the various devices that Beckett adopts for showcasing his concerns.

Q 3: Would you consider this play as a representation of the bizarre reality of the contemporary age? Discuss in detail.

Q 4: Make a comparison between *Waiting for Godot* and any of the traditional plays that you have read. What are the differences you find in your reading of both the plays?

Q 5: What makes the play *Waiting for Godot* so popular that it was adopted for so many later productions? Can we say that the later adaptations have increased the popularity of the play? Give a reasoned answer.

Q 6: Comment on Beckett's characterisation in the play *Waiting for Godot*? How do you feel that the characters are related to eachother? What according to you, do the characters mostly represent?

Q 7: 'Silence' and 'Waiting' play an important role in the play *Waiting for Godot.* Elaborate.

Q 8: As we read the play, both similarities and differences between characters strike our mind. Justify your answer.

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UNIT 14: HAROLD PINTER: *THE CARETAKER* (PART I)

UNIT STRUCTURE

14.1 Learning Objectives

14.2 Introduction

14.3 Harold Pinter: The Playwright

14.4 Sources of the Play *The Caretaker*

14.5 Critical Reception of Pinter

14.6 Let Us Sum Up

14.7 Further Reading

14.8 Answers to Check Your Progress (Hints Only)

14.9 Possible Questions

14.1 LEARNING OBJECTIVES

After going through this unit, you will be able to

- gain fare idea about the life and works of Harold Pinter
- discuss Pinter as a great playwright and thinker of his time
- read the text of the play in its other possible contexts and identify the different philosophical and aesthetic ideas implicit in the play
- appreciate the play in its nuanced totality.

14.2 INTRODUCTION

This unit deals with Harold Pinter who is one of the most widely read, performed and best known theatre activists of the world in the last century. Beginning his literary and theatrical ventures in the late forties, Pinter remained an active performer at various creative disciplines till his death in 2008. His creative career spans across half a century in different fields like films, theatre, radio-plays, television etc. He has been a poet, a novelist, a playwright, a screenwriter, an actor as well as an able director on both the stage and the screen. However, it is mostly as a dramatist that Pinter is widely known to the world, and his experiences in other creative

and critical disciplines have always been contributory to the development of the dramatist in him. As you finish reading this unit, you will learn that Pinter's preoccupation with confined spaces, small habitats with constraining circumstances and brief events provides a scope for exploring the complexities of life, the instability of verbal interactions, the changing social realities, and the inability to communicate properly, as found in the play *The Caretaker*. Pinter is preoccupied with human fear and anxiety rather than with hopes. This idea makes the plays of Harold Pinter masterpieces of modern times.

14.3 HAROLD PINTER: THE PLAYWRIGHT

His Life:

Harold Pinter was born in a lower middle class family on 10th October 1930 at 19 Thistle Waite Road in Hackney, North London. His parents were Jack and Frances Pinter. Jack Pinter was a Jewish tailor. During his childhood, Harold was an athlete and loved to play cricket. In 1939, when the World War II broke out, the family was evacuated to Caerhays, near Mevagissy in Cornwall. He saw some of the bombings in his city by the German army, and this firsthand experience of war and destruction had a lasting impression on his young mind. During the war, they often had to stay outside London. In 1944, Pinter was admitted to Hackney Down Grammar School where an excellent English teacher named Joe Brearley, had rendered a remarkable influence on the developing mind of Pinter.

Pinter's passion for theatre drew public attention in his school days when, in 1947, the *News Chronicle* reviewed his performance as Macbeth in a school level production. In the autumn of 1948, he joined the Royal Academy of Dramatic Art (RADA), but in October, he was called for National Service and registered as a conscientious objector. In 1949, he was brought before a military tribunal, arrested twice and fined. Dropping out of RADA, he decided to stay at home and engage in literary activities and to search for acting jobs. On September 19, 1950, he made his debut in professional performance in a play called *Focus on Football Pools.* Meanwhile, he started

playing small roles in BBC Radio. In the same year, two poems were published in *Poetry London.* In the first half of 1951, he spent two terms at Central School of Speech and Drama, and in August 1951, he was engaged in Anew McMaster's company for a six-month tour playing Shakespeare and other classic dramas in Ireland. In 1954, he changed his stage name to David Baron. In the following few years he worked for Huddersfield Repertory company, Colchester repertory, the repertory company in Torquay.

On 14 September 1956, he married Vivien Merchant who used to act with him. In 1957, he wrote a short play called *The Room* and started working for his first full-length drama, *The Birthday Party*. *The Birthday Party* was first premiered in London in 1958 only to be greeted with savage reviews. The play was closed within a week. However, despite adverse criticism Pinter continued trying his hand in playwriting, acting and directing. His plays were performed throughout the major cities of Europe and the United States. Gradually he extended his hands to the radio and television, and later to film. Apart from engaging himself within the creative practices like writing, directing, acting, Pinter started to meet his social commitment through political activism. He was critical of Britain's involvement in the Iraq War. He was not hesitant to term both U.S. President George W. Bush and British Prime Minister Tony Blair as terrorists. His concern for the contemporary world's socio-political situation is expressed in the form of outrage in some of his poems, particularly in the collection called *War* (2003). His life-long engagement with the world of creativity has earned him laurels and recognitions as well as several awards like David Cohen British Literature Prize (1995), S. T. Dupont Golden Pen Award for a Lifetime's Distinguished Service to Literature (2001), Companion of Honour for services to literature (2002), Wilfred Owen Poetry Prize (2004), European Theatre Prize (2006), Légiond'honeur (2007) etc. In 2005, he was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature. For some people, the Nobel Prize to Pinter, who is an antiwar campaigner, is a strong political statement. Pinter was not well enough to accept the prize in person; so he delivered his Nobel lecture in a pre-recorded video played at the event.

Pinter brought to the stage another best regarded of his works, the

drama *Betrayal* in 1978. This play tells the tale of infidelity and marital meltdown. Critics sense that this story in the play reflects some aspects of the writer's life. Pinter, by that time, had been involved with Lady Antonia Frasier, a talented writer and the wife of a member of the Parliament and a mother of six children. The lovers eventually come out of their existing marital bonds by shedding their respective spouses and get married in 1980. The couple, with their own accord and credibility in literature, became very popular in the contemporary literary circles.

Harold Pinter established the notion of Absurd theatre in the world of the English stage. The essence of the European Absurd theatre finds a new dimension his play because they show the inherent drawbacks and tension in the social life of the modern world. His dramatic style and techniques have certainly given a novel direc-tion to the drama in subsequent periods. His later works exhibit Pinter's growing concern for world politics. For instance, a short play called *Mountain Language* (1988) makes a bold portrayal of and protest against the oppression of the Kurdish people in Turkey.

In 2001, Pinter had been diagnosed with cancer. However, he continued working for the stage, television and cinema, apart from raising voices in socio-political affairs, both domestic and international. Finally, he succumbs to cancer on December 24, 2008, in London. At the time of his death, he left behind his second wife (Antonia Fraser, who is a writer), his son Daniel (from his first marriage), and six stepchildren. He was laid for the eternal sleep at Kensal Green Cemetery, London.

His Dramatic Career:

Pinter started his dramatic career with a short play called *The Room* in 1957. His first full-length drama was *The Birthday Party*, first premiered in London in 1958. The play did not get any desired welcome as it faced severe criticism from the theatregoers and critics. It was however, with his *The Caretaker* (1960) that Pinter met with the first experience of success. The Royal Shakespeare Company first performed his *The Homecoming*, which is considered by some to be one of his masterpieces in 1965. The

play explored familial tensions in a way no playwright had ever done before. The play tells the story of a man who brings his wife to meet his father and brothers after a long estrangement. The wife, at the end leaves him and decides to stay with his family. In 1967, the drama was taken to **Broadway**, where it won the Tony Award, which is Pinter's only Broadway honour. *The Homecoming* was later adapted into a film which featured many of its original cast, including the great actors like Ian Holm, Terence Rigby and Vivien Merchant.

By this time, Pinter had also extended his domain to film, radio and television. He started writing screenplays for his own works as well as for others' films too. He wrote *The Servant* (1963) and *Accident* (1967), both directed by Joseph Losey. They worked together for another film called *The Go-Between* (1970), starring Julie Christie and Alan Bates. *The French Lieutenant's Woman* (1981), starring Jeremy Irons and Meryl Streep, is perhaps one of Pinter's best-known screen adaptations. His engagement with radio (especially BBC) is marked by the plays like *A Slight Ache* (1959), *A Night Out* (1960), *The Dwarfs* (1960), *That's Your Trouble*, *That's All*, *Applicant*, *Dialogue for Three* (all in 1963), *The Birthday Party* (1970), *Acts in Monologue* (1975) and many more productions. His television serials and other programmes include *A Night Out* (1960), *Night School* (1960), *Monologue* (1973), *Old Times* (1975), *No Man's Land* (1978), *The Hothouse* (1982), *One for the Road* (1985), *The Dumb Waiter* (1985), *The Birthday Party* (1987) and many more productions.

Harold Pinter has achieved the distinction for a living dramatist. He has made his own adjective 'Pinteresque', which is generally applied to a situation fraught with menace in which common speech camouflages a ferocious battle for territory. However, there is much more to Pinter than masked conflict and hidden threat. His pervading theme is memory: the way our existence is haunted by a recollection, however fallible or imaginary, of some vanished world in which everything was secure, certain and fixed. The wordplay in Pinter is striking. Questioning, self-doubt and distrust of values amongst the characters constitutes some other major preoccupations in the play.



LET US KNOW

It will be interesting to draw a parallel between the worlds of Franz Kafka and Pinter. Both deal with experiences, which at first glance seem commonplace, even paltry. However, all of these turn out to be battles for high stakes, for sanity, for life itself. Both share a conviction that the essential aspects of experience are ambiguous. In addition, their characters are preoccupied with anxiety or fear rather than hope. Like Kafka's *The Trail,* Pinter's *The Birthday Party* begins with the hero's birthday and ends with two men taking him away.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q 1: Who is Harold Pinter?

Q 2: What connection can you make between Pinter and the "Theatre of the Absurd"?

Q 3: Mention briefly about the significant plays of Harold Pinter.

14.4 SOURCES OF THE PLAY *THE CARETAKER*

Pinter had his inspiration for the play from a real-life experience of his youth that relates to his acquaintance with two brothers who lived together. One of the brothers brought an old tramp to their house in order to provide shelter. Pinter somehow identified himself with the tramp as he had very little money and was almost a tramp. The two brothers and the old tramp takes Pinter closer to the mysterious play between reality and fantasy, complexities of family relationships, and the struggle for power. Michael Billington has stated in his book *Harold Pinter* that Pinter very often discussed the details about the *The Caretaker's* origins in relation to images dawn from his own life. As Billington notes Pinter claims to have written the play while he and his first wife Vivien Merchant were living in Chiswick. As Pinter himself claimed: "The flat was a very clean couple of rooms with a bath and kitchen. There was a chap who owned the house: a builder, in fact, like Mick who had his own van and whom I hardly ever saw. The only image of

him was of this swift mover up and down the stairs and of his van going…Vroom…as he arrived and departed. His brother lived in the house. He was a handyman…he managed rather more successfully than Aston, but he was very introverted, very secretive, had been in a mental home some years before and had had some kind of electrical shock treatment…Anyway, he did bring a tramp back one night. I call him a tramp, but he was just a homeless old man who stayed three or four weeks." According to Billington, Pinter described Mick as the most purely invented character of the three. (*Harold Pinter* 114–17).

The Caretaker, opened in London in 1960 but later moved to Broadway, was acclaimed as a critical success. It has been described as Pinter's most naturalistic play. The British theater critic Kenneth Tynan called it "a play about people," which, in Pinter's case, marked a significant turn in his approach to theater. Unlike his early works such as *The Room* (1957) and *The Dumb Waiter* (1959), which are laden with symbolism and heavily influenced by playwrights Samuel Beckett and Eugène Ionesco, *The Caretaker* instead focuses on the lives of the three characters, presenting the action realistically and in a naturalistic fashion. Perhaps, here lies the significance of Pinter's play *The Caretaker.*



LET US KNOW

Stage History of the Play *The Caretaker*

- The play *The Caretaker* was first performed by the Arts Theatre Club in association with Michael Codron and David Hall at the Art Theatre, London, on 27th April 1960.
- On May 30, 1960, Michael Codron and David Hall at the Duchess Theatre, London, presented the play. This performance was directed by Donald McWhinnie. With this group, later in the run, Pinter played Mick. This performance brought Pinter the Evening Standard Drama Award, 1960.
- On March 2, 1972, Christopher Morahan directed at a revival of the play at the Mermaid Theatre, London.

- In January 1976, the play was presented at the Shaw Theatre under the direction of Kevin Billington.
- On June 20, 1991, Harold Pinter directed the play in a Triumph Proscenium Production at the Comedy Theatres.
- The play was adapted into a film in the year of 1963. The film, directed by Clive Donner, was showed in the Berlin Film Festival.
- In the United States, the play was released as the *The Guest* in 1964.
- The play was revived in a National Theatre production in November 1980, and was broadcast by the BBC in March 1981.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q 4: Write a note on the stage history of the play *The Caretaker*?

14.5 CRITICAL RECEPTION OF PINTER

Harold Pinter is one of the most influential personalities in British theatre. Out of all the experiments with the form of drama in the mid-20th century, like the verse drama, the new theatre, the angry drama, it is the theatre of the Absurd which could worthily represent the human condition of the time, and thus influence public imagination; the theatre of the Absurd fared better than the others, because it flourished in many forms, developing its own traditions since Beckett's play *Waiting for Godot*. Pinter has played a mighty role in the development of this form and thus contributing to the development of European contemporary drama. Throughout his career, Pinter tried to maintain that his plays are not intricate but easy to grasp. He does not cherish the presence of any allegory in his plays. Pinter's dialogues are marked by wit and brevity; this characteristic encourages the possibility of multiple readings for meaning. The reader or audience of his plays cannot always arrive at any definite meaning of the puzzling dialogues; one is always free to draw many alternative ideas from them. Following the

traditions of the Absurd theatre, Pinter has debunked the excessive stress on language and logic. Unlike many of his contemporary playwrights, his plays have got a suggestive power.

One of the greatest drama critics Martin Esslin has placed him among the great masters of the avant-garde Theatre of the Absurd. Nonetheless, categorising and labelling his works, though helpful to some readers in understanding them, do not and cannot limit Pinter's multi-dimensional approach to modern life. The multiplicity of his outlook towards life and his unique method of presenting this multiple outlook must not be ignored by the reader who is looking for truth and meaning in his works.

The critics of *Encore,* the foremost radical theatre journal of the time, found in Pinter's plays significances of which Pinter himself was unaware. But, from *The Birthday Party* (1958) to *The Homecoming* (1965), Pinter's plays are subjected to long and serious criticism and it was the *Encore* Publishing Company that produced the first edition of *The Birthday Party,* which it advertised as 'not only pungently funny and disquietingly macabre, but rich with concerned about the state of our society.' There was however one lonely voice who praised Pinter's works. His name was Harold Hobson who proclaimed that that–"Mr. Pinter, on this evidence of this work, possesses the most original, disturbing and errasting talent in theatrical London." Dealing with *The Birthday Party,* he further said, "One of the greatest merits of this play is the fact that no one can say precisely what it is about, or gives the address from which the intruding Goldberg and Meccann came, or say precisely why…Stanley is so frightened…it is exactly in this vagueness that its spine chilling quality lies."

Accused sometimes of retreating into private worlds, Pinter from the mid-1980s onwards, has answered his critics and expressed his sense of moral outrage with a series of pungent, political plays dealing with abuse of human rights as found in *One For The Road* (1984), *Mountain Language* (1988), *Ashes to Ashes* (1996) and so on. Pinter is now recognised as one of the most widely performed and best-known dramatists in the contemporary world. An active Pinter Society in the US is producing a Pinter Record annually. Even in India, a group of young energetic academics and scholars

of Literatures in English, under the care and guidance of some eminent university faculty of literature, have formed the PINTER SOCIETY OF INDIA after the name of Harold Pinter (1930–2008) who along with some of his peers overwhelmingly changed the contemporary theatre scenario. They publish original, ardently researched articles on various facets of contemporary creative literature in the global perspective. Thus, there is a formidable body of Pinter studies. Contemporary British Playwrights are mostly used to being a part of the Pinter Canon.



14.6 LET US SUM UP

After going though the various sections of this unit, you have learnt that Pinter exhibits in his works strong influence of Beckett. For the Absurdists like Beckett, humanity is waiting for the appearance of the ideal order, which the two tramps in *Waiting for Godot* anticipate. The question when will Godot come is not different from the question when will a better society come into existence. Pinter has adopted the Beckettian model of expressing the existential suffering of humanity, though the depiction of the individual experience of despair is certainly different from that of the other practitioners of the 'Theatre of the Absurd'. Pinter's first successful *The Birthday Party* shows the struggles of man against the influence of the past. The play deals with the philosophical ideas like will power, anxiety and fear. This play makes a telling comment on the experiences of individuals in the modern world. His *The Dumb Waiter* is an exposition of the nature of menace, and how others in turn menace the menac-ing persons. Pinter extensively explores silence, as an important device for communication, in this play. In *The* Caretaker, Pinter has shown the individual search for compassion and help in a world devoid of human sensibility. You will get an opportunity to read about this play in sufficient details in the next unit.



14.7 FURTHER READING

1) Bradbury, Malcolm. (1996). (Ed.). *The Atlas of Literature.* London: De Agostini Editions.

2) Esslin, M. (1983). *The Theatre of the Absurd.* London: Penguin.

3) Hayman, Ronald. (1970). *Harold Pinter.* Contemporary Playwright Series. London.

4) Ousby, Ian. (1994). (Ed.). *The Wordsworth Companion to Literature in English.* Hertfordshire: Wordsworth.

5) Sanders, Andrew. (2004). *The Short Oxford History of English Literature.* (3rd Edn). Oxford: Oxford University Press.

6) Pinter Harold. (1998). *Various Voices Prose, Poetry, Politics 1948-2005*. London: Faber and Faber.

7) Raby Peter. (2001). (Ed.). *The Cambridge Companion to Harold Pinter.*



14.8 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS (HINTS ONLY)

Ans to Q 1: Harold Pinter is one of the most widely read, performed and best known theatre activists of the world in the last century… …his creative career spans across half a century in different fields like films, theatre, radio-plays, television etc… …he has been a poet, a novelist, a playwright, a screen-writer, an actor as well as an able director on both the stage and the screen.

Ans to Q 2: Harold Pinter established the notion of Absurd theatre in the English stage. The essence of the European Absurd theatre finds a new dimension his play because they show the inherent drawbacks and tension in the social life of the modern world.

Ans to Q 3: In 1957, he wrote a short play called *The Room… …*his first full-length drama was *The Birthday Party*, premiered first in London in 1958…. …with *The Caretaker* (1960) Pinter met with the first

experience of success… …his *The Homecoming,* often considered a masterpieces, was first performed by the Royal Shakespeare Company in 1965, the play explored familial tensions in a way no playwright had ever done before… …*Betrayal* (1978) tells the tale of infidelity and martial meltdown.

Ans to Q 4: The play was first performed by the Arts Theatre Club on 27 April, 1960… …on May 30, 1960, the play was presented by Michael Codron and David Hall at the Duchess Theatre, London… …on March 2, 1972, Christopher Morahan directed at a revival of the play at the Mermaid Theatre, London… …In January, 1976, the play was presented at the Shaw Theatre under the direction of Kevin Billington…. …on June 20, 1991, Harold Pinter directed the play in a Triumph Proscenium Production at the Comedy Theatres and so on.



14.9 POSSIBLE QUESTIONS

Q 1: What are the specific qualities of Pinter as a modern dramatist?

Q 2: Do you find any common themes in the plays of Pinter? Discuss.

Q 3: What according to you are the reasons behind Pinter's acceptance as one of the leading dramatists of the contemporary world?

Q 4: Comment on the critical reception of Harold Pinter as a playwright of the 20th century.

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UNIT 15:HAROLD PINTER: *THE CARETAKER* (PART II)

UNIT STRUCTURE

15.1 Learning Objectives

15.2 Introduction

15.3 Act wise Summary of the Play

15.4 Critical Commentary on the Play

15.5 Major Themes

15.6 Major Characters

15.7 Let Us Sum Up

15.8 Further Reading

15.9 Answers to Check Your Progress (Hints Only)

15.10 Possible Questions

15.1 LEARNING OBJECTIVES

After going through this unit, you will be able to

- make an act wise summary of the play to discuss how the play *The Caretaker* presents a simple story of the two brothers and a tramp
- discuss the major themes of the play
- enlist the major characters and explain the role they play
- comment critically on the significance of the *The Caretaker* as a modern play.

15.2 INTRODUCTION

The Caretaker is the first major play by Harold Pinter. It brought him nation-wide recognition as well as huge commercial success. Being staged for the first time at the **Arts Theatre** in London on April 27, 1960, this play was an instant hit with audiences and critics celebrating Pinter's accomplishment. Most of the newspapers published favourable reviews on the play. In the same year, the play received the 'Evening Standard Award' for best play. In the following years, till the present time, the play has occupied

a revered space among the theatre activists across the world, across linguistic, cultural and national borders. It has been translated into various languages, performed with different stage-techniques, adapted for television as well as film. Besides, it has dominated the literature and theatre syllabuses in colleges and universities across the globe. *The Caretaker* presents a simple story of the two brothers and a tramp. With this story, the play deals with themes like the distance between reality and fantasy, family relationships, and the struggle for power. It also touches on the subjects of mental illness and the plight of the destitute. Pinter takes recourse to elements of both comedy and tragedy in order to express complex meanings about human existence, life and being, which in turn elicits complex reactions among the audience. The complexity of the play, Pinter's masterful use of dialogue, and the depth and perception shown in Pinter's themes—all contribute to *The Caretaker*'s being considered as a modern classic. It has been unanimously accepted that his breakthrough as a dramatist came with *The Caretaker* (1960), and since then, he has been one of the most eminent British playwrights of contemporary times. By the time you finish reading the unit, you will find that his surreal, nightmarish, disturbing plays can be called 'comedy of menace'. His art seems to be formalist, but exposes down psychological motivation and rationalisations, revealing drives and instincts.

15.3 ACT WISE SUMMARY OF THE PLAY

The Caretaker is a three-act play where the entire action takes place in a single room. The play comprises three characters: A mentally challenged man called Aston, his younger brother called Mick, and a tramp called Davis, who are involved in a series of interactions. One evening Aston, a man in early thirties, brings the old tramp Davis to his room in the house owned by his brother, Mick, who is in his late twenties, and allows the old man to stay in his room. With the progress of time, both brothers ask Davis to be the caretaker at the house. However, situations compel them to throw the old man out. The play touches on the subjects of mental illness, jealousy, greed and need, power and politics as well as the plight of the poor. The use of

both comic and tragic elements in the play induces complex reactions in the audience. The complexity of this reaction combining with Pinter's compelling dialogue, the depth of perception contributes to the complexity of the simple plot of the play.

Act I

The **first scene** of Act I begins with a wintery night. Pinter provides a detailed description of the room where the action takes place. It is a big room with two beds, a fireplace, a good number of boxes, cupboard, buckets, vases and sacks. Besides, it contains all sorts of miscellaneous things like kitchen sink, stepladder, coal bucket, lawn-mower, shopping trolley, drawers, gas stove, suitcases, a blow-lamp, a rolled carpet, a wooden chair, ornaments, planks of wood, electric toaster, newspapers piled and scattered all around the room. The first impression that comes out is that the room is not well maintained.

The play begins with Mick sitting alone in his room, looking at each object in the room in silence, then with an expressionless face looking out. This brooding composure is disturbed by the entry of Aston and Davis into the room. Davis is an old tramp and has been invited into his apartment by Aston who rescued him from a bar fight. Davis starts commenting on the apartment, emphatically criticising that it is untidy and dirty. Aston tries to get a pair of shoes for Davis but Davis does not show any interest in it, rather he rejects all offers. He rejects a pair that does not fit well enough and then another pair with the complaint that the colour of the laces does not match. Davis comes to know that a few Indian families live in the neighbourhood, and shows some interest to know about them. In course of their conversation, Davis reveals to Aston that "Bernard Jenkins", the name under which he is known to everybody, is not his real name, but an "assumed name" taken long ago. His real name is "Mac Davis". The papers that validate his identity and whereabouts are in Sidcup, and he claims that he must return there to retrieve them. He declares that he is ready to go there as soon as he gets a good pair of shoes. Now there is a bit of disagreement between Aston and Davis as they discuss where Davis will be allowed to sleep. At last, Davis takes Aston's bed while Aston sits repairing an electrical

plug. Lights fade out into darkness. The first scene ends here.

The **second scene** begins with the lights coming back after a few seconds. It is the next morning. While Aston gets ready for the day, Davis wakes up. Aston tells Davis that he could not sleep all night because Davis was muttering while asleep. Davis denies this accusation and asserts, expressing his fear for foreigners, that the 'Blacks' were making noise. Aston, while going out, tells Davis that he can stay there if he likes. As soon as Aston leaves his room, Davis begins rummaging through Aston's articles. However, Mick, who arrives unexpectedly, watches Davis' activities and suddenly attacks Davis, interrupts him. Davis screams as they engage in a fight. The first Act ends here.

Act II:

The **first scene** of Act II begins with following what happens in the first act. Mick interrogates Davis about how well he slept the previous night, asks his proper name, and wonders whether Davis is a foreigner. Davis replies that his name is 'Jenkins' and that he was born and bred in the British Isles. However, Mick accuses Davis of being "an old robber […] an old skate", "stinking the place out". To confuse Davis, Mick utters words full of banking jargon, and hyperbolically states that his brother Aston is "a number one decorator". As Mick delivers his final hyperbolic line— "Who do you bank with?" Aston comes back with a bag. The brothers discuss how to fix the leaking roof while Davis asserts his presence by putting some practical questions like: "What do you do . . . when that bucket's full?" to which Aston simply replies, "Empty it". Then in one of the most comic moments of the play, the three fight over the bag that Aston has brought for Davis. After Mick leaves, Aston offers Davis the job of Caretaker. The first scene of act II ends here.

With the **second scene**, "The lights fade to black out. Then up to dim light through the window."

Davis enters, closes the door, and tries to switch the light on, off, on, off. To Davis, it appears that the light has gone; but, it becomes clear that Mick has removed the bulb in the dark. After a few minutes, Mick also offers Davis the job of a caretaker. Gradually, they turn to the absurd

discussion of a "financial agreement" relating to Davis' caretaking or looking after the place for Mick. Then they return to the question of references, and hence the trip to Sidcup to get Davis' papers.

Next morning, Davis starts complaining Aston about various aspects of the apartment. He claims that he did not have a good sleep. Aston asks him to make adjustments, but Davis remains inflexible. Aston narrates the story of how he was given electric shock therapy in a mental hospital, and while trying to escape from the hospital, how he was utterly shocked being left with permanent brain damage. Aston exclaims, "I've often thought of going back and trying to find the man who did that to me. However, I want to do something first. I want to build that shed out in the garden". Here comes the longest monologue in the play by Aston.

Act III:

The **first scene** of Act III is about an afternoon two weeks later. Davis and Mick are found discussing redecorating the apartment. When Mick tells that Aston will live there, Davis starts complaining about every aspect of Aston's behaviour, and that Aston is not social. Thus, Davis begins to treat himself as an accomplice in Mick's attempt at fixing up the apartment without Aston's involvement. Then Aston enters and gives Davis another pair of shoes; Davis accepts it, speaks of going down to Sidcup, and gets the papers. That night, in the **second scene**, Davis elaborates his plan while talking to Aston. He insults Aston by referring to the details of his treatment in the mental institution. This leads Aston to respond: "I . . . I think it's about time you found somewhere else. I don't think we're hitting it off". Aston is shocked and frightened when Davis points a knife at him. At last, Aston orders Davis to leave. Davis in an outraged mood utters that Mick will take his side and throw Aston out instead. Then he leaves aggressively concluding: "Now I know who I can trust".

Later, in the **third scene**, Davis comes back with Mick explaining the fight and complaining about Aston. However, for his disgrace, Mick takes Aston's side and starts counter questioning. Mick forces Davis to disclose that his real name is 'Davis' and 'Jenkins' is his assumed name. After hearing a few abusive words about Aston, Mick appears to take offense

and dismisses Davis from his caretaking job. As Aston comes back, “They look at each other. Both are smiling, faintly”. Davis again comes back, using the excuse of taking his pipe, which was given to him by Aston, and begs Aston to let him stay there. However, Aston does not pay heed to it. The play ends here, in long silence, with Aston turning *his back to Davis,* gazing at his garden and makings no response to Davis’ plea.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q 1: Briefly narrate the story of the play *The Caretaker*?

Q 2: Write a note on the plot structure of the play. Does it affect the overall impression and the central themes of the play?

15.4 CRITICAL COMMENTARY ON THE PLAY

One would certainly wonder about the possible meaning of the play *The Caretaker.* However, the first thing that a reader comprehends is the absence of a coherent plot in the play. As a mark of innovation, Pinter’s *The Caretaker* does not possess a coherent plot. The meaning of the play is often confused in the jumbled structure of the plot. *The Caretaker* opens with Mick, whom we later learn to be Aston’s brother. He is sitting on the bed, but as soon as he hears voices outside, he gets up and leaves. The readers are given no information for the cause of this strange behaviour. We, the readers or audience, are never intimidated with the cause of Aston’s welcoming of Davis into his house, and later, his offering of the job of caretaker. Any attempt to read such incidents from an absurdist point of view, by associating Pinter with dramatists like Samuel Beckett and Eugene Ionesco, may reduce them to mere illogical happenings. However, in Pinter’s play, we are challenged to interpret the events the same way we are to deal with language. We have to think beyond what the actions on the stage show. Unlike most absurdist dramas, the action in this play is open to several interpretations. The particular scene described here may open up many probable meanings in the play. Mick’s leaving the room after hearing Aston’s

voice may refer to the state of their relationship. Despite being brothers, Aston and Mick do not seem indulging in fruitful communications. The audience may connect this observation to Aston's invitation of Davis to be caretaker. The challenge of making sense of the jumbled plot structure that the play poses for the audience registers a lively engagement of both the text and its interpreters.



LET US KNOW

Innovative use of language has been one of the major distinguishing features of Pinter. It is the utter breakdown in communication that his plays try to exhibit, in opposition to the conventional drama where language is treated as an effective means of communication. Pinter's characters often speak in broken sentences, with repetitions and pause without any apparent reason, utter nonsense, and listen to what is not said to them. One can argue that this treatment of language is a departure from the artificiality of conventional dramatic language towards realism. However, realism is not enough as an explanation of his language. The play, at certain points, comprises highly stylised language. Though the play exposes the artificiality of speech and plot in conventional drama, and the lapses in human communication, we cannot confine ourselves to the point that Pinter does so in the sole interest of realism.

The Caretaker is not made of words alone as spectacle and sounds, stillness and movement, noise and silence integrate into the construction of meaning. Such a theatrical construction is particularly applicable in absurdist theatre. These theatrical vehicles of sight, sound, tranquillity, movement, noise and silence, portray the idea of a random and remote world. Life, into which we are thrown all alone and from which we will depart all alone, is a juxtaposition of unrelated events; the use of these symbolic tools tries to infuse this sensibility throughout the play. The setting in the play is very much symbolic of such ideas, which fabricate the play. A couple

of suitcases, a blow-lamp near a wooden chair, boxes, a rolled carpet, a number of ornaments, a clothes horse, planks of wood, kitchen sink, a step-ladder, a coal bucket, a lawnmower, a shopping trolley, boxes side board drawers, small electrical fire, an old electric toaster – all these junk that have been gathered over the years, without have any apparent necessity and connection, do not promise any meaning to the characters' lives. They are like diverse experiences and meanings of life; at one time, each of them seems important, but in course of time they become insignificant. This symbolism of the junk extends to the lives of the characters; they also become insignificant and unconnected to one another's lives. The coexistence of the human beings with these grotesque, lifeless junks relegates their lives to the verge of isolation, meaninglessness and absurdity.

The use of props is essential in adding meaning to the play. The scene of Mick's breaking of the Buddha statue is important in this context. Mick walks to the gas stove, picks up the Buddha and hits it against the gas stove that breaks the statue into pieces. The breaking of Buddha, a symbol of calm and tranquillity, symbolises the destruction of order and integrity. It is a symbol of man's continuous struggle with the universe: the conflict between the wish to order and the universal force towards **entropy** and chaos. However, in the play, this breaking of the Buddha brings chaos. The household, which is reasonably calm and ordered, descends into disharmony as the Buddha is broken and Davis is asked to leave. This episode also makes a telling comment on human emotions. Human emotions often function against human will; Mick's anger disrupts the seemingly ordered world. Again, the broken toaster, another fundamental component of the play, is also symbolic in this context. At the play's beginning, Aston busies himself fixing the broken toaster; within the course of the play also he goes back to fix it; and at the very end he is still fixing the toaster plug. However, the toaster remains unrepaired throughout the play, as if all efforts end in no change. At a metaphoric level, we see that nothing was accomplished in the characters' lives. Each character remains the same as they were in the beginning; neither do they change anything nor do they achieve anything. The sound of the dripping bucket is also a continuous presence in the play.

We can read this dripping sound as a metaphor for the failing down of human sensibility. The sound produced by the leak and the bucket also symbolises the ever-present menace in the world.

Extensive use of silence and pauses in the play serve as an important tool in conveying what language often remains unsuccessful to communicate. Pauses are used tactfully enough to mean and communicate where language remains insufficient. They complement language, and at the same time create meaning contradictory to what is expressed in language by the characters. Thus, silences and pauses open up the possibility of multidimensional interpretations and readings. In this play, silence can be seen as passive aggression. Davis often takes recourse to silence, by not answering and thus resisting Mick, as an act of aggression. These silences and pause develop, at the meta textual level, the feeling of unease and tension pervading the three characters. The world of the three characters is filled with the tensions of miscommunication. The pauses develop the picture that despite intense thought occupying the mind of the characters, nothing is being expressed loud. This lapse of communication resulting in the glooming sense of isolation adds to the absurdity of the play.

Another very important factor is the **underlying sense of humour**. The humour used in the play is often **black**, as the tragic side of the comic pervades the human condition, especially in case of Davis, in the play. Davis is out and out a comic character. He is continually rejected, insulted and abused. Whatever dignity he manages to maintain is by going down to the ludicrous level. To make himself feel any sense of self-esteem he must see and construct himself always as superior to others; it results in the exposition of his racism and vilification of everyone coming into his contact. Now, the sharp contrast between his self-proclaimed elevated construction of himself and his failure in social life comes out as an intrinsically comic strain. This humour is permeated through the play in terms of discontinuities of register, as seen in his account of his visit to the monastery to get a pair of shoes where the monk tells him to “piss off”. The humour is generated by this discontinuity of register for it is an unexpected behaviour from a monk to use such colloquial language of abuse. The discontinuities of register

also contribute to the comic scenes between Davis and Mick. However, the discontinuities of register are not only confined to the comic; they are also used as a tool for exercising power. Mick easily asserts his dominance over the old tramp by simply switching to a register where Davis cannot function: "Of course, we'd have to come to man small financial agreement, mutually beneficial." Mick moves quickly from one register to another, Davis gets confused in deciding how to respond; and thus power is exercised as Davis reduces to the ludicrous.

Thus, one can assume that *The Caretaker* exhibits an acute relationship between language, meaning and psychology and it is very important to grasp this relationship in order to understand how meaning is imbibed in the play. It is not only in this text, but in all Pinter's drama, that meaning is not necessarily revealed in the words a character uses. Moving beyond the spoken words, his plays invite questions like: "Why does this character say this?" or "What conditions such an expression?" or "What underlying interests govern this or dialogue?" The conventional relationship between language and meaning is severed. For example, we can take a scene from the second act where Davis and Aston engage in a particularly fractured exchange after the latter suggests to Davis that he might be caretaker. To look at the language in conventional terms will reduce it to mere confusing inarticulacy. But when the question of possible motivation is looked at, by going beyond the semantics of language in orthodox linguistic terms, the exchange becomes open to various interpretations: such as Davis is not interested to commit himself to the job of caretaker; he is playing for time; he cannot understand why Aston should want to do him something good; he is worried that he may fall into the trap if he accepts the proposal. Thus, in this play, the language of the characters does not necessarily relate to what they might mean.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q 3: Do you think that communication is possible in the play with the kind of language used by the characters?

Q 4: What thematic resemblance do you find between *The Caretaker* and the theatre of the absurd?

Q 5: What do you mean by the term 'Black Humour'?

15.5 MAJOR THEMES

The following are some of the most obvious themes of the play *The Caretaker.*

The Theme of the Absurd:

Harold Pinter is one of the early practitioners of the Theater of the Absurd, which started in the nineteen fifties. As one of the many different aspects of his works, for Pinter, the absurd functions as a means of getting into the reality. Many critics treat him as a predominant figure of the Theatre of the Absurd; his works have been analysed and interpreted in the light of the theories and doctrines of the Theatre of the Absurd. However, there are contradictions to the view that he is an absurdist, and many critics strive hard to nail home the idea that he differs in many respects from the practitioners of the Absurd drama. Being a voracious reader Pinter has artistically employed tactics derived from Kafka, Hemingway, Beckett, Genet and Ionesco in his dramaturgy. Almost all of the writers who had influenced Pinter were either founders or forerunners of the Theatre of the Absurd. As such, Martin Esslin, in his *The Theatre of the Absurd*, considers Pinter as "one of the most promising exponents of the Theatre of the Absurd... in the English speaking world".

Though Pinter's *The Caretaker* is popularly called an absurd play, as it destabilises the fundamental elements of dramatic structure such as plot, character and the conventions governing the use of language, it does not act as radically as Samuel Beckett's play *Waiting for Godot.* In most of his plays, Beckett virtually discards the conventional dramatic forms and theatrical devices. On the other hand, Pinter, in his plays, and especially in *The Caretaker*, does not completely reject them. There is something in the play that can be taken as a plot, though it appears to be very puzzling. In addition, unlike Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*, there are characters too, who

have some connection with real world even though their actions and motivations may be too strange to understand.

The absurd in the play is constructed chiefly with the failure of language. Language fails to unite the three characters; the breach in human communication and intentional deviation from it leads the individuals to solitude, and then to the sense of a fearful void. This feeling ushers in bigger questions on the existence of man and his position in the world. Questions are raised on the essential conditions of human existence. What is man? Wherefrom has he come, where does he belong? What does man's existence mean? Does he know the nature of his being in a world where the relationship between being and nothingness is contingent and arbitrary? Attempts to get answers for these questions must take reference to the philosophical explorations of Existentialism. Ideas of **Existentialism** are echoed in the lives of the three characters in the play *The Caretaker* as they symbolically represent man's continual struggle to define his sense of being, find meaning of this being and to determine his position in the universe.

Loneliness and Alienation:

One of the most significant themes that permeate the play is the theme of loneliness and alienation. Though the play does not allow its readers to be certain about any definite meaning, what seems reasonably certain is that there is a common interest in all the three characters to cooperate with each other. The isolated lives of the three characters tend to become unproductive and futile; and despite their attempts, they fail to develop that cooperation. However, a few questions may arise: Could things have worked out otherwise if all the characters changed themselves in relation to situation? Such a change is particularly difficult for Aston and Mick, as both seem to be governed by forces beyond their control: Aston by his mental illness and Mick by his aggression. Davis, however, seems to have the freedom to change with the opportunity of being a caretaker and improves his situation. However, his freedom is only theoretical; he cannot transcend the influences and circumstances that shape him. Experience has conditioned his narrow self-interestedness. He tries to categorise himself in such a way as to ensure

his own sense of superiority over the Brothers, especially Aston. Davis has been as irretrievably shaped by the circumstance of his life just as much as Aston and Mick are shaped by mental or personality factors. They are not free from the constructedness of their beings. Davis' apparent freedom to change his life and become a different person becomes meaningless as the effects of his past and surrounding situations are virtually inescapable. This is a universal human predicament to be doomed by the past and the surrounding situations, which hinders any possibility of change and development. As such, at the denial of movement, the characters return to the original state of insularity. Loneliness pervades the stage as the characters get alienated from one another.

Presence of Davis, the Caretaker:

The appointment of Davis as the caretaker of the house is one of the most significant events of the play. It raises an important question on the two brother's situations behind their selection of a tramp like Davis as the caretaker. Why at all should the brothers think him suitable for the job? We do not find any direct answer to this in the play. A possible interpretation can be made on the fact that there is a breach in communication between Mick and Aston. Aston is mentally challenged, and it seems that his condition is worsened by the electric shocks that he receives as part of his treatment. On the other hand, Mick appears to be a rough minded, high tempered person who is inclined to function only in an aggressively dominating mode. In addition, this attitude cannot make any healthy communication with the mentally challenged Aston. Now, both these brothers are connected by the house they live in. Now, in order to keep order and cooperation between the lives and activities of the two, they need a mediator. At the absence of the mediator, they cannot exchange a meaningful word and, as such, nothing gets done. This interpretation answers our query as to why both brothers offer Davis the job. However, the question of power remains still intact, even after the intrusion of the third party. Mick, at the beginning, seems to be extremely offensive against the intrusion of an outsider; but surprisingly he too accepts the new man as the caretaker. Despite his early aggression, Mick accepts Davis because he soon realises that it won't be tough to

dominate the old man and that his controlling hand in the house will not be affected by him.

Davis, once getting an establishment in the house, starts making his own space and power position. He is not satisfied with the role of the mediator. He plans to play one brother against the other and thus strengthen his hold over the brothers. As he realises that Mick is more powerful and dominant than the other, and that he is not in comfortable terms with his brother Aston, Davis aligns himself with Mick. He starts believing that together they can throw out Aston. Davis' relationship with Aston rapidly deteriorates after Mick offers him the same job. Davis starts dwelling in the delusion that Mick too wants to get rid of Aston. So, despite the efforts made by Aston to establish some kind of empathy with Davis, the latter tries to create conflict with Aston. Aston's gestures of kindness, like giving shoes to Davis, go in vain, as Davis even dares to threaten Aston that he will have to leave the house. However, Mick's discovery of the bad blood between Aston and Davis draws a curtain to Davis' dreams. Mick throws Davis out because he can no longer act as a middleman. As Davis gets expelled from his refuge, the brothers return to their former condition of isolation.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q 6: What are the important themes in the play?

Q 7: How did Beckett influence Pinter?

Q 8: How does Pinter illustrate the condition of human isolation in his play *The Caretaker*?

15.6 MAJOR CHARACTERS

You have already come to know that there are only three characters—Aston, Davies and Mick in the play. The following is an attempt to briefly explain the role played by each of the characters.

Aston

Aston is the elder brother of Mick. He is shown as having some psychological disorder. When he was young, he had to take electric shock therapy, which left him permanently retarded with a damaged brain. He is a

failure in all sorts of human communications, which results in his being misunderstood by his closest ones like his brother. He desperately tries to establish connections with others; however, he ends up dealing with the wrong place and the wrong people resulting in utter helplessness. His efforts to help Davies can be taken as an attempt to reach out to others. Because of his good nature, others easily exploit him. His failure in understanding his acquaintances and inability to communicate at a mutually understandable level renders him isolated. He has a long cherished dream of building a shed. This dream can be seen as a hope to fulfil what he lacks: a feeling of belongingness to and completeness within the established order.

Davies:

Davies is the old tramp who goes to Aston's house for shelter. He is an opportunist, a chameleon, who can change his colour with time and opportunity. However, he is an ambitious fool too, who gets blinded by the sparse flash of elusive power. To Aston and Mick, he narrates the story of his life, often lying or sidestepping some details in order to keep the brothers in dark about himself. His story about his life is conditioned by his approximation of the wishes and likes of the people he is trying to impress and influence. He constructs himself in accordance with the momentary imperatives and the suggestions of people important for his purpose. However, lack of credibility in front of Aston and Mick, over-estimation of his position and misuse of his newly acquired power leads him to go back to where he initially had been. He comes out as a tragicomic figure in the play.

Mick:

Mick is the younger of the two brothers and the co-owner of the house where both live. He is an ambitious fellow who, at times, becomes violent, moody and bad-tempered. Mick is never seen in good humour with his elder brother Aston. Both brothers appear to have distanced from one another from the beginning of the play; they hardly talk. However, by the end of the play they indulge in small conversations and even exchange a faint smile. He does not approve of Aston's act to bring old Davies to their house, takes Davies to be an intruder into their lives, especially to the

personal space of his mentally retarded brother. Right from his early encounter he attacks Davies, severely questions him about his whereabouts, talks in a way beyond Davies' comprehension. His dissatisfaction with old Davies even worsens his relationship with his brother. However, very ambitiously, he sees in Davies a shoulder to shift his responsibility to the mentally disturbed brother. However, the discordance between his lofty dreams and the destitution of Davies results in a series of oppositions in human existence.



15.7 LET US SUM UP

It is expected that after going through the unit, you have acquired some basic ideas about Harold Pinter's play *The Caretaker.* You have learnt that Pinter portrays human condition in its wider modern sense, with all its arbitrariness. If anyone tries to look for some common characteristics to categorise him as an absurdist-existentialist writer, there is enough scope to trace these characteristics in the play about which you have just read. The themes and ideas discussed in this unit surely have provided you with some insights into the play. Treat this knowledge as a door to a better understanding of Pinter and his plays and continue your readings. You have also found that the 'Theatre of the Absurd' concentrates on the absurdity of human actions and lives, as faced by the individual willingly or unwillingly, leading to a never-ending state of despair from which there is no escape. In the plays of Pinter, the glooming experience of fear poses threat to the natural harmony of life. Pinter depends more on the form of comedy than that of tragedy; but this choice of form does not influence the hidden menace against the characters who want to escape from the forces of evil. Through such portrayals, he tries to refer to the tentacles of evil forces that drag the individual into the mire of corruption and nefarious acti-vities. As such, Pinter's plays have been rightly called the comedies of menace.



15.8 FURTHER READING

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15.9 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS (HINTS ONLY)

Ans to Q 1: The play has a very simple storyline… …It comprises three characters: Aston, Mick, and Davis… …one evening Aston, a man in early thirties, brings the old tramp Davis to a house owned by his brother, Mick, in his late twenties, and allows the old man to stay in his room…. … with the progress of time, both brothers ask Davis to be the caretaker at the house… … but situations compel them to throw the old man out.

Ans to Q 2: There is no coherent plot… …simple story told in a complex manner… … jumbled structure dislocates meaning… …demands the audiences' continuous engagement… …meaning is beyond what is shown… …the sense of fragmentation and disintegration gets diffused among the characters… …shattered and problematic individual relations… …isolated selves… …absurdity of life… …Pinter's philosophy of life.

Ans to Q 3: In opposition to the conventional drama where language is treated as an effective means of communication, here in this play it is

the breakdown of communication… … Pinter's characters often speak in broken sentences, with repetitions and pause without any apparent reason… …characters often talk nonsense… …departure from the artificiality of conventional dramatic language towards realism.

Ans to Q 4: Influence of the theatre of the absurd on Pinter… …the play lacks a coherent plot… …symbolic use of stage setting… …theme of isolation… …failure of language… … miscommunication among the characters… …futility and limitations of human existence… … puts up questions on the essentials of human existence and so on

Ans to Q 5: **'**Black Humour' juxtaposes the morbid or ghastly elements with comical ones to underscore the senselessness or futility of life… …It uses farce and low comedy to make clear that individuals are helpless victims of fate and character…. … André Breton the French Surrealist in 1940, first used the term in *Anthologie de l'humour noir* ("Anthology of Black Humour")… …Subsequently, it was applied to the works of the novelists Nathanael West, Vladimir Nabokov, and Joseph Heller, Kurt Vonnegut, Thomas Pynchon and so on.

Ans to Q 6: The theme of the Absurd… …Loneliness and Alienation… …Existential dilemma… …Meaninglessness of life, and so on.

Ans to Q 7: Pinter adopted the Beckettian model of expressing the existential suffering of huma-nity available in his *Waiting for Godot*… … Pinter's first successful play *The Birthday Party* shows the struggles of man against the influence of the past and the experiences of individuals in the modern world… …His *The Dumb Waiter* is an exposition of the nature of menace and how the menac-ing persons are in turn menaced by others…. …*The Caretaker* shows the indi-vidual search for compassion and help in a world devoid of human sensibility.

Ans to Q 8: The characters have difference in interests and difference in conditions: Aston's mental illness, Mick's overt ambition, Davies' dire necessities… …lack of mutual understanding… …failure of language… …rupture in communication… …absence of human sensibility… …everyone's freedom is doomed by individual history… …emotional, intellectual, existential isolation.



15.10POSSIBLE QUESTIONS

Q 1: "The Caretaker is a tragedy on human shortcomings and isolation." Explain with reference to the text of the play.

Q 2: Write a note on the structure and settings of the play *The Caretaker*. Do you think that the settings and structures have anything to do with the central themes of the play?

Q 3: Do you consider Pinter as an exponent of the 'Theatre of the absurd'? Support your view with necessary examples from the plays you have read.

Q 4: Do you count *The Caretaker* as an absurd play? How, according to you, has Pinter used elements of the absurd in the line of Beckett?

Q 5: Do you think that there exists complete communication among the three characters in the play *The Caretaker*? Does the portrayal of characters by Pinter have anything to do with his philosophy of human existence? Explain.

Q 6: How do you rate Davies as a caretaker? Why was he initially selected and later rejected as the caretaker of the house? Analyse from your understanding of the play.

Q 7: In what ways, does the play *The Caretaker* reflect the conditions of a modern human being?

Q 8: Connect all the three Acts of the play and try to explain how do they reflect the broader themes of the play?

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