PGEG S3 02

Modern Drama

SEMESTER III

ENGLISH

BLOCK 2

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Reprint, January, 2022

ISBN : 978-93-87940-38-3

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Printed and published by Registrar on behalf of the Krishna Kanta Handiqui State Open University.

Head Office : Patgaon, Rani Gate, Guwahati-781017; Web : www.kkhsou.in/web_new
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SEMESTER 3
MA IN ENGLISH
COURSE 2: MODRN DRAMA
BLOCK 2: ELIOT AND OSBORNE

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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: This unit 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: This 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: In this unit, we 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: This unit 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: This unit 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.

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 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 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.



7.8 FURTHER READING

Bentley, Eric. (Ed.). (2008). *The Theory of the Modern Stage.* London: Penguin Books.

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Däumer, Elisabeth & Shyamal Bagchee. (Eds.). (2007). *The International Reception of T. S. Eliot*. Continuum Reception Studies.

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Eliot, T. S. (1963). *Murder in the Cathedral.* Intro. Nevil Coghil. Delhi: Oxford University Press.

Gassner, John. (1960). *The Theatre of our Times.* New York: Crown Publishers.

Murphy, Russell Elliott. (2007). *Critical Companion to T. S. Eliot: A Literary Reference to His Life and Work.* New York: Facts on File, Inc.

Nancy K. Gish. (2009). "*The International Reception of T. S. Eliot* (review)*." Modernism/modernity*. 16.4: pp. 827-829

Raine, Craig. (2006). *T. S. Eliot.* New Delhi: Oxford University Press.

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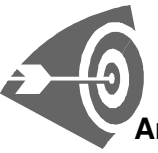
http://www.novelguide.com/MurderintheCathedral/characterprofiles .html

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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

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Websites and Electronic Resources:

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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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