PGEG S4 04 (A)

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Modern European Literature

SEMESTER IV

ENGLISH

BLOCK 3

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SEMESTER 4

MA IN ENGLISH

COURSE 4: (OPTION A) MODERN EUROPEAN LITERATURE

BLOCK 3: EUROPEAN DRAMA

DETAILED SYLLABUS

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BLOCK 3: INTRODUCTION

This Block comprises a total of six units that deal with European Drama, discussed in terms of three brilliant playwrights namely – Bertolt Brecht, Henrik Ibsen and Eugene Ionesco.

Units 11 & 12: These units deal with Bertolt Brecht a famous name in 20th century drama. Bertolt Brecht, a German poet, playwright, theatre director, contributed to dramaturgy and theatrical production during the post-war period. Due to his inclination towards Marxism, Brecht is often considered a 'Marxist' playwright who put 'ideology' into dramatic form. His play *Mother Courage and Her Children* which is discussed in detail in Unit 12 is a brilliant rendering of Bertolt Brecht's idea of Epic Theatre.

Units 13 & 14: These units seeks to acquaint us with the works of the Norwegian playwright Henrik Ibsen. As a pioneer of social plays, Henrik Ibsen introduced and dealt with problems of education, marriage, society and most specifically human relationship. In almost all his significant plays, Ibsen deals with a specific issue or problem as can be seen in some of his important plays. These units shall also help you to discuss one of his most important plays *The Wild Duck* in sufficient detail.

Units 15 & 16: In these units, we shall discuss the life and works of Eugene Ionesco, a Romanian French playwright, with reference to his play *The Chairs.* Ionesco is credited with having inspired a revolution in the post-war theatre with his first play *La Cantatrice Chauve* or *The Bald Soprano* (1948), where he introduced his innovative technique of the 'anti-play', using things or words in order to stress upon the absurdity of human existence. The play *The Chairs* is an absurdist tragic-farce, in which an old couple is seen arranging chairs in order to accommodate an supposed gathering of guests who have come to hear the Old Man's message to the world.

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 11: BERTOLT BRECHT: *MOTHER COURAGE AND HER CHILDREN* (PART I)

UNIT STRUCTURE

11.1 Learning Objectives

11.2 Introduction

11.3 The German Dramatic Tradition

11.4 Bertolt Brecht: The Playwright

11.4.1 His Life

11.4.2 His Dramatic Career

11.5 Sources of the Play *Mother Courage and Her Children*

11.6 Critical Reception of Brecht

11.7 Let us Sum up

11.8 Further Reading

11.9 Answers to Check Your Progress (Hints Only)

11.10 Possible Questions

11.1 LEARNING OBJECTIVES

After going through this unit, you will be able to

- acquaint you with the background of German drama
- discuss the life and works of the great German dramatist Bertolt Brecht
- relate Brecht to the traditions of German drama and outline some of his innovations
- connect Brecht's philosophy with the various aspects presented in the play *Mother Courage and Her Children*

11.2 INTRODUCTION

This is the first unit of Block 3 of the course on Modern European Literature. In this unit, we shall read about Bertolt Brecht who is a familiar name in 20th century drama. Bertolt Brecht (1898–1956) was a German poet, playwright, theatre director. As a theatre practitioner of 20th century, Brecht contributed to dramaturgy and theatrical production, through his tour,

along with his wife Helene Weigel by the Berliner Ensemble–a post-war theatre company. Due to his inclination towards Marxism, Brecht is often considered a 'Marxist' playwright who put 'ideology' into dramatic form. As we finish reading the unit, we shall be able to reflect on the life and works of Bertolt Brecht with particular reference to his play *Mother Courage and Her Children.*

11.3 THE GERMAN DRAMATIC TRADITION

It is important to note that German drama actually evolved out of the fragmentary Easter plays of Muri and the St. Gall Passion Plays, which led to the subsequent popularity of the morality and miracle plays. By the beginning of the 15th century, there began to appear popular drama, mostly farcical comedies, for secular entertainment in the form of carnival plays, which gained tremendous popularity in the subsequent periods. However, by the 16th century, there could be seen a noticeable shift towards tragedy as farcical episodes were integrated into tragedies. Comic interludes were made into regular under-plots subsequently. Besides, drastic changes were taking place in the choice of subjects too. For example, secular topics were given more importance, and ancient myths and Roman, medieval and modern stories were sought to be dramatised. Simultaneously, there developed various types of characters such as parasites, braggarts, soldiers, peasants and witches. The subsequent interest in medicine and psychology also led to the representation of various temperaments like that of the melancholy man. Though all these apply more immediately to Latin dramas, yet the changes in these exercised an influence on German plays also.

One interesting feature of German drama was its indebtedness to Saxon and Norman mimes from which German actors learned a variety of tricks and traditions. Henceforth, Hans Wurst, the familiar boorish clown who was imported to Germany, became an indispensable character in every play designed to gratify the low demands of the vulgar. However, the prevailing grossness and ribaldry, the tastes and sympathies of the educated classes held them aloof from the theatre. This continued until the outbreak of the 'Thirty Years' War' (1628-1648) and the stage was left to the guardianship

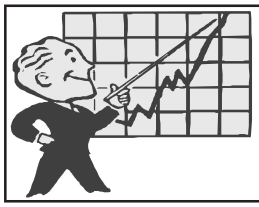
of marionettes. Consequently, the development which had begun in German drama was interrupted at its most promising phase. All the hopes cherished with regard to German drama were wrecked by the war and also by the lack of an appreciative and artistic audience.

The conditions and prospects of German drama became even worse than as the higher classes came to despise their native tongue. As they had formerly considered Latin as the proper language of scholars and the only fit medium of discourse on important subjects, they now considered the use of French as the distinguishing mark of modern elegance and culture. Thus, it is pertinent to say that unlike the traditions of English drama, German drama has a peculiar historical background. In order to discuss the socio-historical context of German drama, you can turn to 15th century humanism, which cast its influence in the field of drama and revitalised the dramatic tradition. In contrast to the courtly Renaissance, there existed a new humanist element in German literature after 1450. German humanism took a different turn after 1480 as a strong patriotic and political strain was evinced in the cultural history of Germany. A lively dramatic tradition was even established as part of the university courses. Roman comedies and Latin plays were used as moral instruction. Such plays were a direct contrast to the medieval dramatic types resulting in the proliferation of German drama in and after the 16th century. Later, this Latin drama was turned to the service of the Reformation.

The 16th century, on the other hand, was more influenced by Martin Luther's 'Reformation' and drama was used more as the vehicle of Lutheran teaching. However, during the early part of the 17th century there could be seen a noticeable change in vernacular drama. In the first half of this century, vernacular drama was relatively uninspired. However, notable amongst the works of this period were those of Jacob Bidermann and Gryphius. While Biederman's Jesuit dramas expressed the themes of mutability, vanity and urgency of salvation, Gryphius's tragedies and comedies sought to explore the problems of stoicism and personal integrity. Thus, the 17th century German dramas collectively sought to express the acuteness of intellectual perception on the one hand and the excesses of feelings on the other.

You will note that German literature in general, began to take its actual shape through the various processes like—Enlightenment, Neo-

classicism, and Romanticism. However, Neoclassicism and Romanticism are often considered to be the greatest epochs of German literature because, during that age, Jonathan Wolfgang von Goethe went beyond the Enlightenment's substitution of science for religion, and insisted on the value of 'feeling' in place of 'reason.' Although we do not find any major literary trend before the 19th century Germany, the trends of the 19th century can be traced in the form of Realism, Regionalism and Naturalism. Similarly, the 20th century Germany saw the rise of Impressionism, Expressionism, Post-expressionism and Social-Realism (You are advised to read about such isms from any good glossary of literary terms). You will also note that Georg Kaiser (1878–1945), Arnolt Bronnen (1895–1959), Bertolt Brecht (1898–1956), Fritz Hochwälder (1911–86), Tankred Dorst (1925–), Günter Grass (1927–), Volker Braun (1939-) are some of the most significant German playwrights of the 19th and 20th century who you should study in later times.



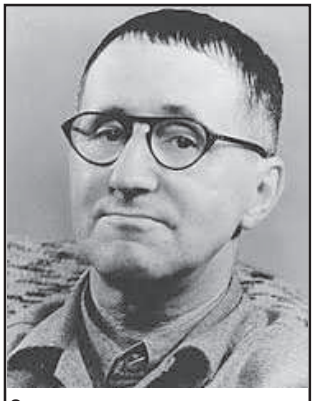
CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q 1: Briefly sketch the major periods in the history of German drama.

11.4 BERTOLT BRECHT: THE PLAYWRIGHT

In the following subsections, we shall read about the life and works of Bertolt Brecht.

11.4.1 His Life



Source: www.google.co.in

Brecht was born in Augsburg, Bavaria, which is about 80 km North-west of Munich, to a devout Protestant mother and a Catholic father. His father worked in a paper mill, and became its manager in 1914. It was however, his mother that he received inspiration for writing. From her, he learnt to portray the "dangerous image of the self-denying woman" that

recurs in his drama. At school in Augsburg, he met Caspar Neher, with whom he formed a lifelong creative partnership. Neher designed many of the sets for Brecht's dramas and helped to forge the distinctive visual iconography of their epic theatre. When he was only 16, the World War I broke out, and Brecht had a direct experience of his classmates joining the army. On his father's recommendation, Brecht registered for a medical course at Munich University. There he studied drama with Arthur Kutscher, who inspired towards the work of the iconoclastic dramatist and cabaret-star Frank Wedekind.

From July 1916, Brecht's newspaper articles began appearing under the new name "Bert Brecht". His first theatre criticism for the *Augsburger Volkswille* appeared in 1919. His first full-length play *Baal* (written 1918), arose in response to an argument in one of Kutscher's drama seminars. Brecht completed his second major play, *Drums in the Night*, in February 1919. In 1922, Brecht came to the attention of an influential Berlin critic, Herbert Ihering In November, it was announced that Brecht had been awarded the prestigious Kleist Prize, which is probably Germany's most significant literary award until 1932, for his first three plays (*Baal*, *Drums in the Night*, and *In the Jungle*, although at that point only *Drums* had been produced).

In 1924, Brecht worked with the novelist and playwright Lion Feuchtwanger, whom he had met in 1919, on an adaptation of Christopher Marlowe's *Edward II* that proved to be a milestone in Brecht's early theatrical and dramaturgical development. Brecht's *Edward II* constituted his first attempt at collaborative writing and was the first of many classic texts he was to adapt. He later credited it as the germ of his conception of "epic theatre".

In 1925 in Mannheim, the artistic exhibition *Neue Sachlichkeit* ("New Objectivity") had given its name to the new post-Expressionist movement in the German arts. Brecht began to develop his *Man Equals Man* project, which was to become the

first product of "the 'Brecht collective'—that shifting group of friends and collaborators on whom he henceforward depended." This collaborative approach mark Brecht's work from this period as part of the *Neue Sachlichkeit* movement. In the same year, he saw two films that had a significant influence on him: Chaplin's *The Gold Rush* and Eisenstein's *Battleship Potemkin*. In 1926, a series of short stories was published under Brecht's name, though Hauptmann was closely associated with writing them.

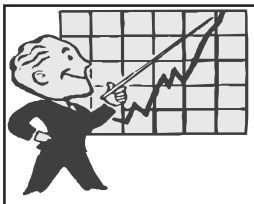
In 1927, Brecht became part of the "dramaturgical collective" of Erwin Piscator's first company. The Piscator productions influenced Brecht's ideas about staging and design, and alerted him to the radical potentials offered to the "epic" playwright by the development of stage technology (particularly projections). The year 1927 also saw the first collaboration between Brecht and the young composer Kurt Weill. Together they began to develop Brecht's *Mahagonny* project. Subsequently, they produced *The Little Mahagonny* for a music festival in July. From that point on Caspar Neher became an integral part of the collaborative effort, with words, music and visuals conceived in relation to one another from the start. The model for their mutual articulation laid in Brecht's newly formulated principle of the "separation of the elements", which he first outlined in "The Modern Theatre Is the Epic Theatre" (1930). The principle, a variety of montage, proposed by passing the "great struggle for supremacy between words, music and production" as Brecht put it, by showing each as self-contained, independent works of art that adopt attitudes towards one another.

In 1930, Brecht married Helene Weigel. By February 1933, Brecht's work was eclipsed by the rise of Nazi rule in Germany. Fearing persecution, Brecht left Germany in February 1933, when Hitler took power. After brief spells in Prague, Zurich and Paris, he and Weigel accepted an invitation from journalist and author Karin Michaëlis to move to Denmark, where they settled in a house in Svendborg on the island of Funen. This became the residence of

the Brecht family for the next six years, and there they started receiving important guests like—Walter Benjamin, Hanns Eisler, and Ruth Berlau. During this period, Brecht also travelled frequently to Copenhagen, Paris, Moscow, New York and London for various projects and collaborations.

When World War II seemed imminent in April 1939, he moved to Stockholm, Sweden, where he remained for a year. Then Hitler invaded Norway and Denmark, and Brecht was forced to leave Sweden for Helsinki in Finland. During the war years, Brecht became a prominent writer of the Exilliteratur. He expressed his opposition to the National Socialist and Fascist movements in his most famous plays: *Life of Galileo*, *Mother Courage and Her Children*, *The Good Person of Szechwan*, *The Resistible Rise of Arturo Ui*, *The Caucasian Chalk Circle*, *Fear and Misery of the Third Reich*, and many others.

Brecht died on 14th August 1956 of a heart attack at the age of 58. He is buried in the Dorotheenstädtischer cemetery of Berlin.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q 2: What does Brecht's newly formulated principle of the "separation of the elements" suggest?

11.4.2 His Dramatic Career

In the previous section, we have already read about some of the dramatic works of Brecht. As we already know, *Baal* (1918) and *Drums in the Night* (1919) are Brecht's first successful plays. In 1921, his new play *In the Jungle of the Cities* was accepted for production. His winning of the prestigious Kleist Prize at the same time, established him as the best young dramatist in Germany of his time.

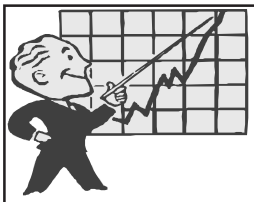
Brecht's foray into his 'epic theatre' was through the adaption of Christopher Marlowe's *Edward II* in 1924. Now, Brecht moved to

Berlin where he met the great actress, Helene Weigel, and also Max Reinhardt, the eminent producer. There he wrote an article, "How to apply the principles of good sports promotion to the theatre". His play *Man is Man* was produced in 1926. Erwin Piscator, who was famous in Berlin theatre and had much experience of the left-wing 'agitprop' (agitation + propaganda) productions, was Brecht's collaborator in *The Good Soldier Schweik* (1927) which is based on the anti-military novel by Jaroslav Hašek.

Brecht's *Threepenny Opera* was an instant success when it was premiered in 1928. The stage design was by Caspar Neher while Kurt Weill set the music. The play shows both Brecht's increasingly Marxist convictions as well as his distinctive style of 'epic' theatre, which included slogans on placards, sub-titles, projections, half-curtains, visible lighting, and songs. It was a satirical attack on bourgeois society. In his later play, *Rise and Fall of the City of Mahagonny*, he exposed capitalist society's lust for money. Against his experiences of the rising Nazism, Brecht devised his "learning plays" (or *Lehrstücke*). Yet another Marxist play, *Saint Joan of the Stockyards*, came out in 1931, followed by Gorky's *The Mother* in 1932. Among the political plays were *Badener LehrstØck* (1929) and *The Measure* (1930) meant for amateur proletarian groups and schoolchildren.

Brecht had to flee from Germany during Hitler's rise. Travelling in Europe and then in America, Brecht produced the ballet *The Seven Deadly Sins of the Petite Bourgeoisie* (1933) in Paris together with Kurt Weill. At home, the Nazis burnt Brecht's books and stripped him of German citizenship in 1935. *Seòora Carrar's Rifles* (1937) came of his support in the Spanish Civil War while his experiences with the stage got recorded as *The Messingkauf Dialogues*. His most remarkable plays of the later periods are: *The Life of Galileo* (1938), *Mother Courage and her Children* (1939), *The Good Woman of Setzuan* (1940) and *Mr. Puntila and His Man Matti* (1941), *The Caucasian Chalk Circle* (1944) and so on.

As Daniel Burt has stated, as both a playwright and dramatic theorist, Bertolt Brecht's influence on the modern stage is immense. An Aristotelian describes the accepted dramatic conventions in operation for the last 2,500 years; while a Brechtian indicates a challenge—a radical re-conception of theater's essential principles. Rejecting the mimetic tradition that had dominated Western art, Brecht famously declared, "Art is not a mirror held up to reality, but a hammer with which to shape it." Brecht widened the focus of drama from the concerns of an individual to the historical, social, and economic context surrounding identity, motive, and action. Embracing the role of artist as provocateur and reformer, Brecht mounted a sustained critique of the historical moment and modern life while the universal principles he uncovered have sustained his work with a persistent relevance. The famous drama critic Martin Esslin argues that "Brecht's importance...transcends his significance as a dramatist, poet, or amusing personality. He is above all an epitome of his times: most of the cross-currents and contradictions, moral and political dilemmas, artistic and literary trends of our times are focused and exemplified in Brecht's life and its vicissitudes." An oversised figure of great contradictions and contentiousness, Brecht remains a force to be reckoned with whose writing challenges the very foundations of our understanding of the way of the world and the purposes of art.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q 3: How did Erwin Piscator influence Brecht?

Q 4: Name some of the important plays of Brecht.

Q 5: Discuss briefly Brecht's foray into 'epic' theatre.

Q 6: What is Brecht's specific contribution to modern drama?

11.5 SOURCES OF THE PLAY *MOTHER COURAGE AND HER CHILDREN*

Survival, its costs and consequences, has been one of the most significant theme of Bertolt Brecht's play *Mutter Courage und Ihre Kinder* (*Mother Courage and Her Children*, 1941) which is also one of the most powerful antiwar dramas of the world. Set in 17th century Thirty Years' War, the play follows the experiences of a canteen woman called Anna Fierling, nicknamed Mother Courage, who tries to make her living selling her wares from her cart to the soldiers. As a character, Mother Courage is a woman of enormous strength. She is cunning but the war gradually takes the lives of her three children. However, her trade that depends on the war and her cupidity make her a collaborator in the destruction of her own family. The play makes explicit the conjunction between war and capitalism with greed and exploitation making Mother Courage a "hyena of the battlefield." The play *Mother Courage* justifies the techniques of the epic drama by creating a stage experience that is simultaneously a moving human story, a brilliant meditation on the nature of war and commerce, and a terrifying modern fable. However, it is important for us to know the background of the play.

Between 1618 and 1648, the 30 Years' War migrated across Central Europe from the original place of rebellion in Bohemia to its conclusion in Westphalia. It had left a lasting impression on Bertolt Brecht since he decided to set his play *Mother Courage and Her Children* during this conflict, nearly 400 years after the event when the whole was going to experience the havocs of World War II. However, Brecht claimed to have written the play before World War II began. According to Eric Bentley, the name of the protagonist was taken from a 16th century work *The Life of the Arch-Imposter and Adventuress Courage* by Hans Jacob Christoffel von Grimmelshausen. Another source of inspiration may also have been Grimmelshausen's picaresque novel, *Simplicissimus* (1669). As the work of a man who had himself served in the Thirty Years' War, this novel remains a grim testimony to the horrific experiences of the times.

Perhaps, the most devastating period in Germany before the World Wars is the "Thirty Years' War" (1618-48) whose impact on the life and culture of German is worth mentioning. It was one of the most destructive conflicts in the history of Europe. The war was fought primarily in Germany and at various points involved most of the countries of Europe. Initially the war was fought largely as a religious conflict between Protestants and Catholics in the Holy Roman Empire. Gradually, it developed into a more general conflict involving most of the European powers. A major impact of the War, fought mostly by mercenary armies, was the extensive destruction of entire regions, denuded by the foraging armies. The subsequent famine and disease significantly decreased the populace of the German states and the Low Countries. Some of the quarrels that provoked the war went unresolved for a much longer time. The War was ended with the Treaty of Münster, a part of the wider Peace of Westphalia. As has been mentioned above, Bertolt Brecht makes use of this War as the background of one of his most popular plays *Mother Courage*.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q 7: What are some of the sources of the play *Mother Courage*?

11.6 CRITICAL RECEPTION OF BRECHT

Early studies of Brecht and his works, as you can find in Berthold Viertel's essay entitled "Bertolt Brecht, Dramatist" (1945), are based on the assessments of Brecht's use of the old and the new, and the significance of the new idiom that he was creating in those years. Brecht's idea of the Epic Theatre was another important topic of discussion for many critics. Henry Goodman, writing in 1952, commented on Brecht's relation to traditional modes of dramatic presentation and found that in the deepest sense he was "traditional" since he worked on the premise that a play had to be written well. This position has found favour with many critics who find deep connections between Brechtian theatre and older classical forms of

dramatic art. Moreover, the definition and description of 'Epic Theatre' continued to be the focus of commentary on Brecht's works. Another aspect, connected with Brecht's challenge to conventional drama, was the departure from and the redefinition of realism. You should note that the influence of Ibsen and realistic theatre prevailed till well into the 20th century.

In 1953, Martin Esslin published *Brecht*: *The Man and His Work* in which we find the reference to an issue central to all discussions of Brecht– his allegiance to Marxism and his differences from the official Communist party line of thought. Another aspect of Brechtian theatre is the didacticism of Brecht's plays. He was aware of the purpose that gave to his work their wider significance: the purpose of arousing the critical attitudes of his audiences. From this standpoint, the origins of Brecht's "Alienation-Effects" have come in for discussion among critics.

Discussions of *Mother Courage and Her Three Children* have turned very often on Brecht's conception of the protagonist. In an interesting study by Angela Curran in 2001, Brecht's turning away from Aristotelian methods of characterisation which draw upon the spectators' empathy, the figure of Mother Courage is analysed to show that Brecht took seriously the idea of the "gest" – the gesture or action that shows the larger social context of the character(s) depicted. In this sense, the 'gest' works on the idea that the actions of the individual are often the outcome of the wider economic and political context and which can be directed through human conducted. In other words, this larger context is not to be understood as a given (which Aristotelian drama assumes) but as the plane of existence which is susceptible of human motivation. With the influence of feminism, Brecht's portrayal of women characters in his plays is also open to criticism. This means that Brecht seemed to take sexual politics very seriously and attempted to extend his portrayal of women beyond the initial dependence on traditional notions. Interestingly, Brecht often used the figure of the mother in many of his plays.

Eric Bentley in his "Preface" (1962) to *Mother Courage and her Children* sated: "As we look back today upon the career of Bertolt Brecht (1898–1956) two periods of maximum creativity define themselves…Brecht

had written some of his finest poetry, dramatic and otherwise, before he was twenty-five. The second came when he had perforce to withdraw from the hectic political activity of the Depression Years and lead the life of an exile during the later thirties and earlier forties. This is the period of *The Good Woman of Setzuan*, *The Life of Galileo Galilei*, *The Caucasian Chalk Circle*, and of what many regard as his masterpiece, *Mother Courage and her Children.* In this play, and *Galileo*, Brecht withdrew, not only from Nazi Germany, but from the 20th century, and it is not without interest that the century he took in exchange was, in both instances, the 17th. It is the century of greatness, a century that opens with William Shakespeare and closes with Isaac Newton. Brecht finds in that century the roots of his own philosophy of life, scientific humanism."



11.7 LET US SUM UP

In this unit, we have gone through the background of German drama and have also read about Brecht's contributions as a playwright. His plays, what can be called Epic Theatre, provide a reading of Marxist philosophy as a powerful form that gets beautifully reflected in his play *Mother Courage.* This play is set in Europe during the Thirty Years' War. Mother Courage, a canteen woman, pulls her cart with her three children (Eilif, Kattrin, and Swiss Cheese) in the wake of the army, trading with the soldiers and attempting to make profit from the war. The information we have gained about Bertolt Brecht and his oeuvre shall help us to read the following unit.



11.8 FURTHER READING

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Web Resources:

http://www.theatrehistory.com/german/holocaust001.html

http://www.theatrehistory.com/german/bates002.html

http://www.theatrehistory.com/german/bates003.html

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bertolt_Brecht

11.9 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS (HINTS ONLY)

Ans to Q 1: The 15th century saw the development of popular drama, mostly farcical comedies for secular entertainment… …the 16th century, farcical episodes were integrated into tragedies… …in 17th century there developed vernacular drama… …German literature then began to take its actual shape through the various processes like—Enlightenment, Neo-classicism, and Romanticism leading to Realism, Regionalism and Naturalism in the 19th century… …the 20th century Germany saw the rise of Impressionism, Expressionism, Post-expressionism and Social-Realism.

Ans to Q 2: The principle suggests a variety of montage, proposed by passing the “great struggle for supremacy between words, music

and production"… …Brecht wanted to show each as self-contained independent works of art that adopt attitudes towards one another.

Ans to Q 3: In 1927, Brecht became part of the "dramaturgical collective" of Erwin Piscator's first company… …Piscator influenced Brecht's ideas about staging and design, and alerted him to the radical potentials offered to the "epic" playwright by the development of stage technology. .. … he was Brecht's collaborator in *The Good Soldier Schweik* (1927).

Ans to Q 4: *Life of Galileo*, *Mother Courage and Her Children*, *The Good Person of Szechwan*, *The Caucasian Chalk Circle*, *Fear and Misery of the Third Reich and so on*.

Ans to Q 5: Brecht's foray into his 'epic theatre' was through the adaption of Christopher Marlowe's *Edward II* in 1924… …his *Threepenny Opera* (1928), a satirical attack on bourgeois society, shows both Brecht's increasingly Marxist convictions as well as his distinctive style of 'epic' theatre… …this play included slogans on placards, sub-titles, projections, half-curtains, visible lighting, and songs… ...in his later play, *Rise and Fall of the City of Mahagonny*, he exposed capitalist society's lust for money… …against his experiences of the rising Nazism, Brecht devised his "learning plays" (or *Lehrstücke*).

Ans to Q 6: Rejecting the mimetic tradition in Western art, Brecht declared, "Art is not a mirror held up to reality, but a hammer with which to shape it."… …he widened the focus of drama from the individual to the historical, social, and economic contexts surrounding identity, motive, and action… …he embraced the role of artist as provocateur and reformer.

Ans to Q 7: Eric Bentley states that the name of the protagonist Mother Courage was taken from a 16th century work *The Life of the Arch-Imposter and Adventuress Courage… …* Grimmelshausen's picaresque novel, *Simplicissimus* (1669)… …however, the most important sources has been the horrific experience of the Thirty Years' War.



11.10 POSSIBLE QUESTIONS

Q 1: Discuss the contributions of Bertolt Brecht to European literature in general.

Q 2: How far do you find Brecht's setting of the Thirty Years' War relevant to the your discussion of the play Mother Courage?

Q 3: How has Bertolt Brecht been received in the dramatic world? Discuss in detail.

Q 4: Write a note on the sources of the play *Mother Courage and Her Children.*

Q 5: What are some of the important dramatic works of Bertolt Brecht? Discuss how they reflect Brecht's idea of epic theatre.

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UNIT 12: BERTOLT BRECHT: *MOTHER COURAGE* (PART II)

UNIT STRUCTURE

12.1 Learning Objectives

12.2 Introduction

12.3 Reading the Play *Mother Courage and Her Children*

- 12.3.1 Act Wise Summary of the Play
- 12.3.2 Critical Commentary on the Play
- 12.3.3 Major Themes
- 12.3.4 Major Characters

12.4 Let us Sum up

12.5 Further Reading

12.6 Answers to Check Your Progress (Hints Only)

12.7 Possible Questions

12.1 LEARNING OBJECTIVES

After going through this unit, you will be able to:

- identify the major themes and characters of the play
- make act wise summary of the play
- provide a critical comment on the play and its various aspects
- appreciate the play in its nuanced totality

12.2 INTRODUCTION

The unit is to be read as part of the previous unit where we have discussed the life and works of Bertolt Brecht. In this unit, we shall discuss Brecht's play *Mother Courage and her Children* (*Mutter Courage Und Ihrekinder* was first produced in Zurich Schauspielhaus, 19 April 1941) which, we all know by now, is an anti-war socio-political play set during the Thirty Years' War of the 17th century. It shows a mother who tries to gain profit from the war in order to help her family, but loses her children in that attempt. Thus, in this unit, we shall get an opportunity to read about this wonderful play, which is also an excellent example of Brechtian epic theatre.

12.3 READING THE PLAY *MOTHER COURAGE AND HER CHILDREN*

In the following subsections, you will get to read about the play in terms of its various aspects.

12.3.1 Act Wise Summary of the Play

Scene 1

From the narrative at the beginning of the play, it is assumed that the year is 1624, and the place is Dalarna—a peaceful province of Sweden. The Chancellor, who had taken over the command of the troops after the death of King Gustavus Adolphus of Sweden, is preparing for a campaign in Poland. The Recruiting officer is discussing with the Sergeant who is assigned with the job of gathering enough soldiers for four platoons. Gradually, the protagonist Mother Courage is introduced. Mother Courage's weakness for profit is brought to the forefront although she hopes to save her children from the war. She outwits the Recruiting officer and the Sergeant through the game of prediction with blanks and crosses. However, the first loss for Mother Courage is through Eiliff's recruitment and this is going to be a recurrent pattern throughout the play as each of her children are sacrificed one by one by the Mother. Brecht shows us the central conflict in the terms of this clash between the maternal instinct and the profit motive.

Scene 2

The year is 1625. Mother Courage has travelled with "the baggage train of the Swedish army" in course of the Polish campaign of the Swedish army. The "Thunder of cannon" is heard in the background. This is another phase of the war. The Cook of the Swedish commander is quarrelling with Mother Courage who is trying to sell him a capon for sixty hellers. The price gets lowered to thirty hellers and one gilder finally. The commander is happy with Eiliff's cunning defeat of enemy peasants and brings him over to

dine with him. Note that there is a siege on as the Swedish army has laid siege to the enemy town. In this scene, we see Mother Courage doing business with her well-practiced skills of striking the right bargain at the right moment. The Cook buys her capon at the price she decides. The song Eilif sings reunites mother and son although we are also constantly made aware of the possible destruction of the war.



LET US KNOW

The Thirty Years' War:

"From 1618-48, in European history, a series of wars fought by various nations for various reasons, including religious, dynastic, territorial, and commercial rivalries. Its destructive campaigns and battles occurred over most of Europe, and, when it ended with the Treaty of Westphalia in 1648, the map of Europe had been irrevocably changed."

"The principal battlefield for all these intermittent conflicts was the towns and principalities of Germany, which suffered severely. During the Thirty Years' War, many of the contending armies were mercenaries, many of whom could not collect their pay. This threw them on the countryside for their supplies, and thus began the "wolf-strategy" that typified this war. The armies of both sides plundered as they marched, leaving cities, towns, villages, and farms ravaged. When the contending powers finally met in the German province of Westphalia to end the bloodshed, the balance of power in Europe had been radically changed. Spain had lost not only the Netherlands but also its dominant position in Western Europe. France was now the chief Western power. Sweden had control of the Baltic. The United Netherlands was recognised as an independent republic. The member states of the Holy Roman Empire were granted full sovereignty. The ancient notion of a Roman Catholic empire of Europe, headed spiritually by a pope and temporally by an emperor, was

permanently abandoned, and the essential structure of modern Europe as a community of sovereign states was established." [Quoted from *Encyclopædia Britannica*]

Scene 3:

The time is now 1629. You should note that this is an example of a "chronicle", a historical narrative that will make you sensitive to Brecht's innovations in dramaturgy. A variety of things in this scene is shown which emphasises Brecht's breaking the tradition of theatre as 'illusion'. The presence of Yvette a prostitute in this scene is a reminder of the moral depravity during war. Thus, Brecht shows the underlying businesses of war. The officers are as unscrupulous as their commanders. Mother Courage is a hard-headed business woman who can beat the corrupt officers at their own game of driving hard bargains. There are three stages of the 'action' in this scene. In the first part, we meet Yvette, who is a woman doing another kind of business. The second part of the 'action' begins with the entry of the cook and the chaplain who appeared in the last scene. The third part of the scene's 'action' shows the actual process of war in the way random destruction takes place. The presence of the 'one-eyed spy' symbolises the dangerous manoeuvrings of war. The sudden development of war sends the characters on stage into a state of frenzy.

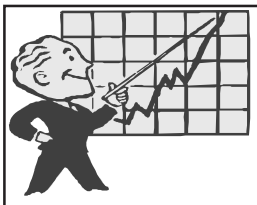


LET US KNOW

"Epic theatre" and "The narrative mode":

Largely because of his experience of working with Erwin Piscator, whose concept of 'epic theatre' or, a political theatre revolutionised drama in the late 1920s, Brecht attempted to forge a new dramatic idiom, which was radically different from the conventional 'well-made play' with tight structure and a proper ending. While Piscator tried to make theatre more scientific in keeping with the temper of a new scientific society, Brecht was

also influenced by Japanese Noh theatre, and rejected the illusionist ''realism' promoted by the Russian theatre director, Stanislavsky. Towards the end of his life, Brecht summed up his dramatic work with an allusion to Marx: "I wanted to take the principle that it was not just a matter of interpreting the world but of changing it, and apply that to the theatre". The influence of Marxist ideology is well embedded in Brechtian drama, which is seen partly in the manner in which the audience is encouraged to a critical understanding of the characters and their situation and actions.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q 1: How did Marx influence Brecht the playwright?

Q 2: In what way, did Brecht approach the epic form in this play?

Q 3: Why does Brecht use the setting of the "Thirty Years' War"?

Scene 4:

It is a scene that seems to be disconnected, as it does not seem to build upon the action of the previous scenes. Mother Courage is waiting to file a complaint with an officer about a soldiers' spoilage and vandalising of her canteen together with a fine slapped on her on the suspicion of her relations with the dead Swiss Cheese.

Scene 5:

The scene is set two years later, in 1631. The canteen has travelled a long way as the war has also spread over a wide territory. This scene presents a tussle between business and human instincts. Mother Courage is a contrast to her daughter, Kattrin, but she has to survive and feed her mute daughter.

The sound of the military band is suggestive of the celebration of General Tilly's victory. The two soldiers, who drink brandy at Mother Courage's canteen, cannot pay as they lost their chance to plunder the town. The first soldier calls it "a swindle" meaning that the soldiers

were not given enough of a chance to carry off loot; they were given only one hour to rob and plunder. Mother Courage loses some valuable linen in the rescue of the injured. Compassion and kindness, as Mother Courage so fully makes explicit, do not make for gain. Thus, the scene is designed to bring out the meaning of 'victory' for the common people. We see the hard-headed business of Mother Courage who is forced to part with some of her best wares –shirts of fine linen for officers, and has to sell brandy to soldiers who cannot pay.

Scene 6:

The year is now 1632. In the previous scene, we saw Tilly's victory. Now it is one year after Magdeburg and Tilly have died. One common topic of discussion among the scrivener, the chaplain and Mother Courage is the possibility of peace, and whether it will be of any help to people. Peace and further war are both possibilities, and for the moment, Mother Courage and her counterparts consider their own prospects in the light of that. Brecht's idea is to show how we can consider war objectively and critically.

Scene 7:

In this scene, the discussion of the benefits and losses of war is resumed. Listen to the song that Mother Courage sings. This scene does not contribute much to the "action" of the play but offers interesting critiques of the situation through the device of the song.

Scene 8:

The year is in 1632. The opening caption of the scene shows poor prospects for Mother Courage: "THE PEACE THREATENS". The peace that had been talked about in Scene 6 is now temporarily here. Peace is welcomed by some and feared by others. Yvette reappears, having made a good business during the war. Eilif appears, under arrest, with permission to visit his mother for the last time. Mother Courage yet again loses her son while she is busy doing business. She remains unaware of the real situation in which

Eilif is condemned to death. Thus, a temporary peace poses many problems for Mother Courage.

Scene 9:

It is now the autumn of 1634. After sixteen years of prolonged war, there began in 1618, have worsened general conditions of people who have taken recourse to desperate steps to survive. The Cook confronts Mother Courage with a choice that can actually relieve her: leave behind Kattrin and set up a good life with the Cook in Utrecht, or continue with her existing means but without the aid of the Cook. The narration at the beginning of the scene is a graphic description of the ravages of the war. Even more telling is the fact that the Cook and Mother Courage have now started begging. As Mother Courage tells us, people are unable to pay for their purchases, and "Nothing grows any more, only thorn bushes".

Perhaps Courage's horrific visions are expressive of her dilemma: anyhow, the business must pick up so that she can survive and feed her family. However, her very mode of survival is fraught with fear, acute uncertainty, risks and danger. Thus, her little speech is driven with despair and paradox: "Sometimes I see myself driving through hell with this wagon and selling brimstone. And sometimes I'm driving through heaven handing our provisions to wandering souls! If only we could find a place where there's no shooting, me and my children — what's left of 'em – we might rest a while." The Song of Solomon, that is sung, embodies commentary on the fact that an immoral world endangers the virtuous.

Scene 10:

The socio-political situations have worsened. Mother Courage and Kattrin pull the wagon along roads, which have already been traversed by "ever more tattered armies". The scene plays out a brief moment on the highway showing an unnameable desire in the hearts of the two characters. "The Song of the Shelter" sung by a voice off stage, brings out the contrast between the plight of

Mother Courage and Kattrin. The duo now belongs to a different world. The song functions like chorus in classical drama. The unknown singer of the 'song' brings out the critical distance between what is visible to the eye and what can be an alternative state of existence.

Scenes 11 & 12:

Scene 11 shows the climax of the play as it plays out to its logical conclusion what has been seen so far. It is now 1635, the year following the time of the last scene. The town of Halle is about to be attacked by the Catholics, in the middle of the night. The action in this scene is gripping as Kattrin is shown to be determined in her chosen path to martyrdom. Throughout the play, Mother Courage loses her children one by one while she was doing her business. She has gone into town to buy up her goods at low rates thus being absent when the climax of the play takes place. Kattrin, as the epitome of courage, brings an ultimate ironic contrast to Mother Courage. In the penultimate scene, Scene 12, she saves the town of Halle by raising an alarm with beating the drum, which she had brought in Scene 6. She is immune to the threats and the tricks of the soldiers and is finally killed for her deed. Mother Courage, in her last embrace of the dead Kattrin, is unable to recognise what her daughter has done.

12.3.2 Critical Commentary on the Play

Mother Courage and her Children stands as one of the most famous anti-war plays of the 20th century. Brecht noted, while referring to the play, that the Thirty Years' War was one of the first large-scale wars waged on capitalism over Europe in the name of a war of religion. You will however note that besides his views of war, this play gives more place to the question of economic conditions, money, commerce and material production. From Brecht's Marxist viewpoint, the war resulted from the economic exploitation of capitalist societies, which use war to conduct 'business by other

means'. Yet, the Thirty Years' War had been proclaimed to be a war of religion by those who sought to justify it.

In 1940, Brecht left Europe for America and in the following year, he staged his *Mother Courage and her Children*. This was to be the play with which the *Berliner Ensemble* opened in 1948. It provides an excellent example of 'epic theatre', that form of theatre which eschews Aristotelian forms of drama and concentrates instead upon a tale which narrates and offers a nucleus for possible discussion. The use of 'alienation' is explicit here in the choice of historical subject, in the encouragement to the actors to 'imitate' and 'represent' their parts, rather than empathising with them, and in the use of songs to interrupt the action and drive the several points home. Each of the twelve scenes is supposed to stand as a self-contained unit. At the climax of Brecht's creativity, characters are brought to life through performance. (*A Companion to Twentieth Century German Literature*, Page 43)



LET US KNOW

Please look at the distinction between Dramatic Theatre and Epic Theatre in the following:

Dramatic Theatre	**Epic Theatre**
Plot	Narrative
Implicates the spectator in a stage situation	Turns the spectator into an observer
Wears down his capacity for action	Arouses his capacity for action
Provides him with sensations	Forces him to take decisions
Experience	Picture of the world
The spectator is involved in something	He is made to confront something
Suggestion	Argument
Instinctive feelings are preserved	Brought to the point of recognition

The spectator is in the thick of it, shares the experience	The spectator stands outside, studies
The human being is taken for granted	The human being is the object of inquiry
He is unalterable	He is alterable and able to alter
Eyes on the finish	Eyes on the course
One scene makes another	Each scene for itself
Growth	Montage
Linear development	In curves
Evolutionary determinism	Jumps, leaps
Man as a fixed point	Man as a process
Thought determines being	Social being determines thought
Feeling	Reason

You must pay attention to the fact that in Brechtian theatre, themes and dramatic techniques are dialectically presented to produce the final message of the play. His epic drama comes closer to a modern exploitation of the episodic plot technique. The traditional cause and effect plot with its pattern of exposition, conflict, climax and resolution is generally ignored. As mentioned already, the twelve separate scenes are presented in ***Mother Courage and her Children***; each of which is thematically related to one another. At this point of 'thematic unity', the ideas and the techniques are manipulated and interwoven with each other. The whole play is regarded as a product of corruption of war and how human values are profoundly tainted by the circumstances of such deadly business. Each scene presents a variation on this theme but it does not cause the next. In short, the twelve scenes of ***Mother Courage and her Children*** share the same war theme although they are presented through fragmentary incidents and different characters.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q 4: What is the significance of the play *Mother Courage*?

Q 5: Mention the different events and incidents in the play *Mother Courage.*

Q 6: What are the differences between Traditional Theatre and Epic Theatre?

12.3.3 Major Themes

The following are some of the important themes of the play *Mother Courage and Her Children.*

The Plight of the Lower Classes during Wartime:

Brecht's play sets its focus firmly on the lower classes affected by wars. This is obvious from the portrayal at the very beginning of a nameless Sergeant and Recruiting officer freezing in a field. Mother Courage, her family, and her companions are all the "little people" and it is their story, which Brecht finds interesting to explore. These people usually are unable to extract any benefit from the war. You will note that the minor characters in the play are presented in terms of a profession or a description rather than a proper name, following which we have peasants, numerous soldiers, generals, clerks, captains, officers, and even chaplains and so on.

Courage:

The idea of Courage in the play is tinged with irony. The play suggests that the courage of Mother Courage is as questionable as her motherhood. You must have noticed that she gets her nickname from driving loaves through the bombardment of Riga. However, one might consider this recklessness rather than true bravery. Mother Courage finally learns that real courage requires persistence enough to make a significant, life-threatening change, as Kattrin does at the end of Scene 11.

Motherhood:

There is a contrast between Mother Courage's role as a 'mother' and her professional role as a 'canteen woman'. Despite her claims that she is working only to support her children, her recklessness becomes the cause of their deaths. She never seems to have loved anyone of the three different 'fathers' of the three children. Her mute daughter Kattrin is a contrast to her as she hopes to get married and have children. However, the readers get the impression that her maternal instincts are not completely lost as she risks her life to save a baby from a collapsing house.

War as Capitalism

This play provides an important view regarding war. War in the context of the novel can be seen as a profitable business for a select few. You perhaps know that the idea of war being a part of the capitalist system is very common. This theme also hints at the philosophy of Brecht who was a life-long socialist. From this point of view, Brecht's purpose of writing the play was to show that during wartime "you need a big pair of scissors in order to get your cut."

Religion:

According to Brecht, religion is of little help, and rather becomes a hindrance, during wartime. Religion in this play is portrayed through the hypocritical figure of the Chaplain who changes his allegiances at the drop of a hat. When peace is declared, he removes his vestment and prepares to go back to his part activities. However, again he changes views when war breaks out again. At the end of the play, when the Catholic army is marching to attack a sleeping town, the people pray for God's help. But, it is Kattrin, who climbs the rooftop, to alert the people by beating her drum.

Silence and Dumbness:

You will note that Kattrin's dumbness in the play is highly symbolic—that is real virtue and goodness are silenced at the time of war. Brecht even makes clear that Kattrin's dumbness is due directly to the war: "a soldier stuck something in her mouth when

she was small." The play itself deals similarly with several significant silences: Mother Courage's refusal to complain after the Song of the Great Capitulation, the chaplain's denial of his own faith when the Catholics arrive in Scene 3 ("All good Catholics here!"), and the way Mother Courage denies her own son at the end of the scene, first in life and then in death. An antithesis to dumbness is eloquence, and Kattrin's death (itself conducted through loud noises, and answered by the noises from the town after she has died) is perhaps the single most eloquent act in the play.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q 7: Mention some of the important themes of the play *Mother Courage*.

12.3.4 Major Characters

As you are informed already, the following are the important characters in the play.

Mother Courage

Mother Courage is an entrepreneur. Her real name is Anna Fierling. She follows the Army with her canteen wagon of foods and other stuffs. She earned her name Mother Courage in Riga when she ran through a bombardment in order to sell her loaves of bread. She has three children—by different lovers Eilif, Swiss Cheese and Kattrin, whom she tries to take care of and protect throughout the play. However, she loses all three of them while following the war around Europe. The war finally ruins her and she fails to learn anything by the end of the play. You will find that Mother Courage is a contradictory character: courageous, forthright, and intelligent, yet unable to protect her children. Brecht attempts, by the end of the play, to make her seem deeply unsympathetic.

Kattrin

Kattrin is the mute teen-aged daughter of Mother Courage. She hopes to get married and have her own children. Initially she is

promised that she can have a husband in peacetime, though she dies while warning the villagers of an impending assault. She resembles one of Brecht's favourite sayings: "silence sometimes makes the most noise.

Eilif

Eilif is Mother Courage's eldest and most favourite son. He is something of a hooligan, though she thinks him to be dashing and brave. He is recruited by the Recruiting Officer in the first scene. Much praised by the General in Scene 2, for slaughtering peasants and stealing their livestock, Eilif is executed in Scene 6 during temporary peace. Mother Courage never knows of his death

Swiss Cheese

He is the younger son of Mother Courage. He is stupid but honest. He takes the job as paymaster of the Second Finnish Regiment, and attempts to hide its cashbox so that he can return it to his general after the Catholics have gained power. He is caught and executed.

The Cook

The cook works for the Swedish General. He first appears when Mother Courage negotiates with him over the price of a capon, and he becomes her sexual partner later in the play. His name, rather aptly chosen, is "Lamb," which bears out his treatment in Scene 2. When the food runs out, he quickly leaves. He is very cynical. He later offers Mother Courage a chance to get settled and run an inn.

The Chaplain

An army chaplain and a personification of Brecht's view that religion which is of no use when it comes to war. He is a total coward and a hypocrite, switching religious allegiance with the twirl of a clerical robe. He complains throughout the play that his clerical talents are going to waste, and no one appreciates his talents.

Yvette Pottier

She is a prostitute in the army and follows the army after falling in love with the Cook. After the Catholics arrest Swiss Cheese, she picks up a colonel and convinces him to give her money with which to buy Mother Courage's wagon. She reappears later in the play, having married the same colonel's brother. She is the only person who gains from the war. Her beauty is her future.



12.4 LET US SUM UP

As we finish reading the unit, we have learnt that the play is set in Europe during the Thirty Years' War. Mother Courage who is a canteen woman, pulls her cart with her three children Eilif, Kattrin, and Swiss Cheese in the wake of the army, trading with the soldiers and attempting to make profit from the war. This play is considered by many to be the greatest play of the 20th century and perhaps also the greatest anti-war play in the history of literature.



12.5 FURTHER READING

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Chopes, Karl H. (1977). *Bertolt Brecht.* New York: Frederick Ungar Publishing Company.

12.6 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS (HINTS ONLY)

Ans to Q 1: Towards the end of his life, Brecht summed up his dramatic work with an allusion to Marx, "I wanted to take the principle that it was not just a matter of interpreting the world but of changing it, and apply that to the theatre"… …in Brechtian drama the audience is encouraged to a critical understanding of the characters and their situation and actions.

Ans to Q 2: The 'distance' between (subject) audience and object/ character… …the audience had to adopt a more critical view of the events presented… …this was the crux of the 'epic' theatre because events appeared in the form of a story or 'chronicle' which had occurred in the past… …Brecht's approach was to reflect life in a special way.

Ans to Q 3: From 1618-48, in European history, a series of wars were fought by various nations for various reasons like—religious, dynastic, territorial, and commercial rivalries… …its destructive campaigns and battles occurred over most of Europe, and, when it ended with the Treaty of Westphalia in 1648, the map of Europe had been irrevocably changed… ..the play *Mother Courage and Her Children* during this conflict, nearly 400 years after the event when the whole was going to experience the havocs of World War II… …Brecht used this background to show the horrific experiences of any war.

Ans to Q 4: Besides the views on war, this play gives more place to the question of economics, money, commerce and material production. From Brecht's Marxist viewpoint, the war can be seen as the result of the economic exploitation of capitalist societies, which use war to conduct 'business by other means'.

Ans to Q 5: Read section 12.3.1 carefully.

Ans to Q 6: Read section 12.3.2 again and write your answer.

Ans to Q 7: The Plight of the Lower Classes during artime… …Idea of Courage… …Sense of Motherhood… …War as Capitalism… …Religion… …Silence and Dumbness and so on.



12.7 POSSIBLE QUESTIONS

Q 1: Brecht called the play *Mother Courage* a "Chronicle of the Thirty Years' War". Do you think that the term 'Chronicle' is appropriate to Brecht's intentions?

Q 2: Write a character study of Mother Courage, commenting on the way she conducts her business even during wartime.

Q 3: Would you like to consider *Mother Courage and Her Children* a tragedy? Discuss.

Q 4: Explore the role of Kattrin in the play with particular reference to her dumbness.

Q 5: "All good Catholics here" (Chaplain, Scene 3). What is the role of religion within the religious war in which the play is set?

Q 6: How good a mother is Mother Courage? Is she really courageous? State the major differences between traditional theatre and epic theatre, and discuss how Brecht has used some of the elements of epic theatre in the play *Mother Courage*.

Q 7: Brecht's first intention was to force his audience to critically analyse his characters and their decisions, the audience's emotional involvement was not so important. Discuss.

Q 8: What do you mean by the term "epic theatre"? Comment on the songs and their role within the play.

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UNIT 13: HENRIK IBSEN *THE WILD DUCK* (PART 1)

UNIT STRUCTURE

13.1 Learning Objectives

13.2 Introduction

13.3 Henrik Ibsen the Playwright

13.3.1 His Life

13.3.2 His Plays

13.4 Sources of the Play *The Wild Duck*

13.5 Critical Reception of Ibsen

13.6 Let us Sum up

13.7 Answers to Check Your Progress (Hints Only)

13.8 Further Reading

13.9 Possible Questions

13.1 LEARNING OBJECTIVES

After going through this unit, you will be able to

- discuss the life and works of the Norwegian playwright Henrik Ibsen
- locate Ibsen within the tradition of European Drama
- trace the sources of the play *The Wild Duck*
- understand Ibsen as an important figure in the development of European naturalism and realism

13.2 INTRODUCTION

This unit seeks to acquaint you with the works of one of the most important figures of European Drama, the Norwegian playwright Henrik Ibsen. After a brief discussion of his life, we shall talk at length about his dramatic oeuvre and the important place he occupies in the world of European literature and his contribution towards the movements of *modernism* and *realism.* Since this unit deals with the background to Ibsen, we may expect questions based on general theatrical conventions, styles and what shaped Ibsen the playwright. Questions relating to the different

phases of Ibsen's career, ideas of Realism and Modernism are also to be expected. A general knowledge of the plots of some of his other plays is also important to know to realise Ibsen's thought. The unit, which shall provide an introduction to Ibsen and his works, shall also help you to discuss the play *The Wild Duck* in detail in the following unit.

13.3 HENRIK IBSEN THE PLAYWRIGHT

The following subsections will help you to discuss the life and works of Henrik Ibsen in some detail.

13.3.1 His Life



Source: https://commons.wikimedia.org

Henrik Ibsen was born on the 20th of March 1828 in Skien, Norway. When Ibsen was eight, his father's merchant company fell into misfortune and the family had to live in a farm on the outskirts of town. The bustling port city of his birth and the early misfortunes in life had a profound impact on Ibsen. He stopped school at the age of 15 and started an apprenticeship with a chemist in Grimstad. It was around this time that Ibsen started writing satires and poetry mostly inspired by the European revolutions of 1848 before going to Christiania (Oslo) to study medicine at the university. Although he passed his exams, Ibsen opted to pursue a career as a playwright. He wrote his first play in verse in 1850 called *Catiline,* a tragedy inspired by Shakespeare. Although this play was never performed, it was his second play *The Burial Mound* that made its way to the stage. Ibsen also wrote a considerable amount of poetry in these early formative years. It was around this time that Ibsen met with violinist and theatre manager Ole Bull that changed the course of his career. Bull offered Ibsen a job as a writer and manager for the Norwegian Theatre in Bergen and this position helped Ibsen develop as a dramatist

acquainting him with the nuances of stagecraft. By mid- 20s, Ibsen had a few successful productions under his belt.

The year 1857 in a way marks the beginning of Ibsen's period in exile although he didn't leave his native country until 1864. He left Bergen in 1857 and moved back to Christania to become the artistic director of the Norwegian Theatre there which went bankrupt in 1862. Ibsen had very radical social and political views and he wore his heart on his sleeve. He was an iconoclast through and through and the society he lived in was highly repressive. It was a protestant society that didn't accept atheists like him. He was a republican living under monarchy and he was anti-patriarchy in a highly patriarchal societal set-up. His disillusionment and unhappiness with his own condition and also the repressive culture of Norway found expression in his plays. Its repressive and unmeaning traditions and values and the lack of societal, religious and political freedom were aptly voiced through his plays. His period of apprenticeship at the Bergen theatre, where he learned much about drama and stagecraft, were still unhappy years for him. It was during this time that a feeling of bitterness towards his country started to develop that never really left him. His initial years as a writer too were unsuccessful and all these reasons combined compelled him to leave Norway with his family, imposing upon himself a 27-year long exile.

Ibsen first stayed in Italy and then moved to Germany and it was in between these two countries that Ibsen wrote his best works. These twenty-seven years in exile earned him fame throughout Europe and he became the most well known Norwegian playwright of the modern period although many of his plays received severe criticism and his financial struggles continued. Ibsen wrote perhaps his most famous play *A Doll's House* in 1879 which was an intensely realist piece of work. He persevered this realistic vein for the next decade achieving widespread acclaim with his plays translated and performed across Europe.

Ibsen returned to Norway in 1891 around the time he quit Realism for a new style of writing, which was more symbolic. The first play that he wrote after his return was *The Master Builder* (1892). Ibsen suffered serious health problems starting in 1900 that led to a series of strokes over the next one year, which compelled him to stop writing. He died in his home at Christania on the 23rd of May 1906.

The most obvious impact of Ibsen as a playwright was social and political. His efforts to make drama and the theatre a means to open up discussions on socio-political issues of the age shocked and scandalised a society that regarded the theatre as a place of shallow amusement. Ibsen is also the only playwright to become the centre, in his life time, of what almost amounted to a political party—the Ibsenites, who in Germany and England, appeared as a faction of weirdly dressed social and political reformers, advocates of socialism, women's rights, and a new sexual morality. It is usually assumed that the shock caused by Ibsen, and the furiously hostile reaction his early plays provoked, were due to this political and social subversiveness. However, another important cause of the violent reaction by audiences and critics alike lay in the revolutionary nature of Ibsen's dramatic method and technique.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q 1: How did the theatre manager Ole Bull help Ibsen to emerge as a playwright?

Q 2: Comment on the significance of the year 1857 in Ibsen's life.

Q 3: How was the impact of Ibsen as a playwright?

13.3.2 His Plays

A tripartite division of Ibsen's career as a playwright would look like this:



The protagonist of Ibsen's play *Peer Gynt* (1867), is witty, imaginative, and vigorous, but is incapable of self-analysis. This play takes on universal significance following Ibsen's use of fantasy, parable, and symbolism. This play is often described as a sociological analysis of the Norwegian people.

In the first phase, his plays were mostly written in verse form and drew inspiration from romantic historical tragedy and Norse sagas. *Catiline* (1850), *The Burial Mound* (1850), *Love's Comedy* (1862) and *The Pretenders* (1863), as well as *Brand* (1865) and *Peer Gynt* (1867) belong to this initial phase. The period between 1864 and 1875 saw the creation of plays that did not concern themselves with the condemnation of social ills- a trademark of Ibsen's later realistic plays. During his exile, the dramatist wrote *Brand* about the life of an over-zealous clergyman and his misfortunes. Success in Scandinavia prompted him to produce *Peer Gynt*, a fantastical verse drama that incorporated Norwegian fairy tales. Social satire soon came to be a favourite with him and Ibsen produced more drama: *Emperor and Galilean* (1873) and *The League of Youth* (1869).

The second phase of the dramatist's career from 1877 to 1882 is often called his Realist Cycle. The four plays written during this period call so-called respectable Victorian society into question and beg to be read in the chronological order that Ibsen penned them in, given that they are linked to one another. *The Pillars of Society* and its performance in Munich was the making of him. He abandoned romantic influences and French techniques after this play, which was soon followed by arguably his best-known work, *A Doll's House* in 1879. The play questions the traditional roles of wife and mother that women find themselves bound by in society, through the character of Nora Helmer. Her desire for self-exploration and final action at the end of the play managed to ruffle quite a lot of feathers.

Ghosts followed two years later, creating further controversy through uncomfortable subjects like incest and venereal disease; general outcry delayed the performance of the play by a couple of years. *An Enemy of the People* tells the story of a man at odds with his community, much like the playwright's own life. Hedda Gabler followed in 1890, with the titular character drawing as much

attention to be dubbed a female Hamlet. Ibsen's portrayal of strong women tied down by the social constraints of their time live on through his unforgettable characters like Nora Helmer, Hedda Gabler and Mrs. Alving.

Self-reflection marked the plays that were written after Ibsen's return to Norway in 1891. This quality had already started showing in his earlier plays like *The Wild Duck* (1884), *Rosmersholm* (1886) and *The Lady from the Sea* (1888). The dramatist's later plays have mature characters who retrospect on their choices in life and their results. No play ends on a lighter note.

After his return to Norway, the first play that Ibsen was *The Master Builder*. The play is about how the titular character meets a woman he knew before, who makes him hold up on a promise made. The 1899 *We Dead Awaken* is about an ageing sculptor who tries to restart his creativity after meeting a former model of his. This would be his final play. The work seems to be an echo of his own creative life. It depicts Professor Rubek—a well-known sculptor, ruminating on how his successful career has failed to bring much personal happiness.

Ibsen's later writings depict many more of Rubek-like ruminations. *The Master Builder*, for example, strives to be regarded as an "artist" in his craft, at the cost of his family, while Hedda Gabler seeks independence at the cost of other people's fates. Such grim portrayals make up Ibsen's writings in the last decade of his career. The "demons" or "trolls" that were Ibsen's words for such debilitating negatively charged feelings highlight the deep psychological nuances of his writing. These are evidenced by the many complex characters he created.



LET US KNOW

Problem Plays or Plays of Ideas

The term, "problem plays" refers to a special genre of drama that emerged during the 19th century as part of the

wider movement of realism in the arts in the context of Europe. It deals with contentious social issues through debates between the characters on stage, who typically represent conflicting viewpoints within a realistic social context. We should note that Ibsen's plays revolve around human predicaments and situation caused by decisions made at the wrong moments that further affect the smooth functioning of life. As a pioneer of social plays, Henrik Ibsen introduced and dealt with problems of education, marriage, society and most specifically human relationship. In almost all his significant plays, Ibsen deals with a specific issue or problem as can be seen in some of his important plays.

In *A Doll's House*, Ibsen introduced the concept of the 'New Woman'. In this play, a simple housewife called Nora learns that the her family is based on a false foundation. The illusory world of happiness, peace and tranquillity begins to crumble, and Nora takes a difficult decision of walking out of the house of deceit and falsehood and embrace the reality of life.

In *An Enemy of the People*, Ibsen explores the individual lives of people on the social plane, against social sanction or social propriety. Dr. Stockmann in *An Enemy of the People* fights a lonely battle against the evils of the society and conventional social norms. His decision to go against the public opinion, represented by his brother, the mayor of the city and also other fellow beings who are afraid to raise their voices against the corruption in society, clearly represents his stand: "The strongest man is he who can fight alone."

Ibsen's other plays namely–*The Pillars of Society*, *A Doll's House*, *Ghosts* etc. probe the dichotomy between the ideal and practical prevailing in both official and private lives of the individual. In fact, most of the plays tend to reveal a facade masking a murkier reality underneath. This is what makes Ibsen's plays significant.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q 4: What is a problem play? How do Ibsen's plays add to the idea of a problem play?

Q 5: Why is *Peer Gynt* important?

Q 6: Comment on the style of Ibsen's plays after his return from exile.

13.4 SOURCES OF THE PLAY *THE WILD DUCK*

Written between April-June 1884, Ibsen's play *The Wild Duck* was inspired by the poem "Søfuglen" (translated into English as *The Seabird*) by Johan Sebastian, who was also Scandinavian. The plot of the poem revolves around a wild duck that jumps into the water to die alone after being shot by a hunter. This figure would resonate through many characters in Ibsen's play set in the attic, most particularly with that of Hedvig.

The autobiographical elements and sources in the play are worth mentioning, as the play is full of them. The character of Old Ekdal is heavily drawn from Ibsen's own father who had been a lieutenant and also a hunter. The inspiration for the character Hedvig was a girl Ibsen met in Germany when he was writing a play around 1884 and Hedvig was also his sister's name, who was extremely close to Ibsen. Another striking similarity between Ibsen's personal life and the action in the play was the fact that Ibsen, at the age of eighteen, was involved with one of his maids, which resulted in an illegitimate pregnancy; much like Mr. Werle getting his maid Gina pregnant with Hedvig.

Another important autobiographical element that made its way to the play was an event that caused quite a bit of hullabaloo during Ibsen's younger days. A legal trial (during the time Ibsen was a student) involved an army officer accused of cheating and embezzlement who tried to shoot himself seems to have captured Ibsen's imagination and this was portrayed through the characters of Ekdal and Werle which finally resulted in Hedvig shooting herself.

Ibsen sent the manuscript of the play to his publisher F. Hegel in September, 1884; around three months after completing it. He sent a letter

along with the script that reveals Ibsen's initial views regarding the writing of the play. A few lines from the letter are quoted here:

"The people in this play, despite their multifarious defects, have nevertheless become dear to me during my long daily association with them, but I have hopes that they will find well-disposed friends in the great reading public and not least among actors and actresses, for without exception they offer rewarding parts. However, the study and rendering of these people will not be easy. This new play in some ways has a place of its own in my dramatic production; the method diverges in several respects from my earlier work. However, I do not wish to say more on this. The critics will, I hope, find these points, and will anyhow find various things to dispute and interpret. In this way I think that *The Wild Duck* might lure some of our younger dramatists into new ways, and that I consider desirable."

The Wild Duck with its intense symbolism was definitely a new kind of play in Ibsen's overall oeuvre and it also dramatically influenced subsequent European plays by other playwrights.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q 7: What is the play *The Wild Duck* inspired by?

Q 8: Autobiography is an important element in the play *The Wild Duck*. Comment.

Q 9: Comment on the symbolism of the title of the play *The Wild Duck.*

13.5 CRITICAL RECEPTION OF IBSEN

Due to his heavy contribution towards the development of Modernism in theatre, Ibsen would be dubbed the "father of modern drama". Critics lauded him for his acute portrayal of human nature on the stage and for his conscious writing for a middle class audience. He resisted prevailing conventions of theatre and was a fore figure of a genuine intellectual lot in the European scene. Emerging from the shackles of French and Danish literary influences, Ibsen was part of the divergent Norwegian writing that moved away from the sensational comedies of the 18th century. Drawing from the rise of nationalistic sentiments of fellow writers who harked back

to the Norse sagas, Ibsen's initial writings were imbued with the same romanticism. Ibsen worked with the Det Norske Theatre for years, one that was established with the same spirit of nationalism. Bjørnstjerne Bjørnson, another important playwright, together with Ibsen, heralded a new Norwegian theatre wave in the 19th century.

Like the rest of European literature, Ibsen's writing too gradually moved away from romanticism towards realism; the shift occurred with his *Peer Gynt*. More than his popular romantic plays, it is his later realistic ones that made him a revolutionary figure in modern drama. Ibsen's exchanges through letters with the Danish literary critic, Georg Brandes during his stay in Germany would help usher in the modern movement into the Scandinavian dramatic scene. Much impressed by Brandes's call for a new form of writing that was socio-critical and realistic; Ibsen took to writing in prose form, instead of his earlier dependence on verse. Staving clear of the idealised stock characters of his times, the playwright invested a deep psychology into his characters who were unmistakably real and well rounded.

Henrik Ibsen's plays reveal a severe distrust of social institutions, those that valorise duty and sacrifice, paying little heed to individual desires and aspirations. Marriage, religion, the law- any and all institutions that the middle class despairingly held dear and yet were made miserable by, are held up for scrutiny and question in his drama. He created the neologism *livslÖgnen* (life-lie), often translated into English as 'illusion'. His bourgeois characters have their daily foundations shaken up by the threat of some remembered trauma or action. This destabilisation of social orders is interspersed with moments of self-realisation of his characters.

In *The Social Significance of Modern Drama* (2005), Emma Goldman calls him the 'uncompromising demolisher of all false idols and dynamiter of all social shams and hypocrisy'. Ibsen reverently upheld the institution of marriage- but one based on transparency between both partners- something rare in Ibsen's circles. It was an intellectual- not political- revolution that Ibsen wanted. The liberty that he sought was from the manacles of political authority, from the dogma of religion and other foundations that the middle-class society clung on to.

Ibsen and Realism

The 1870s witnessed the advent of realism in theatre, which marked the middle phase of Ibsen's career. The purpose was to be more faithful to real life through newer theatrical conventions. Like naturalism, realism focused on middle class life with all its daily nuances and linguistic specificities. The difference lay in how both dealt with characters—the first robbed individuals of choices—letting overarching faith govern them, while the latter emphasised on the individuals' abilities to decide for themselves. Strindberg, Chekhov and Ibsen would come to represent the force of realism-as adapted on stage. Ibsen would inspire later realist writers to a great extent.

Realism seeks to depict life as it is-without any dramatic embellishments. Though not confined to any particular times, 19th century France would best to represent the height of realism in the literary field, best forwarded by novelists like Balzac and Flaubert. Henry James popularised psychological realism by relying less on external social factors and more on the inner workings of the self. Others like Emile Zola focused more on the naturalistic influences of one's birth and environment. In his stride, Strindberg wrote his well-acclaimed play *Miss Julie*. Ibsen's four distinct plays published between1877-82 are characteristically realistic and reflect problems contemporary to his times (hence dubbed "problem dramas"). They include *Pillars of Society*, *A Doll's House*, *Ghosts* and *An Enemy of the People.* They share an acute social critique, are set in contemporary settings and represent people and situations one encounters in everyday life. "Truth and freedom" would be the keywords for Ibsen and Georg Brandes and this is reflected in all four of these plays. Areas such as public vs. private life of the bourgeois class, property rights, and marriage were covered by Ibsen's plays.

Ibsen exposed the sham of the Victorian proper family and trimmed his social depictions of all its hypocrisies. In *Ghosts*, he exposes the facade of religion through Pastor Mendes and the Alvings. Taboos like incest, extra-marital love and euthanasia are dealt with deftly in his plays- making him the subject of much controversy in society. Linguistically, highbrow affectations were cast aside in favour of more natural, non-smooth flows of

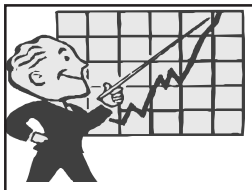
speech. In a letter to August Lindberg (the theatre person who was responsible for the premiere of *Ghosts* in Europe), dated 1883, Ibsen had expressed how the expressions of characters must not be forced, how characters are distinctly unlike one another when they speak naturally. That is why he emphasised on constant revisions of the script lines till they sounded more believable in real life. The audience takes easily to such realism than convoluted speech patterns, he said.

The three-dimensional frame of Ibsen's stage sets help heighten the realism. Well-furnished and realistic living room or garden view backdrops were first introduced by him. The realistic props help transport the audiences to a slice of believable life- not diverting them to exotic, fantastic locations. This he achieved through distinctly specific stage props, with great detailing. The middle class's mundane and sparse worldly possessions were thus laid bare for the audience to ruminate upon- while also highlighting the class desire to accumulate things that can show their little wealth- a trait of the modern world. The rich detailing of Ibsen's drama scripts and stage directions render them the quality of a work of art- like a painting almost. The stage props are never there as meaningless ornamentation but serve specific purposes and reveal insights about the play and characters. The stage directions in the opening act of *Ghosts*, for instance, are distinctly detailed and remembered by many.

George Bernard Shaw in his *The Quintessence of Ibsenism* mentioned:

"The drama was born of old from the union of two desires: the desire to have a dance and the desire to hear story. The dance became a rant; the story became a situation. When Ibsen began to make plays, the art of the dramatist had shrunk into the art of contriving a situation. And it was held that the stranger the situation, the more interesting the play. Shakespeare had put ourselves on the stage but not our situations… …Ibsen supplies the want left by Shakespeare. He gives us not only ourselves, but ourselves in our situations…his plays…are capable of both hurting us cruelly and of filling us with excited hope of escape from idealistic tyrannies, and with visions of intenser life in the future."

As Daniel Burt remarks, it is a critical commonplace to assert that modern drama originates with Henrik Ibsen, even to mark the exact moment when the modern theatre began: December 4, 1879, with the publication of Ibsen's *A Doll's House*. Although the complexity and many crosscurrents of modern drama make the idea of a single source difficult to support, it is incontestable that Ibsen set in motion a revolution on the stage as distinctive in the history of the theatre as that in 5th-century B.C. Athens or Elizabethan London. Like Shakespeare and the great Athenian dramatists, Ibsen fundamentally redefined the drama and set a standard that later dramatists have had to absorb or challenge. The stage that he inherited had largely ceased to function as a serious medium. After Ibsen, drama was restored as an important vehicle for a comprehensive criticism of life. The momentum that propelled his artistic revolt was sustained primarily from his outsider status, as an exile both at home and abroad. His last word was "Tvertimod!" (On the contrary!), which serves as a fitting epitaph and description of his artistic stance.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q 10: What are some of the terms used in favour of Ibsen as a playwright?

Q 11: What is Ibsen's most important contribution to World drama?



13.6 LET US SUM UP

This unit attempted to provide an introduction to the Norwegian dramatist Henrik Ibsen's life and writings, highlighting his immense contributions to Modern European Drama. We discussed the background to his writings, while briefly examining some of his major plays. The next unit will discuss *The Wild Duck* in greater detail. We shall now be able to approach the play from various perspectives given your familiarity now with the range of Ibsen's work. The artistic movements of Realism and Modernism and Ibsen's special association with these too shall help you appreciate the play better.

13.7 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS (HINTS ONLY)

Ans to Q 1: Ole Bull changed the course of Ibsen's career… …Bull offered Ibsen a job as a writer and manager for the Norwegian Theatre in Bergen… …this assignment helped Ibsen to develop as a dramatist acquainting him with the nuances of stagecraft.

Ans to Q 2: The year 1857 in a way marks the beginning of Ibsen's period in exile although he didn't leave his native country until 1864. He left Bergen in 1857 and moved back to Christania to become the artistic director of the Norwegian Theatre there which went bankrupt in 1862.

Ans to Q 3: The most obvious impact was social and political… …he made drama and the theatre a means to open up discussions on socio-political issues of his age and he shocked those people who regarded the theatre as a place of shallow amusement… …the Ibsenites appeared as a faction of weirdly dressed social and political reformers, advocates of socialism, women's rights, and a new sexual morality.

Ans to Q 4: Problem plays refer to a special genre of drama that emerged during the 19th century… …Such plays deal with contentious social issues through debates between the characters on stage… …Ibsen's plays revolve around human predicaments and situation caused by decisions made at the wrong moments… …as a pioneer of social problem plays, Henrik Ibsen introduced problems of education, marriage, society and most specifically human relationship in his drama.

Ans to Q 5: *Peer Gynt* is a fantastical verse drama that incorporated Norwegian fairy tales… …the protagonist of *Peer Gynt* is witty, imaginative and vigorous, but is incapable of self-analysis…. …this play is often described as a sociological analysis of the Norwegian people.

Ans to Q 5: Marks a certain departure… …self-reflection marked the plays that were written after Ibsen's return to Norway in 1891 following his exile… …self-reflexivity gets reflected in the mature characters that retrospect on their earlier life's choices and their results… …none of the play ends on a light note.

Ans to Q 7: The play *The Wild Duck* was inspired by the poem "Søfuglen" (translated into English as *The Seabird*) by Johan Sebastian… …the poem revolves around a wild duck that jumps into the water to die alone after being shot by a hunter… …this figure would resonate through the character Hedvig set in the attic.

Ans to Q 8: The character of Old Ekdal is heavily drawn from Ibsen's own father… … Hedvig is modelled on a girl Ibsen met in Germany… …Hedvig is also the name of Ibsen's sister too close to Ibsen… …when Ibsen was only eighteen, he got involved with one of his maids resulting in an illegitimate pregnancy; much like Mr. Werle getting his maid Gina pregnant with Hedvig.

Ans to Q 9: *The Wild Duck* with its intense symbolism was definitely a new kind of play in Ibsen's overall oeuvre and it also dramatically influenced subsequent European plays by other playwrights.

Ans to Q 10: Due to his heavy contribution towards the development of Modernism in theatre, Ibsen would be dubbed the "father of modern drama"… … Emma Goldman in *The Social Significance of Modern Drama* calls him the 'uncompromising demolisher of all false idols and dynamiter of all social shams and hypocrisy'.

Ans to Q 11: Like Shakespeare and the great Athenian dramatists, Ibsen fundamentally redefined the drama and set a standard that later dramatists have had to absorb or challenge…. …After Ibsen, drama was restored as an important vehicle for a comprehensive criticism of life in modern times.



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13.9 POSSIBLE QUESTIONS

Q 1: Why may we divide Ibsen's dramatic career into three parts? Discuss.

Q 2: Analyse the three phases of Ibsen's career as a dramatist. Comment on Ibsen's self-imposed exile.

Q 3: Why and when did Ibsen move from Realism towards Symbolism? Discuss.



Q 4: Romantic tragedies and Norse mythology shaped Ibsen's early plays. Comment.

Q 5: Analyse the actions of a few of Ibsen's Realist plays to arrive at a proper understanding of his Realism.

Q 6: Discuss the contributions of Ibsen to the field of European drama with particular reference to the play *The Wild Duck.*

Q 7: What do you mean by a "problem play"? Does Ibsen's *The Wild Duck* present the 'problem' of social morality? Discuss.

Q 8: Write in detail about the different sources of the play *The Wild Duck.*

Q 9: Henrik Ibsen's plays reveal a severe distrust of social institutions, those that valorise duty and sacrifice, paying little heed to individual desires and aspirations. Discuss.

Q 10: How is Ibsen received as a modern playwright? Discuss in detail.

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UNIT 14: HENRIK IBSEN *THE WILD DUCK* (PART II)

UNIT STRUCTURE

14.1 Learning Objectives

14.2 Introduction

14.3 Act-wise Summary of the Play

14.4 Critical Commentary on the Play

14.4.1 Major Themes

14.4.2 Major Characters

14.5 Let us Sum up

14.6 Answers to Check Your Progress (Hints Only)

14.7 Further Reading

14.8 Possible Questions

14.1 LEARNING OBJECTIVES

After going through this unit, you will be able to

- discuss the various aspects and concerns of the play *The Wild Duck*
- read the characters and the action of the play in relation to Ibsen's range of thought
- explain the major themes and other dramatic features of the play

14.2 INTRODUCTION

In the previous unit, we have read about the life and works as well as the critical reception of of Henrik Ibsen. In this follow up unit, we shall discuss the play *The Wild Duck* in terms of its various aspects. After the publication of *Pillars of Society* in 1882, Ibsen continued in the realist vein with *The Wild Duck, which* was composed in the year 1884. It is one of Ibsen's more important works with a very complex narrative. The play is divided into five acts containing two stories. The first story is of Elder Ekdal and Old Werle and the business they started together which did not work out well at all. When things were at its worst, Werle put the entire blame on Ekdal and quit; leaving Ekdal to fend for himself. After this, Werle goes on

to amass massive wealth and becomes prosperous whereas Ekdal and his family became bankrupt and ruined after the business fallout. The second story begins in the first act and it narrates the trials and tribulations of the Ekdal family trying to adjust with the horrors of the past. By the end of the unit, we shall learn that the play is most well known for its unique use of symbolism and its focus on how an individual or a family attempts to merge with society.

14.3 ACT-WISE SUMMARY OF THE PLAY

The play takes its name from perhaps the most important element in the play, the wild duck in the attic. Ibsen was inspired by a poem written by another Scandinavian writer, Johan Sebastian Welhaven in which a wild duck is shot and it dives into the water to die and avoid being caught and forced to live a life in captivity. In a symbolic sense, the Ekdal family is a wild duck that was injured, but the Ekdals continued to live their life, pretending to be something they are not and pretending that everything is right. This family lived around a lie, and the idea of living a lie is a central motif in the play. Before we read through a brief summary, it would be helpful to be acquainted with the characters in the play

- Håkon Werle: A wholesale merchant
- Gregers Werle: His son
- Old Ekdal: Former business partner of Håkon Werle
- Hjalmar Ekdal: Old Ekdal's son, a photographer
- Gina Ekdal: His wife
- Hedvig: Their daughter, aged fourteen
- Mrs. Sørby: Housekeeper and fiancée of Håkon Werle
- Relling: A doctor, lives below the Ekdals.
- Molvik: Formerly a student of theology, lives below the Ekdals
- Pettersen: Servant to Håkon Werle
- Jensen: A hired waiter

- Mr. Balle: A dinner guest
- Mr. Flor: A dinner guest

The following is the act wise summary of the play

Act I:

The play opens with a party at Mr. Werle's in honour of his son Gregers' homecoming. The guests include a host of politically important friends and also Hjalmar Ekdal, and old school friend of Gregers who feels out of place in the present company. Werle mentions to Gregers and hopes that nobody notices that there were thirteen people at the table; and Gregers feeling even more isolated and alienated than Ekdal calls himself "the thirteenth guest".

Old Ekdal meanwhile enters the office after the servants reluctantly let him in as he had some papers to collect from the bookkeeper while Gregers finds out from Hjalmar that he has married Gina, Werle's maidservant from years ago. Hjalmar boasts that Gina is not "without culture" and staying with him has "refined her".

Lively chatter can be heard and Mrs. Sorby wittily impresses one and all. Hjalmar makes people laugh in an attempt to join in the conversation with his lack of knowledge about wines when the guests see a shabby old man, Lieutenant Ekdal walk out with the bookkeeper to the front door. Hjalmar averts his gaze and pretends not to know his father and later claims he "did not see him". Gregers is shocked to see Old Ekdal and more shocked at Hjalmar's reaction.

The first private conversation between Werle and Gregers shows Gregers' deep sense of disillusionment and bitterness with his father. He accuses Werle of deceiving Hjalmar and marrying Gina off to him and blames his father's lascivious nature that resulted in his mother's death and then finally accuses his father of ruining Ekdal's life by blaming him entirely for their government swindle. Werle denies running anybody's life and asks Gregers to forget the past and approve of the upcoming marriage with Mrs. Sorby as they are well suited to each other and it would be unfair for her to be in any way associated with any scandal. Gregers laughs it off saying there was never any family feeling in this house and now he needs

to pretend and feign familial love for the sake of Mrs. Sorby. He also pities Hjalmar who has based his life upon a lie. Gregers promises to leave the house forever and says he has found his "life's mission".

Act II:

This scene opens in Ekdal's studio with Gina and her daughter Hedvig talking half-heartedly about the cost of groceries revealing their very frugal existence; almost all their savings going towards Hjalmar's expenses. Hedvig wishes her father to return soon as he had promised her something special from the party. Lieutenant Ekdal returns and goes to his room with his cognac. Hjalmar appears and everyone, including his father emerges to greet him and the little incident at the party is totally papered over. Everyone wants to know about the party and Hjalmar gets carried away by his descriptions and portrays himself as the most sophisticated and entertaining person in the party.

Hedvig finally asks her father what he brought for her from the party and Hjalmar confesses to having forgotten all about it but he had the menu of the evening's dishes and that he would read out to her and describe in detail all the delicacies. Seeing Hedvig almost in tears, he starts a rant about what absurd things a father has to do and how he is treated with bitter faces any time he forgets some small thing.

Gregers enters the scene and talks to the Gina and Hjalmar. Hjalmar informs Gregers of a curious hereditary malady, which is causing her to lose her eyesight. Gina interrupts and says that Ekdal's mother had poor eyes. Gregers then speaks to Old Ekdal and asks him how he manages to live boxed up in a place like this when he used to be a hunter and an outdoors man. Old Ekdal takes Gregers up and shows him the moonlit attic with some rabbits, pigeons and a prized possession, a wild duck. Old Ekdal mentions that the wild duck was given to the Ekdals by Werle.

Ekdal says the wild duck manages well in the garret but he is careful of her not getting a glimpse of the moonlit open sky and the sea for then she would pine for her former freedom.

Gregers surprises everyone by asking if he may rent their spare room although Hjalmar agrees and Gregers bids them goodnight, proposing to move in the next morning.

Act III:

Next morning, Gina narrates to Hjalmar the trouble Gregers has caused by flooding the entire floor in order to put the stove out. Hjalmar mentions that he has invited Gregers and Molvik and Relling for lunch. She leaves her husband to work on restoring old photographs but Hjalmar is constantly interrupted by his father to do small chores up in the garret for their pets and poultry. These seem to interest Hjalmar much more than his touching up of old photographs and seeing this, Hedvig offers to do the retouching for him, even though it might strain her eyes. Handing over his tools to Hedvig, he joins his father up in the loft.

Gregers enters the scene and speaks to Hedvig, learning of the wild duck in the attic and other mundane affairs of their household. She also mentions her failing eyesight and how her eyes are now too weak for her to attend school and how her father has given her his word to read with her at home, though he hardly ever seems to have the time. Gregers' pointed questions are also directed later at Gina from whom he realises that she had been carrying on most of the business for her husband having learned how to touch-up old photographs and also clicking them.

At lunch, Hjalmar tells Gregers how he leaves day-to-day matters to Gina as he is busy thinking about an invention that is to change the very nature of photography that will make it both "an art and a science." When asked, he says he cannot reveal anything about the invention at the moment and that he spends almost all of his time thinking about it and that such things need work and time and patience. He says he's doing all this not for himself but for his family and also to restore his father's reputation by "restoring the name of Ekdal to honour and dignity." In this exchange, Gregers finally remarks "I almost think you have something of the wild duck in you," "You have strayed into a "poisonous marsh" and now that "insidious disease has taken hold of you, you have sunk down to die in the dark."

Relling and Molvik arrive just in time for lunch. Hjalmar introduces them to Gregers but the physician Reling already knew Gregers from the Höidal works. Relling asks Gregers if he still carries the "claim of the ideal" in his pocket trying to persuade people to honour this claim and wonders if

Gregers has become less idealistic over the years. Gregers replies saying he still does “when he has a true man to deal with”. Relling cheerfully attempts to change the topic of conversation by mentioning how Molvik was “demonic” and passed out drunk just the night before; stating that demonic natures are not made to saunter through life but that they must necessarily meander through the course of their life.

As they dine, Relling calls Hjalmar a lucky man who has a purpose in life and a good wife who takes care of all his needs. Hjalmar agrees and calls Gina “a good helpmate on the path of life” and then proceeds to make an insipid little speech about his love for Hedvig. Relling remarks to Gregers how lovely it is to sit and eat at the table of a happy family to which Gregers replies saying, “I don’t thrive in marsh vapours”. This insults Gina and she says that she cleans the house everyday. Gregers responds saying that no amount of cleaning would get that stench out to which he is referring as he leaves the table.

Suddenly, there is a knock on the door and it is Old Werle who steps into the apartment when the door is opened. He asks to speak to his son and everyone else leaves the room to give them some space. Old Werle tells his son that now with his wedding, Gregers’ share of the property becomes his with immediate effect to which Gregers responds by saying that he is not interested in the money but only wants to fulfil his “purpose” and cut all ties with his father.

Gregers says he wishes to speak to Hjalmar about something important and he and Hjalmar then go for a walk after Old Werle leaves the scene. After they have left, Gina wonders if Werle is mad and Dr. Relling says aloud that Werle is suffering from a disease, which is nothing but an “over-inflammation of the conscience”.

Act IV:

Gina and Hedvig wait for Hjalmar to return from the walk and they start to get worried as it was past dinner time and dinner being late at their household was an unusual occurrence. When he finally returns, Gina wonders if he is ill as he looks extremely tired and haggard and refuses to

eat on top of that. He then goes on to say how he is going to take all matters of work in his own hands from now on. Gina asks what will happen of his invention while Hedvig says how the wild duck and the rabbits and the rest need his attention too. He replies saying that he would never set foot in the garret again and he wishes to “wring the neck of the infernal duck”. Hedvig is horrified and makes her father promise that he would do nothing to harm her duck. She then goes out for a walk and husband and wife finally get some space to talk openly.

Hjalmar proceeds to question Gina and compels her to own up to her affair wih Old Werle before their marriage. She admits it saying she was scared to reveal this to him before for fear of him changing his mind and now that they have a happy cozy life together; it is best to forget the happenings of the past she says. Hjalmar responds saying that their home is enmeshed in a “swamp of deceit” and that his “whole dream has vanished.”

Gregers then enters the scene expecting to see Hjalmar and Gina basking in the light of truth but what he sees instead is gloomy sadness. Relling intervenes when Gregers heightens the situation emotionally referring to his high purposes of establishing truth. When asked about his intentions of coming here, Gregers says he wanted to establish a true marriage between Hjalmar and Gina by establishing past truth. Relling tells him that the couple are free to lead their lives the way they want but for the sake of the child, Hedvig, he could have spared them. Relling says Hedvig is at that crucial age where her mind is full of “erratic ideas”. Hjalmar vows to protect Hedvig as long as he is living.

Mrs Sorby unexpectedly pays them a sort of farewell visit as she is about to leave for the Hoidal works where she and Old Werle are to be married. Relling, it is revealed, had a thing with Mrs Sorby once and Gregers says he would tell his father of their old entanglement, to which Mrs Sorby says that there are no secrets between them. Besides, she says, this marriage is not entirely based on unequal power relations, as Old Werle needs someone trustworthy by his side now that he is going blind. Hjalmar is startled at this piece of information while Mrs Sorby affectionately says goodbye to Gina.

Hedvig returns from her walk and shows a letter given to her by Mrs Sorby as a present for her birthday tomorrow. The letter contains Old Werle's writing which states that Old Ekdal would receive a hundred crowns every month which will pass on to Hedvig for lifetime after his death. Hjalmar suddenly sees an uncanny link between Werle's affection for Hedvig and their common blindness and asks Gina if hedvig actually belongs to him to which Gina pleads innocence. He cries out saying he has no child and sends Hedvig away when she rushes to embrace her father; claiming he could not bear to see her anymore. He rushes out of the house followed by Gina leaving a sobbing Hedvig and Gregers alone on the stage.

Gregers tells Hedvig that sacrificing the wild duck, "the dearest treasure she holds in this world" will prove her love for her father. This free will offering of her dearest possession will provide Hjalmar proof of Hedvig's devotion. Hedvig is hopeful and says she will ask her grandfather to shoot the bird for her. The curtain drops with Gina onstage trying to comfort her sobbing daughter.

Act V

It is the next morning and Hjamar has not yet returned when Relling informs everyone that he is asleep at his place. Gregers says Hjalmar requires this rest after the spiritual turmoil his soul has been through in the last twenty-four hours. Relling, though, disagrees, saying that he witnessed no such turmoil in Hjalmar. Gregers goes on to say how Hjalmar has a superior mind and personality but Relling disagrees saying Hjalmar is just an average type of guy elevated to a higher status by his own circle when he did not have any such personality or greatness of character. Relling tells Gregers that he is suffering from an inflamed conscience and falsely hero-worships Hjalmar when he deserves no such importance.

Relling and Gregers argue for a while about their own ideals and views and finally Gregers vows to rest only after he has freed Hjalmar from the doctor's clutches. "Rob the average man of his life illusion and you rob him of his happiness at the same stroke," warns Relling before he goes. With a final word to Hedvig to remind her that the "fearless spirit of sacrifice" would recall her father, Gregers also exits.

Hedvig asks her grandfather how one may shoot a duck and Old Ekdal says in the breast against the feathers. Hedvig cautiously takes the double-barrelled gun from the shelves but keeps it back when Gina enters who asks Hedvig to make a breakfast tray for her father. Hjalmar enters around the same time to Hedvig's joy but Hjlamar asks Gina to keep Hedvig away from him. Disappointed, Hedvig leaves without saying anything.

Hjalmar intends to pack up and leave with his father and cruelly asks Hedvig to leave her room and says that he wishes to be spared from "interlopers" in the last few moments in his house. Hedvig is then seen alone on stage with tears building up in her eyes. She quietly takes the gun and heads up to the garret.

Hjalmar in the meantime rails on about the how tiring it is to do the necessary preparations for leaving and sits down to have his coffee and bread with copious amounts of butter. He finally decides to put off leaving for a few days when Gina says how difficult it will be to find a place that has enough space for the birds and animals for his father.

Hjalmar realises he had no right to tear up the letter as it really belonged to his father and Gregers enters to find Hjalmar gluing the torn pieces of the letter together. He is sad to know that Hjamar has decided to leave the house and Gregers reminds him of his invention to which Hjalmar bitterly responds by saying there never was any invention and that it was all Relling's idea who persisted with the lie since it made Hedvig happy. He professes his love for Hedvig but bitterly says that Hedvig must have never truly loved him. Sounds of the duck quacking from the garret reach both of them and Hjalmar thinks it's his father hunting in there but Gregers smiles and says that Hjalmar may actually find proof of Hedvig's love for him.

They hear the sound of a shot fired in the garret and Gregers explains to Hjalmar that Hedvig had her grandfather shoot the duck to prove her love for him as the duck was her most prized possession. However, when Old Ekdal emerges from his own room, they all have a bad feeling and rush up to the garret. Hjalmar and Gregers carry Hedvig downstairs and Relling pronounces her dead.

Relling looks at Gregers and accusingly says the death was no accident and Gregers responds saying Hedvig's death was not in vain. "Did you not see how sorrow set free what was noble in Hjalmar?" That is only temporary, answers Relling. Within a year, Hedvig "will be nothing to him but a pretty theme for declamation." Hjalmar shall soon steep himself in "syrup of sentiment and self-admiration and self-pity," Relling tells the shocked Gregers. If you are right, then life is not worth living, the young man tells him: Life would be quite tolerable after all [says Relling] "if only we could get rid of the confounded duns that keep pestering us in our poverty with the claims of the ideal." In that case, says Gregers as he prepares to go, I am glad for my destiny — "to be thirteenth at table." "The devil it is," mutters Relling as the curtains come down.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q 1: What is your idea of Hjalmar Ekdal from the action of Act 1?

Q 2: What is the significance and importance of the garret at the Ekdals' home?

Q 3: What does Hjalmar claim regarding his invention?

Q 4: What advice does Gregers give Hedvig?

Q 5: Comment on your sense of what the conversations between Gregers and Relling imply.

Q 6: How is the title *The Wild Duck* symbolic?

14.4 CRITICAL COMMENTARY ON THE PLAY

The first act is a short one but Ibsen skilfully sets up all the important relationships in the play as he develops the history of his characters and shows some as "realistic" (old Werle and Mrs. Sorby) and the others as tainted with "idealism" to mask their shortcomings (Gregers and Hjalmar Ekdal).

Mrs. Sorby, although of unequal rank, treats her influential guests well and with frankness and compassion whereas Hjalmar exposes his

concern for keeping up social appearances. While mourning his father's relegated position in society; he, at the same time, does not publicly accept that he is anyhow related to the shabby looking man that interrupts the party. Insisting that his wife is "not without education" Hjalmar exposes his status-seeking aspirations and proves that he has an inflated and conceited sense of self.

The introduction of Old Ekdal at the party reveals to the audience his naiveté and lack of self-consciousness. He appears as a character from another world who stumbles blindly through the social spheres which include the chamberlains, Mr. Werle, and Mrs. Sorby.

"According to this scheme, Gregers and Hjalmar, who each suspect themselves of being "thirteenth at table," inhabit a peripheral sphere which lies somewhere between the worlds of old Ekdal and old Werle."

The first act provides a description of the world of Werle. The transition to the second scene provides interesting contrast with the wealthy industrialist's circle, but it also establishes that Hjalmar Ekdal's household is a product of Old Werle's achievements. The Ekdal household is possible only because Werle discounted Ekdal's professional training, provided Hjalmar with a wife (Gina) and child (Hedvig), and even presented the precious wild duck.

"This relationship between the two worlds — that of old Werle and that of Hjalmar — is significant for it underscores the imitative nature of Hjalmar Ekdal's life."

Perhaps the most important feeling that the audience experiences in this act about Hjalmar's character is his relationship to his daughter. Hedvig's deep love for her father makes her believe that he is the great man he pretends to be. However, Hjalmar's selfish nature makes him unable to reciprocate this love.

His pathetic attempt to alleviate Hedvig's disappointment by presenting her with the menu of the party instead of a promised delicacy actually exposes Hjalmar's entire way of life.

"The menu as a substitute for the food represents how Ekdal substitutes high-sounding phrases for a depth of feeling he cannot achieve."

We are next introduced to the central motif of the play, the wild duck in the attic of the Ekdal household; it is a symbol which gains in complexity as the drama develops. Primarily, the wild duck stands for the fantastical world created by both the Ekdals to keep their minds off the drab and murky lives they lead.

"She is the final touch, which, like a work of art that requires at least one realistic detail to make it appear real, brings their hunting ground in the garret to a state of perfection."

Gregers, however, believes that the bird symbolically portrays the entire Ekdal family who will drown in the swamps of self-delusional fantasy and he feels it is his responsibility to rescue them from this calamity, in the same way his father's dog rescued the duck when it was entangled in seaweed.

The points of opposition established between Relling and Gregers is a significantly important aspect of the play. Both characters feel responsible for what happens in the lives of others although their methods are different and contrary to one another.

"Ibsen shows that the realist (Relling) is the one who encourages self-deception as a technique of facing life's disappointments while the idealist (Gregers) encourages truthfulness as a way to self-fulfillment."

Having disclosed the truth about Hjalmar's family, Gregers believes his mission is fulfilled and he looks forward to seeing the change in his friend and his 'process of purification'. The result though is highly unexpected and ironic as Hjalmar in his self-conceited way plays the martyr and decides to abandon his family. He even rejects Hedvig when he learns she is Old Werle's daughter and then goes on a drinking binge with Molvik and Relling, escaping from the inner turmoil that begins to gnaw at him.

Still convinced that his friend can yet change and take on a new course of life, he now shifts his focus to Hedvig with his "claim of the ideal". He believes if Hedvig sacrifices the wild duck to show her love, Hjalamar will come to realise how strong family ties are. He further believes that with the destruction of the wild duck; the Ekdals will finally be free of their delusion and fantasy and escape the shadow of Werle.

"By this train of thought Gregers unwittingly commits the same logical error he tries to make Hjalmar avoid: He acts on the belief that if the symbol of fantasy is effaced, then the Ekdals' lives will be devoted to a truthful acceptance of their lot."

Life would be quite tolerable, Relling says as he expresses the keynote of the play, if imperfect souls do not destroy themselves by trying to meet the claims of the ideal. Unable to accept this doctrine as an acceptable standard of life, Gregers chooses to be "thirteenth at table" — to remain outside the circle of the normal human condition. Hjalmar, on the other hand, lacking personal integrity, will survive because he can easily build up a new series of self-deceptions to overcome temporary disillusion. He and Gina will continue their life together, sustaining their sense of personal worth with fresh fantasies.

14.4.1 Major Themes

The following are the important themes of the play *The Wild Duck*. We shall do well if we read some of the books in the reference list to understand the themes in detail.

Concealing Vs Revealing the Truth:

Gregers Werle, due to his extreme idealism, believes in championing the truth at any cost. His polar opposite, the extremely pragmatist Doctor Relling believes in concealing it whenever it may seem to cause harm. While revealing the truth about the Ekdal's and his father, Gregers fails to realise his own truth—that he is a prying and vindictive soul. And, equally ironically, striving to conceal the truth, Relling lays bare the complete naked truth to Werle.

Delusion:

Gregers sees himself as a noble and truthful man of character, whose mission is to champion truth and fix all faults related to the lack of it. Hjalmar believes he is a good husband, and father and even an inventor. To themselves, they seem ideal, like heroes. But neither realise their failings and sees the truth. Besides them, other realities are equally deluded like Lieutenant Ekdal's, who

hunts amongst old Christmas trees in the loft. He retreats to an imaginary world instead of facing the truth. Even someone like Molvik continuously deludes himself into thinking alcohol is the answer to all problems.

Revenge:

Although Gregers claims that his idealism drives him to reveal the truth about his father, it becomes evident that his actual aim is revenge against his father. His hostility towards his father was well known since he was young, when he sided with his mother against Werle in a terrible feud. The following lines from Act 1 reveal this

Gregers: My poor unhappy mother told me; and that the very last time I saw her.

Werle: Your mother! I might have known as much! You and she — you always held together. It was she who turned you against me, from the first.

Extremism:

Gregers' extreme zeal for the truth leads him to destroying lives ruin, even young Hedvig's. In his attempt to genuinely help, Relling is wrong to say that Ekdal, Hjalmar, and Molvik are right in chasing the illusions that shield them from the bitter truth. Gregers and Relling are polar opposites. The only person who walks the middle path is Gina who sees both sides of every argument and does not stray into extremes.

Shame:

A sense of shame permeates the actions of most characters in the play, especially Hjalmar. He avoids recognising his disgraced father at the opening party and later depicts his wife to Gregers as "by no means without culture," equating her with genteel society although Gina's lack of sophistication is well known. Even when he returns home after the party, he is embarrassed to admit he was humiliated by a guest due to his lack of knowledge of wines and instead pretends he educated the gathering about vintage wines.

14.4.2 Major Characters

Gregers Werle:

Gregers Werle, the son of Old Werle, spends fifteen years away avoiding his father and he returns only to avenge his father's crimes against the Ekdals. "In this sense, his appearance in the Ekdal household figures as a "returned of the repressed." He is impassioned and idealistic and is labelled a "spiritual quack" by Relling, his ideological counterpart in the play. He makes it his life's mission to preach the truth and purity of soul whenever he can and he takes it upon himself to unmask Hjalmar's family life. In the course of the play, Ibsen establishes that, because he is so unattractive in appearance, Gregers has abandoned the hope of settling down with his own family; his long brooding solitude has prevented him, furthermore, from understanding his father. In the events of The Wild Duck, Gregers plays a major role of proving to others the virtues of the "claim of the ideal." His destiny is to be the "thirteenth at the table," or the guest outside the circle of diners. His number of course recalls the figure of Judas at the Last Supper; Relling also identifies him as the devil or Antichrist. Gregers's insistence on the ideal condemns him to a false gospel that drives him to the betrayal of his friends and ruin to their houses.

Hjalmar Ekdal:

Dramatic and fiery, the character of Hjalmar is unmasked in the conversation that takes place between Gregers and Relling in Act V. As Relling states Hjalmar's handsomeness, "superficially emotional temperament," and "sympathetic voice," makes him look like the "great light of the future" among his friends. The play of course thoroughly exposes this delusion throughout beginning with his embarrassment in the banquet in the very first act.

Hjalmar believes he is a great father and inventor, the provider for his family and the redeemer of the family line. The revelation of both his continued debt to Old Werle and the reasons

for his marriage to Gina leads him to abandon his family and home. However, his need for comfort and a place to continue playing out his fantasies makes him return home soon. "Hjalmar's dismissal of the petty concerns in life and dawdling in the garret while he awaits the necessary inspiration for his invention is certainly a parody of romantic notions of creation and creativity."

Hedvig Ekdal

Hedvig is the daughter of Gina and Hjalmar possibly fathered by Old Werle and passed onto Hjalmar in marriage perhaps designed to avoid public scandal. She is the most closely connected to the idea of the wild duck. "Hedvig, like the duck, she is no longer certain of her origins and has been adopted into a second home. Her inherited disease (blindness) is the legacy of crimes past, crimes of which she is again innocent. Her blindness also symbolizes the predominance "life-illusion" in the Ekdal household."



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q 7: The play is concerned with the self-delusions of both Hjalmar and Gregers. Comment.

Q 8: Is Gregers a character full of inner contradictions? Or does he stand for unmitigated evil?

Q 9: Discuss the themes of illusion and reality in the play.

Q 10: Discuss *The Wild Duck* as a tragic-comedy.



14.5 LET US SUM UP

In this unit, we have read about the different important aspects of the play *The Wild Duck* such as the plot, its important themes and characterisation. The critical commentary on the play *The Wild Duck* shall enable us to appreciate the play from various viewpoints and discuss the important aspects of the play in sufficient detail. However, many issues remain untouched and we are expected to read up more on those areas after having read the entire text of the play.



Ibsen's plays explored extreme character types whose dilemmas emerge in neurotic behaviour, orchestrated by means of symbolism as a dramatic agent. In *The Wild Duck,* for example, the killing of the bird in the play comes to symbolize the escape from reality that makes Ibsen's thematic point, in dramatizing the disintegration of the Ekdal family, that only illusion, or the "life-lie," makes most existences bearable.



14.6 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS (HINTS ONLY)

Ans to Q 1: Analyse his actions and behavior in the banquet and at home.

Ans to Q 2: Holding onto the past.

Ans to Q 3: Exaggerated wishful thinking.

Ans to Q 4: Sacrifice as proof.

Ans to Q 5: Opposed worldviews.

Ans to Q 6: Answer in relation to the similarities of the characteristics of the duck with the character of Hedvik.

Ans to Q 7: Analyse the actions individually

Ans to Q 8: Idealistic vs delusional.

Ans to Q 9: Characters of Hjalmar, his father and Gregers.

Ans to Q 10: Look for the elements of tragic comedy and try to answer.



14.7 FURTHER READING

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14.8 POSSIBLE QUESTIONS

Q 1: Explore the symbolism of the wild duck used by Ibsen in the play *The Wild Duck*.

Q 2: Evaluate those aspects of *The Wild Duck* that align it with the movement of 'modernism' in Europe in the late 19th century.

Q 3: How would you understand the descriptive phrase, "problem play"? Does *The Wild Duck* present the 'problem' of social morality in its first Act?

Q 4: Write about the important themes of the play *The Wild Duck*.

Q 5: Who are the important characters in the play *The Wild Duck* and what role do they play?

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UNIT 15: EUGENE IONESCO: *THE CHAIRS* (PART I)

UNIT STRUCTURE

15.1 Learning Objectives

15.2 Introduction

15.3 Eugene Ionesco: The Playwright

15.3.1 His Life

15.3.2 His Dramatic Career

15.4 Sources of the Play *The Chairs*

15.5 Critical Reception of Ionesco

15.6 Let us Sum up

15.7 Answers to Check Your Progress (Hints Only)

15.8 Further Reading

15.9 Possible Questions

15.1 LEARNING OBJECTIVES

After going through this unit, you will be able to

- acquaint yourself with Eugene Ionesco as an important postmodern playwright.
- have a glimpse into Ionesco's life and dramatic career
- learn about Ionesco's style of writing through some of his well-known works.
- learn about the "Theatre of the Absurd" that arose in the 20th century and which is said to have been inaugurated by Eugene Ionesco.

15.2 INTRODUCTION

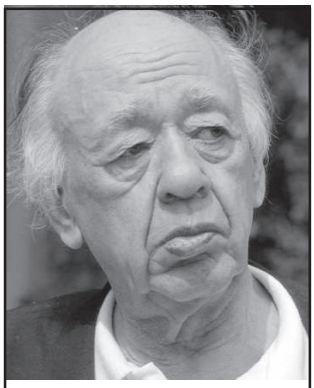
In this unit, we shall discuss the life and works of Eugene Ionesco, a Romanian French playwright who is also one of the foremost playwrights of the French Avant-garde theatre of the 1950s. Writing in the second half of the 20th century, Ionesco is credited with having inspired a revolution in the post-war theatre with his first play *La Cantatrice Chauve* or *The Bald Soprano* (1948), where he introduced his innovative technique of the 'anti-

play', using things or words in order to stress upon the absurdity of human existence. Like his contemporary Samuel Beckett, Ionesco replaces customary plots, structure, and language with fragmentary, contradictory, and often nonsensical dialogue and surreal images in order to present a world of chaos that mocks established institutions and conformity. As we finish reading the unit, we shall be able to appreciate Eugene Ionesco as one of the greatest European dramatists.

15.3 EUGENE IONESCO: THE PLAYWRIGHT

In the following subsections, we shall try to read about the life and works of the playwright Eugene Ionesco in some length.

15.3.1 His Life:



Source:
https://commons.wikimedia.org

Eugene Ionesco (1909–1994) was born in Slatina, Romania to a French mother and a Romanian father. His growing up years is characterised by frequent change of homes and movements between Romania and France. In 1916, the father went away to Bucharest leaving the family behind in Paris where the mother worked in a factory, and returned in 1917 for a brief stay. It was perhaps during this period that Ionesco found the first inspiration for his career as a dramatist, as he regularly watched the puppet theatre in "Jardin du Luxembourg". In 1917, Ionesco's mother sent him along with his younger sister Marilina to La Chapelle Anthenaise due to his poor health. This period has been described by Ionesco in his diary as the most peaceful and happy time of his life. Thérèse Icard, Ionesco's mother took the family back to Bucharest in 1925 only to discover that she had been divorced by her husband and he had taken a new wife. She was forced to return to Paris leaving behind her children with the father. The father's maltreatment of his mother and his

refusal to give her alimony as well as his tendency to always be on the side of those in power contributed to a long-lasting hatred that Ionesco harboured for his father.



LET US KNOW

Avant-Garde Theatre: Avant-Garde literally translates to 'advanced guard', which refers to the newest and the most radical ideas or people often-promoting radical social changes. In theatre, the term has been often attached to the various kinds of experimental plays that were written and performed since the late 19th century beginning with Alfred Jarry's Ubu trilogy. **It** emerged as a reaction against a perceived general cultural crisis and rejected **bourgeois values and conventions**. This fresh concept tried to introduce a different application of language and body in order to **change perception** and create **a more active relationship** with the audience.

Ionesco attended Saint Sava National College in Bucharest and went on to study French literature at the University of Bucharest from 1928 to 1933. He also briefly taught French at a lyceum in Bucharest. In 1936, he married Rodicia Burileanu, with whom he had a daughter. He lost his mother in the same year. Two years later, he acquired a fellowship from the Romanian Government to carry out his doctoral research on French poetry, and moved his family to France. By this time, he had seen the rise of Fascism in the streets of Bucharest. In France, during World War II, Ionesco had to join the military service while his family lived in Marseilles. After the war, they relocated to Paris and Ionesco took up a job in the production department of a law-publishing house. He never wrote his doctoral thesis on French poetry. He worked as a proofreader and a translator in the publishing house and was also inspired to learn English around the same time. It was around this time that Ionesco decided to learn the English language.

His attempt to learn English resulted in his first one-act play titled *La Cantatrice Chauve* or *The Bald Soprano* in 1948. This was followed by other remarkable plays such as *The Lesson*, *The Chairs* and *The Rhinoceros*, that established him as an important absurdist playwright. Ionesco also wrote a number of theoretical works on theatre some of which appear in his *Notes and Counter-notes.* He was elected to the Académie Française in 1970 and continued to explore the meaninglessness of human existence in numerous plays. As a prominent proponent of the absurdist theatre, Ionesco wrote twenty-eight plays over the course of his dramatic career. In the 1980s and the years before his death, Ionesco is said to have stopped writing and focussed on his love for painting. He lived on till the age of 84 and died on March 29, 1994. He is buried in the Cimetière du Montparnasse, in Paris.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q 1: What is an anti-play?

Q 2: Where can we place Eugene Ionesco as a playwright?

Q 3: What do you think are the major influences that shape Ionesco's outlook towards life?

Q 4: What led to the composition of *The Bald Soprano*?

15.3.2 His Dramatic Career

Though he produced a number of written works during his student days at the University of Bucharest, the closest Eugene Ionesco had come to theatre was by writing some 'dialogues' and establishing himself as a dramatic critic. His first essay appeared in 1930 in the *Zodiac Review*. A volume of poetry, *Elegy of Miniscule Beings*, was published in 1931, followed by a collection of essays titled *No!* in 1934, where he attacked popular Romanian writers such as the novelist Camil Petrescu and the poets Tudor Arghezi and Ion Barbuspark.

Eugene Ionesco wrote his first play *The Bald Soprano* only in 1948. His attempt to master the English language at the age of 40, had, according to his own account in "The Tragedy of Language: How an English Primer Became My First Play", resulted in the play. Considered to be the manifesto for Ionesco's anti-play or anti-theatre, *The Bald Soprano* rejects the method of the well-established traditional drama, as it contains no logical plot or character development. It moves in a circular manner and ends where it had begun; in the conversation between a couple belonging to the bourgeoisie class. It begins with Mr and Mrs Smith talking about regular and yet unconnected events while awaiting the Martins whom they had invited for dinner. During the course of the conversation, the Martins realise that they are married and have a daughter. While the two couples wait for something to happen, they tell nonsensical stories to each other, speak in truisms, they argue about issues that never get resolved and as this progresses, we realise the dissipation of language itself and the failure of communication. The characters repeat themselves and seem to be involved in a conversation, which is shallow and empty of psychological depth, highlighting Ionesco's belief that language is full of empty clichés and meaningless expressions. The play highlighted the failure of language to establish logical and rational communication. Staged at the Théâtre des Noctambules on May 11, 1950, this first play of Ionesco's was hardly noticed till a few well-established writers like Jean Anouilh and Raymond Queneau stumbled upon it and praised it. *The Bald Soprano* soon saw success and what followed was a decade of one after another critically acclaimed 'anti-plays' concerning the absurdity and meaninglessness of life.



LET US KNOW

Ionesco's anti-plays reject the established conventions of theatre that follow Realism or Naturalism. While Naturalism or Realism is based

on the premise that life or the world is knowable, Ionesco's anti-plays were based on the belief that life is unknowable and the search for its meaning would end only in further confusion and disorientation. As he would have us believe, the true condition of human existence is not knowable in the conventional theatre, but in the kind of anti-plays written by him to shock the audience out of their complacent 'suspension of disbelief' and awaken to the true condition of human life which is often untellable or unexplainable. His audience are not allowed to walk away after seeing his plays, with a sense of having achieved a meaning, for his plays do not provide one. His plays end with neither a climax nor a resolution, and language itself proves to be an incompetent medium of communication. This may be attributed to Ionesco's own distrust of all forms of ideology and institutions. While there is stark absence of character or plot, what is so common in an Ionesco play, is the absurd multiplication or proliferation of objects on stage that overwhelms the actors as well as the audience into the realisation of an absurd existence. Such proliferation of objects on stage is seen in *The Rhinoceros (*1958*)* and *The Chairs (*1952*)*.

Ionesco's second play *The Lesson* performed in 1951 is considered to be an important absurdist drama. In this play, a professor gets so agitated in his attempt to teach his young pupil that it leads to his killing of the pupil. This second play takes forward Ionesco's preoccupation with the insufficiency of language as a tool of communication, which was an important theme in *The Bald Soprano*. While the repetition in *The Bald Soprano*, is of empty expressions and words, in the *The Lesson*, the repetition is of the professor killing his pupils in his attempt to impose upon them his perspective on subjects like mathematics, language and geography. Like the first play, *The Lesson* too moves in a circular motion as we get to know from the maid's comment that he has been killing pupils every day. Since 1957, it has been in permanent showing at the Théâtre de la Huchette in Paris, along with *The Bald Soprano*.

The *Lesson* was followed by other remarkable plays such as *The Chairs* (1952), *Amédée* (1954), *Jack or The Submission* (1955), *The New Tenant* (1955), *The Killer* (1958) and *Rhinoceros* (1959), his break-through play, and the one that actually made him internationally famous . In *The Chairs*, Ionesco carries forward his technique of repetition as we see the Old Man and the Old Woman welcoming one after another guest, giving them chairs to sit on, as they gather to listen to the Old Man's profound message to the world. However, the guests are invisible to the audience, and all that they can see on the stage is the old couple amidst numerous empty chairs. With this, Ionesco introduces another one of his signature technique, which is the multiplication of objects on the stage. In *Amédée*, we see the prototype of Berenger in the title character who is a playwright. While Amédée and his wife converse in a manner reminiscent of the Old Man and the Old Woman of *The Chairs*, their discussion let the audience know about the multiplying size of a corpse of unknown origin in the other room. A similar multiplication of objects in seen in *The New Tenant*, where two movers continuously bring in furniture belonging to the new tenant with whom the caretaker is trying to have a conversation.

With *The Killer* (1958), Ionesco's technique of anti-theatre becomes more approachable in terms of character and plot. *The Killer* is the first of the playwright's Berenger cycle, *The Rhinoceros* (1959), *Exit the King* (1962) and *A Stroll in the Air* (1963) being the others, in each of which, apart from the character Berenger, there appears to be a plot. In the above-mentioned plays, Berenger, the everyman protagonist is seen confronting various circumstances such as, a killer in 'Radiant City', the disease of 'rhinoceritis' in a small provincial town, the depletion of his power and grandeur as a terribly aged king, and gaining the capacity to fly and witness strange things beyond the clouds. In *The Killer*, Berenger, a middle-aged man arrives at 'Radiant City' hoping to move here, and as he is shown around by the Architect, he is enraptured by the perfection of

the city. It dawns upon him only gradually that 'Radiant City' is deserted. Stones are pelted upon him and the Architect by some unknown person, and later on he is told by the Architect about a killer who lures people with one or another thing towards the edge of a pool and then pushes them into the pool, thus killing them. In *The Rhinoceros*, Berenger is an easy-going and laid-back man who unlike his friends does not want to follow the regular routine of going to work every morning. When everyone around him turns into rhinoceroses for various reasons, Berenger continues to remain human refusing to follow others. Through *The Rhinoceros*, Ionesco reveals his dislike for totalitarianism as well as all other forms of homogenising ideology. Berenger's struggle to remain human is equivalent to Ionesco's own struggle to maintain his individual identity in the face of growing fascism in the 1930s Bucharest.

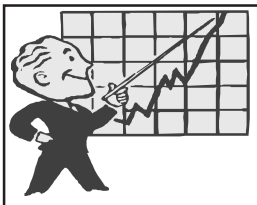
By 1960, Eugene Ionesco's reputation as an excellent playwright had been firmly established. He became one of the most important playwrights in Paris, whose plays were quickly picked up for performance by the 'avant-garde' theatre practitioners. Between the 1950s till the end of his dramatic career, he wrote twenty-eight plays concerning the absurdity of the human condition. His plays were mostly performed in small theatres fully packed with audience from the intellectual and artistic elite of Paris.

Ionesco's constant preoccupation with man's isolation in a meaningless world and hence his existential crisis has resonance with the kind of concerns that playwrights like Arthur Adamov, Jean Genet or Samuel Beckett presented in their works. Using their own techniques to present the absurdity of life, all the above playwrights were contributing towards and participating in a new development in the Parisian theatre of the times. Martin Esslin has identified the above-mentioned playwrights as absurdist in his 1962 work, *Theatre of the Absurd*.



LET US KNOW

Perhaps you all remember from your previous Semester that 'Theatre of Absurd' is a term coined by Martin Esslin in his 1962 book by the same name to refer to a kind of theatre practised by playwrights like Eugene Ionesco, Jean Genet, Arthur Adamov, and Samuel Beckett in the 1950s and 1960s. The above-mentioned playwrights shared a pessimistic vision of humanity struggling vainly to find a purpose and to control its fate, and the post-war mood of disillusionment and scepticism. Their perspective of the human condition is derived from Albert Camus's 1942 essay "The Myth of Sisyphus", which highlights the purposelessness and absurd nature of human existence. Absurdist playwrights did away with most of the logical structures of traditional theatre. There is little conventional dramatic action in their plays, and the characters, however frantically they perform, their busyness serves to underscore the fact that nothing happens to change their existence. Language in this plays therefore; seem to serve no purpose of communication since it is either dislocated, full of clichés or repetitions.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q 5: Which play is considered Ionesco's manifesto for anti-play or anti-theatre? Why?

Q 6: What are the similarities between *The Bald Soprano*, *The Lesson*, *The Chairs* and *Amédée*?

Q 7: What changes does Ionesco introduce in his three-act plays?

Q 8: Briefly discuss the plays of the Berenger cycle.

15.4 SOURCES OF THE PLAY *THE CHAIRS*

In *The Chairs*, an old man in his 90s who live in an isolated house in an island along with his equally old wife, has discovered the great meaning

of life and wishes to deliver the message to the world. The old couple is seen arranging chairs in order to accommodate an ever-increasing number of guests who have been invited to come and hear the Old Man's message. As the gathering grows, the old couple get lost among their guests and they have to shout at the top of their voices to communicate with each other. They try to accommodate the growing number of guests by providing chairs for them, and play the role of good hosts by making small talk with them. With the stifling proliferation of empty chairs on the stage, Ionesco introduces his technique of multiplying objects on the stage in order to highlight the overwhelming question of man's existence. The play ends with the old couple committing suicide relegating the responsibility of passing on the message to the world upon the trusted Orator. The Orator, however, fails to deliver the message as he can only produce meaningless and incomprehensible sounds, thus putting forward Ionesco's main concerns that language is not a competent tool of communication, and that life or the world is unknowable.

In the programme for the original production of *The Chairs* in 1952, Ionesco is reported to have said, "As the world is incomprehensible to me, I am waiting for someone to explain it". He also is reported to have written to Sylvian Dhomme, the first director of the play, as, "The theme of the play is nothingness". If we have to look for sources that may have inspired *The Chairs*, we will surely find it in the two sentences above. The modern man's effort to find meaning in his existence is the source for many of Ionesco's plays including *The Chairs*. However, like many of the absurdist playwrights writing during the 1950s and 1960s, Ionesco's inspiration lies in the philosophy of Existentialism which states that human beings are inherently alone in an incomprehensible and unknowable world, thus proving man's search for meaning as futile.

In *The Chairs*, we see the Old Man who seems to know the meaning of the world and is ready to share it with others who seem to eagerly gather to hear it. The arrival of so many guests at the gathering, all eager to know the meaning of the world, and the ultimate failure of the Orator to deliver the message highlight Ionesco's belief that while the entire human race struggle to know life's meaning, it remains ever elusive. The stage shows us how isolated and alien the Old Man and his wife are even amidst their audience, absent from the audience's view, and surrounded by only chairs.

The Chairs got a lukewarm reception when it was performed for the first time in Paris, on April 22, 1952. Due to its seeming incomprehensibility, it remained unperformed till 1956 when it was revived at Studio des Champs Elysées under the direction of Jacques Mauclair. The 1956 performance of the play was lauded for its profound sense of humour and its unique staging using his signature technique of the anti-play in order to paint a comic portrait of human folly and mankind's ever-lasting quest for meaning in his existence.



LET US KNOW

Existentialism is a philosophy concerned with finding the self and the meaning of life through free will, choice, and personal responsibility. As a philosophy, it became popular in the post WWII years and influenced disciplines like art, literature, drama, philosophy, psychology and theology. Soren Kierkegaard, Jean-Paul Sartre, Heidegger, and Albert Camus are some important names associated with Existentialism. Albert Camus's existential work *The Myth of Sisyphus* that speaks about man's futile search for meaning and clarity in an incomprehensible world devoid of God is the foundational influence behind the 'theatre of the absurd'.

15.5 CRITICAL RECEPTION OF IONESCO

When *The Chairs* was performed for the first time in Paris on April 22, 1952, Eugene Ionesco was still a struggling playwright. As had been the case with the first reception of his first play *The Bald Soprano*, written in 1948 and performed in 1950, the audience of *The Chairs* did not know what to make of it. Due to its seeming incomprehensibility, *The Chairs* remained unperformed until 1956, by which time, theatregoers and critics in Paris might already have been familiar with absurdist plays of Arthur Adamov, Jean Genet and Samuel Beckett. The 1956 performance of the play was lauded for its profound sense of humour and its unique staging using a kind of 'zero degree' style. This style, also known as 'anti-theatre', had of course been established among his audience as Ionesco's signature style of theatre

with the subsequent success of his *The Bald Soprano*, subtitled 'An Anti-Play', with which, it is often said, that Ionesco inaugurated the "Theatre of the Absurd".



LET US KNOW

Roland Barthes used the term 'le degrè zero de l'écriture' or 'writing at zero degree' in 1953 to refer to a style of writing that offers itself as an absence of style. In drama, the term refers to those plays which have no plots or characters. Playwrights writing at zero degree presented on stage, characters with no character and endowed them with meaningless movements that highlight the impossibility of finding meaning in human existence.

Ionesco's anti-plays reject the established conventions of theatre that follow Realism or Naturalism. While Naturalism or Realism is based on the premise that life or the world is knowable, Ionesco's anti-plays were based on the belief that life is unknowable and the search for its meaning would end only in further confusion and disorientation. As he would have us believe, the true condition of human existence is not knowable in the conventional theatre, but in the kind of anti-plays written by him to shock the audience out of their complacent 'suspension of disbelief' and awaken to the true condition of human life which is often untellable or unexplainable. His audience are not allowed to walk away after seeing his plays, with a sense of having achieved a meaning, for his plays do not provide one. His plays end with neither a climax nor a resolution, and language itself proves to be an incompetent medium of communication. This may be attributed to Ionesco's own distrust of all forms of ideology and institutions. While there is stark absence of character or plot, what is so common in an Ionesco play, is the absurd multiplication or proliferation of objects on stage that overwhelms the actors as well as the audience into the realisation of an absurd existence. Such proliferation of objects on stage is seen in *The Rhinoceros (*1958*)* and *The Chairs (*1952*)*.

The Bald Soprano (1950) was meant to be a tragedy, but in performance, it had the effect of a farce. This is how, according to David Bradby, Ionesco stumbled upon his signature formula of the tragic-farce. Ionesco's accidental discovery of his signature formula probably hints at the shock and surprise element his first audience may have found in his plays. The majority of critics received *The Bald Soprano* with dismissive reviews and was not well attended. It was closed only after twenty-five performances at the tiny Theatre des Noctambules, and replaced by one of Bertolt Brecht's plays. *The Bald Soprano*, Ionesco's first play became a success only after a few established writers and critics such as Andre Breton, Arthur Adamov, Queneau, and Mircea Eliade stood in support of him. The first audience of *The Chairs* had similarly not known how to interpret it till 1956 when it was revived after Jean Anouilh's open letter in *Le Figaro*, supporting the play.

By 1958, Ionesco was an established playwright writing one tragic-farce after another. The Théâtre de la Huchette in Paris had begun a permanent show of Ionesco double-bill in 1957 with *The Bald Soprano* and *The Lesson*. He had gained fame and international acclaim. The stir Ionesco and his plays caused can be gauzed by the English theatre critic Kenneth Tynan's preoccupation with him and the ensuing public debate, some of which were printed in *Notes and Counter-notes*. In the summer of 1958, Kenneth Tynan attacked Ionesco in an essay published in the *London Observer*, as the 'messiah' of the enemies of realism in theatre. This accusation was made in response to Ionesco's essay "Experience of the Theatre" where he differentiated between realistic theatre and theatre that evoked 'imaginative truth', and where he also expressed his distrust of realistic theatre as a medium of expressing the true picture of life. Tynan's accusation that his plays had no message or no contact with reality compelled Ionesco to respond in a series of to and fro articles that his plays indeed have an impact on reality. In what came to be known as "the London Controversy", Ionesco was forced to defend and thereby define the art and aims of his theatre by responding to Tynan's criticism.

The defining moment of Ionesco's dramatic career perhaps came when Martin Esslin described him as the foremost playwright of the 'Theatre of the Absurd' and counted him one with Beckett, Adamov and Genet, though Ionesco himself never wanted to be put in a category. Martin Esslin hailed Ionesco's theatre as a far more effective illustration of Albert Camus's concept of the absurd. In his view, Ionesco presents on the stage the absurd in its purest form, truer to life than realism itself.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q 9: What is the "London Controversy"? Discuss.

Q 10: What is the defining moment in Ionesco's dramatic career? Discuss.



15.6 LET US SUM UP

In this unit, we have learned that Eugene Ionesco was a French playwright of Romanian origin, who wrote between 1950s and 1970s. He gained fame in the Paris theatre circle as an avant-garde playwright writing absurd plays, which came to be recognised as tragic-farce. He began with one-act plays that have no logical plot or character development to three-act plays, which had some semblance of plot and character. Some of his well-known plays are *The Bald Soprano*, *The Lesson*, *The Chairs*, *The Killer* and *The Rhinoceros* through which he presented his concern about the predicament of modern man and the breakdown of language. In his plays, Ionesco shows us the modern man in his loneliness and isolation, in his attempt to find meaning and purpose in life and in his inability to use language for communication. His signature techniques are the use of repetitions, nonsensical conversation between characters that are filled with clichés, and multiplication or proliferation of objects on stage. As explained by Ionesco in one of his responses to Kenneth Tynan, he attempts to "exteriorize, by using objects, the anguish of (his) characters, to make the set speak and the action on the stage more visual, to translate into concrete images terror,



Like Berenger in *The Rhinoceros*, Ionesco always sought to maintain his individuality, as an independent thinker and never part of a category. In opposition to "theatre of the absurd", he preferred to call his work "theatre of derision".

regret or remorse, and estrangement ... " He preferred to call his theatre the "theatre of derision" precisely because of the kind of overwhelming effect such techniques would have on his audience. Though Ionesco never wanted to belong to a group or be part of a herd, Martin Esslin, in his 1962 work *The Theatre of the Absurd,* counted Ionesco as the foremost absurdist playwright among established playwrights of 1950s and 1960s such as Arthur Adamov, Samuel Beckett, and Jean Genet.



15.7 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS (HINTS ONLY)

Ans to Q 1: Ionesco's anti-plays reject the established conventions of theatre… ...life is incomprehensible... …it is not possible to interpret it neither in reality nor on the stage... …the search for life's meaning would end only in further confusion and disorientation.

Ans to Q 2: A foremost playwright among the French avant-garde... …brought about a revolution in post-war theatre… ...credited with having founded the theatre of the absurd with his *The Balcony*... …He refuses to be held within a category.

Ans to Q 3: Ionesco regularly watched the puppet theatre at one point of his childhood... …His stay at La Chapelle Anthenaise due to his poor health... …Constant changing of homes and moving to and fro between France and Bucharest... …his father's politics... …rising Fascism in Bucharest.

Ans to Q 4: Ionesco's attempts to learn the English language... …reading an English primer... …his realisation of the disjointed nature of language.

Ans to Q 5: Ionesco's first play...disjointed language... …language as insufficient tool for communication... …confusion and uncertainty in the play.

Ans to Q 6: One-act plays... …claustrophobic environment...sense of being trapped... …failure of communication and multiplication of objects.

Ans to Q 7: There is a sense of plot, which seems to develop in the three acts... …they become more approachable in terms of character and plot... …the conclusion appears to be free of uncertainty.

Ans to Q 8: *The Killer* (1958), *The Rhinoceros* (1959), *Exit the King* (1962) and *A Stroll in the Air* (1963) belong to Ionesco's Berenger cycle... ...Berenger is an everyman facing the world in various circumstances...He may be a type of the existential hero.

Ans to Q 9: Kenneth Tynan's criticism of Ionesco... …Ionesco's responses to him.

Ans to Q 10: Martin Esslin's *The Theatre of the Absurd*.



15.8 FURTHER READING

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___ (1997). *The Chairs.* Translated by Martin Crimp. Faber and Faber Limited.

15.9 POSSIBLE QUESTIONS

Q 1: Which is Ionesco first play? When was it performed? Write a detailed note on the plays of Eugene Ionesco.

Q 2: When was *The Chairs* written? What is the play about? Discuss.

Q 3: What is the 'zero degree' style of theatre? Elaborate with reference to Ionesco's plays.

Q 4: What is 'Theatre of the absurd'? Who coined the term? Discuss some absurdist playwrights with reference to their important works.

Q 5: What kind of theatre practitioners were attracted by Ionesco's plays? Elaborate.

Q 6: When was *The Chairs* revived and who was instrumental for it? Write in detail about the reception of *The Chairs* following its first staging.

Q 7: Why was Ionesco attacked by Kenneth Tynan in the *London Observer*?

Q 8: What can be termed as the defining moment of Ionesco's dramatic career? What does Ionesco prefer to call his dramatic work?

Q 10: Discuss the thematic concerns of Ionesco's plays.

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UNIT 16: EUGENE IONESCO: *THE CHAIRS* (PART II)

UNIT STRUCTURE

16.1 Learning Objectives

16.2 Introduction

16.3 Act wise Summary of the Play *The Chairs*

16.4 Critical Commentary on *The Chairs*

16.4.1 Major Themes

16.4.2 Major Characters

16.5 Let us Sum up

16.6 Further Reading

16.7 Answers to Check Your Progress (Hints Only)

16.8 Possible Questions

16.1 LEARNING OBJECTIVES

After going through this unit, you will be able to

- make an act wise summary of the play *The Chairs*
- discuss the major themes of the play
- identify the major character and discuss their role in the play
- appreciate the play *The Chairs*, through a critical analysis of the play

16.2 INTRODUCTION

In this unit, which is also the last unit of Block as well as of the Course, we shall discuss in length the different aspects of the play *The Chairs*. This play was written and performed for the first time in 1952. In *The Chairs*, an absurdist tragic-farce, an old couple is seen arranging chairs in order to accommodate an ever-increasing gathering of guests who have come to hear the Old Man's message to the world. As the invited guests arrive, the Old Man and the Old Woman are seen bringing in onto the stage more and more chairs, frantically trying to accommodate the ever-increasing number of invisible guests. The room/stage is filled with chairs and the old couple move around among the guests making conversations. The audience

can hear numerous voices, and see several chairs on the stage, yet it is starkly empty of people. The stifling proliferation of empty chairs on the stage and the fact that the couple lives in a house surrounded by water on all sides succeeds to highlight the old couple's utter isolation. The play ends with the old couple committing suicide confident that their message will be delivered through the trusted Orator. The Orator, however, turns out to be deaf and mute, who fails to deliver the message of the Old Man to the world, thus putting forward Ionesco's main concerns that language is not a competent tool of communication, and that life or the world is unknowable. With *The Chairs*, Ionesco continued with his one-act absurd tragic farce, a style of theatre he had begun with his *The Bald Soprano* in 1950. As we finish reading the unit, we shall be able to offer our critical appreciation of the play as one of the forerunners of the Theatre of the Absurd.

16.3 ACT WISE SUMMARY OF *THE CHAIRS*

The Chairs, an one-act play begins with the Old Man standing on a ladder and leaning out of the window, while the Old Woman is lighting the gas-lamp indicating that it must be some time after sunset. The woman requests the old man to close the window as he is letting in the stench of the water and the mosquitoes inside. She tells him to come away from the window and sit down, warning him that he might fall into the water and reminding him about Henry the Seventh. The old man protests at the woman's reference to Tudor history as her constant historical references make him sick to death. He tells her that he likes looking out and observing the little boats. She reminds him that there are no boats outside and even if there were, he wouldn't see them, as it is dark outside. When the man insists on looking outside and leans further, the woman is frightened and drags him away from the window. While the man allows the woman to drag him away from the window, he continues to protest. He tells her he wanted to watch outside and he loves watching the water. To this, the woman expresses her discomfort in the house on that island surrounded by water on all sides. She says she would never get used to the situation and the very thought of water makes her head spin. She drags the man over to the

chairs and he sits down on her lap. Sitting comfortably on the woman's lap the man begins to talk about a past when darkness fell much later than the present, and how things have changed. The woman praises his memory and intellect, and says that he could have had a powerful occupation that would equal his intellect, if only he had any ambition. He declares that his having a better occupation would have changed nothing and life wouldn't have improved. Moreover, he is still very good at his job, for he is "Master of the mop and bucket". The woman strokes the man as if he were her child. The man complains of boredom, at which, the woman suggests that he should 'be' something to cheer them both. The man asks the woman to 'be' something instead as it was her turn. From playing a role, or trying to do so, the couple move on to story telling.

The woman wants the man to tell the story that begins "the two of us came". The man expresses his boredom with the story as he has been telling it to her every night of the seventy- five years they have been married. He protests that she has been making him tell the same stories, impersonate the same characters and be the same months every evening of their married life without exception. She tells him that she never finds the stories tedious as they are about his life, and forgets them as soon as they are told. Therefore, she remembers nothing and every evening the stories return to her as new. The man is soon convinced and begins the story "the two of us came", with the woman repeating phrases after him. The story that unravels is of the two arriving at a metal gate enclosing a garden, or a place called Paris, soaked to their bones in rain and freezing in cold; wanting to enter the garden, but being prevented from doing so. The woman points out that there never had been any place called Paris, to which the man responds by saying that Paris was the city of light, but now is in ruins, and what remains of it is only a lullaby, "Paris will always be Paris". As the old man talks about the ruin of Paris, he appears to be lost in dream, while the woman praises his intellect again.

After a momentary silence, the man resumes his story, while Sémiramis, the woman starts laughing. She is seen laughing with soft senility initially. Then she laughs with more abandon as the man joins her. The

man's story continues amidst laughter with the woman repeating phrases after him. Then the two laugh and speak at the same time. The woman praises the man again and begins to speak about how he could have achieved something great. The man questions her if they cannot be happy with what little they have. At this the woman asks, "But what if you've missed your true calling", sending man into an infantile state of tears, crying out for his mother. While the man cries for his mother, the woman strokes him lovingly and reminds him of her presence. She cuddles him and tries to calm him down when she sobs like a baby with mouth wide open. The woman tells him, "I'm your wife. I'm your mummy now." He calms down at last after the woman repeats his phrases like a lullaby: "Little lost orphan, last little orphan, diddle diddle darling..." She reminds him that he is a special person as he has a message, and the guests would be arriving soon. This reminder seems to awake the man from his infantile state and he gets off from his wife's lap and takes short strides like a marching soldier off on a mission, his mission being the message that he has to share with the whole of humanity. He agrees with his wife that he truly must be a gifted man as he has ideals, and he has done his duty as a janitor honourably. We get a glimpse into the man's past when his wife points out that their life would have been more tolerably if only he had been less intolerant. His intolerant nature, we get to know has caused them the loss of great many friends including the man's own brother.

The talk about the past sends the man and woman into a long silence. They sit on their respective chairs, stiff and motionless, and then quiet naturally return to the story about Paris. The man speaks as if in a dream, trying to recall what lay beyond the gates. When he fails to do so and begins to get agitated, the woman tells him to rest his mind. The man speaks about how hard it is for him to put things into words, and yet it is utterly necessary to speak everything. The woman reminds him that to reveal the message is his sacred duty. "Mankind is waiting. The universe hangs on your lips", she tells him. The man, who seemed to hesitate earlier, agrees to reveal his message and the woman expresses her pride in him, and tells him that probably once they begin to speak they will rediscover the city and

the garden that they find so difficult to remember. At this, the man reveals that he has hired a professional Orator who would speak on his behalf. The wife is delighted to know that the man would reveal his message that very night, and at last, it is truly happening. She excitedly runs through all the people such as the property developers, the chemists, violinists, politicians, miners, artists, bankers, post-Marxist, neo-Nazis, the popular press, the Pope, fundamentalists, and environmentalists, and wants to know if he has invited everyone. As the woman runs through the list, and the man assures her of having invited them, he begins to grow agitated. This agitation grows when the woman wants to know if he is sure about tonight, and he begins to pace round the woman taking small uncertain steps. The woman's question puts him in doubt that he begins to wonder if the revelation of the message would be too tiring for him. However, he soon concludes that it is too late to cancel, as the guests must be already on their way.

Soon the first guest arrives and the old couple nervously head for the door. As the man hurries towards the door, the woman limps behind fidgeting with her hair and dress. The door is hidden from the audience's view and it can hear only the sound of the door opening, the man greeting the guest and introducing his wife. They appear to exchange pleasantries and the woman praises the guest's coat and suit. From their conversation, it appears that the guest is a lady. However, as the old man and his old wife reappear on stage and scramble to give her a chair, we realise that the guest is invisible. The invisible lady is seated in between the couple who tell her things about their lives and listen to her or laugh at what she is telling them, and responds to her queries. In between there are moments of silence when they seem to listen to the lady intently. As this goes on, the doorbell rings and the man rush to open the door ordering Sémiramis to quickly get some more chairs.

The second guest is a Field Marshal, on seeing whom, the old man freezes respectfully and then fumbles with words to welcome him. When the woman sees the Field Marshal, she is filled with wonder at his fine uniform. He is seated next to the lady after the initial introductions and the old couple stand behind their chairs. The invisible Field Marshal appears to

be having a conversation with the lady while the old couple listens. We get a hint of something unacceptable happening between the two with the look of concern on the faces of the old couple and the old man's warning that the young lady's husband could arrive any time. The Field Marshal seems to be taking liberties with the lady as the old woman tries to stop him by tugging at his sleeve and saying, "It's not decent! There are limits!" The old man tries to distract the Field Marshal from what he is doing by trying to have a conversation about the battlefield. Just when he appears to have failed to stop him and expresses his disappointment at his undignified manners, the doorbell rings again. He hurries towards the door to welcome the new guests while the woman rushes off to fetch more chairs.

From the door, the old man is heard exclaiming delightedly at the arrival of a lady and her husband. The lady and her beauty, it appears, must have had much influence upon the old man in his youth. He expresses surprise at her arrival, and begins to stumble with words. Greeting her, he says, "- the fabulous Beauty ... And this must be the Beast, I mean your husband". Speaking to the husband, he says, "... you must forgive me only I knew your wife long before you did ... Oh yes – she was just the same – apart from the hose, I mean nose ..." While he introduces his childhood friend, the 'fabled Beauty' of his youth to his wife and the other guests, the husband of the Beauty gives Sémiramis a gift. Sémiramis, the old woman is flattered and begins to flirt with him. The couple stands behind the chairs, back to back, but almost touching, and while the old man is busy talking to the Beauty, Sémiramis talks to the husband. In between, they speak a word or two with the lady and the Field Marshal. The old man's conversation with the invisible Beauty reveals that he had been in love with her once upon a time. While he nostalgically recalls the past, his wife deteriorates into an increasingly grotesque behaviour in her attempt to flirt with Beauty's husband, the Offsetlithographer. She lifts her skirts, reveals her red stockings, shrieks erotically, and laughs like a whore. This grotesque behaviour of the woman ends abruptly, but she continues to speak coquettishly with the Offsetlithographer, and her responses show that he is flirting with her as well. Gradually, as the old man speaks to the Beauty

about the past and what could have been if they were courageous enough, and the old woman flirts with Beauty's husband, they lead them towards the chairs and offer them seats. The old couple too sits down in silence, except for occasional 'yes' and 'no'. Between them lie four empty chairs, seemingly occupied by their guests, who are invisible to the audience's eyes.

The woman tells the Offsetlithographer about their son who has left them and how they had tried to stop him from leaving. The old man contradicts his wife by revealing that they never had a son although they had tried everything to have one. While the woman continues with her story about the son who left, the old man talks about himself, and how bad a son he had been to his mother, whom he had left to die alone in a ditch. While the old man continues with this story, the wife contradicts him by asking the Offsetlithographer not to reveal about the son to the old man, who loved his parents dearly. While the old man claims that he left his mother to die alone, the old woman reveals that the old man's parents died in his arms. The conversation grows more and more disjointed culminating in the old couple remaining frozen in their chairs. Then the doorbell rings again.

The old man is suddenly charged with energy as he rushes to the door while asking Sémiramis to get more chairs. She frantically rearranges the chairs and gets the room ready since the Orator is due very soon. The old man walks in with three or four very tall guests and after making the preliminary introductions hurries Sémiramis off to fetch more chairs. She begins to grumble but does as ordered. More and more guests arrive and Sémiramis fetches more and more chairs to accommodate them. The old couple are seen trying to make introductions among the ever increasing number of guests, but fails. The doorbell rings more frequently, and the old man is almost out of breath welcoming the guests and trying to arrange them, while the old woman hobbles as fast as she can fetching chairs for the guests. As the stage is filled with chairs, we are given the impression of an incredibly large gathering, among whom the old man is trying to move to and from the door, while the old woman is trying to fetch chairs. They are careful not to bump into the guest, and at the same time try to talk to the

guests. The momentum of the action, the old man answering the door and his wife fetching chairs seem to rise to a crescendo, before gradually slackening and then finally stopping. The doorbell does not ring anymore, and the man and his wife do not have to accommodate any more guests. The room/stage, however appear to be jam-packed with people or rather, empty chairs. Many guests appear to have found no chairs to sit on, and Sémiramis declares that there are no more chairs. She begins to sell programmes, while the old man tries to placate the guests, assuring them that they would be given seats. They are getting impatient and asking questions to the man as well as his wife, to which they respond impatiently and sometimes rudely. In between selling programmes, Sémiramis is heard wondering, "Who on earth are all these people?"

Climbing onto the rostrum, the old man tries to address the gathering, but the place is so crowded that he is jostled and pushed, and then propelled by the crowd towards the window near a step-ladder. Sémiramis too is pushed and jostled by the crowd and propelled towards another window near another step-ladder. They continue to talk to the guests, and also try to talk to each other, amidst the crowd. They cannot see each other, but can hear each other's voices. The dialogues are disjointed as the man speaks to guests on his side while the woman speaks to those on her side. They let it be known to the guests that they are about to hear his message through an Orator who is due very soon. Soon the words of the woman sound like echoes of her husband's. When the old man says, "Suffered much. Learned much", the woman repeats the words and when he says, "You'll see for yourselves: my system is perfect", she says, "You'll see for yourselves: his system is perfect."

The last of the invited guests, the Emperor himself, arrives amidst a lot of fanfare and loud noise, without ringing the doorbell and the old man hurrying to open the door. The Emperor is equally invisible, but with his arrival, the stage is flooded with an intense light. The old man is full of wonder and weeps with emotion. He climbs the step-ladder to get a glimpse of the Emperor, calls out to him and greets him. He declares himself and his wife as the Emperor's most faithful subjects. He tries to reach the

Emperor and offer him a seat, but in vain. He cannot make way through the crowd. Sémiramis too is standing up on the step-ladder trying straining her back to see if the Emperor has been taken care of. Through repetitions, the old man's occupation, his 'life full of suffering', betrayals and persecution by friends are brought up. The woman continues to repeat phrases after him, like an echo. He tries to tell the Emperor how his message could have saved the world, but soon apologises for his ineptness at it. He tells him that the Orator is coming and he would explain everything.

The Orator comes much later, and he is the only other real person on stage apart from the old couple. Looking like a nineteenth-century painter or poet, the Orator appears to be unreal as he walks slowly to the back, to face the gathering. Climbing on to the rostrum, he surveys the gathered crowed and freezes in a solemn pose. The old man tells the audience to ask for the Orator's autograph, and almost immediately, he begins to sign. Thanking the heavens for the arrival of the Orator, the old man addresses the crowd. He thanks them for coming to listen to his message. "My life has been a full one. My mission is accomplished. I shall not have lived in vain now that my message can be revealed to the world", he says. As he goes on to speak about his philosophy, which would guide the universe, the Orator appears to be oblivious about what the man is speaking about. He is seen busy repelling requests for autographs. Putting his full faith upon the Orator, the old man throws himself out of the window. At the same time, Sémiramis too throws herself out of the window near her. The fanfare, the fireworks, the showering of confetti and streamers and the cry ''Long live the Emperor!' comes to a sudden halt and there is a sudden silence. The guests react with only an 'Ah' as the sickly sound of bodies falling into the water is heard. All the lights vanish except for a faint one, and the windows remain wide open like two black holes.

After a few moment of silence, the Orator communicates with the guests. He tries to make the crowd understand that he is deaf and dumb by making signs. He makes desperate attempts to make himself understood by producing guttural groans. The crowd appears to not understand him, as he lets his arms fall to his sides in resignation. Then his face lights up as

he comes upon an idea. He writes on the blackboard 'ANGELSWEEP' followed by 'NNA NNM NWNWNW V'. Turning to his audience, he points to what he has written. However, the audience seems to have failed to understand him again, and dissatisfied, he violently rubs what he had written. He makes a second attempt by writing in equally big capital letters 'XP ËGOD IS ËGone I©'. He is very pleased at what he has written and turns to look at the audience. He smiles at them questioningly, remains motionless for a while, and when he realises that his audience have not understood him, he angrily takes his leave and gets off the rostrum. He walks towards the door, takes a final ceremonious leave of the guests and the Emperor and exits.

The door at the back, like the windows remain wide open after the Orator leaves. The stage is filled with empty chairs, covered in confetti and streamers. For the first time, human noises, apparently belonging to the gathered crowd, such as bursts of laughter, mutterings, 'shush'ing and coughing are heard. The play ends with this noise first growing and then gradually dying down.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q 1: How is *The Chairs* similar to *The Bald Soprano*?

Q 2: Explain the relationship between the Old Man and the Old Woman.

Q 3: Describe a typical evening in the lives of the old couple.

Q 4: Can you deduce the nature of the message from the kind of guests who come to the old couple's house? Give reasoned answer.

16.4 CRITICAL COMMENTARY ON *THE CHAIRS*

The Chairs, Ionesco's third anti-play is a tragic farce about an old couple who seemed to have stumbled upon a great message that would save humanity. In their nineties, the couple live in a tower surrounded by water on all sides, living lonely and stagnant lives. Nothing much happens

in their lives, and we get a sense that every evening of their married life they have been playing the same role-playing games and telling the same stories. This is similar to the absurdist playwrights' concern about the sameness or routine activities with which human lives are characterised. The old man's protest that he is bored of telling the story "the two of us came" every evening, is indicative of this repetition. This repetition is a part of Eugene Ionesco's technique to highlight the absurdity of life, and in *The Chairs*, it can be seen not only in the games and stories the old couple tell each other, but also in several other aspects. For instance, the old man keeps telling Sémiramis, his wife to drink her tea, while Sémiramis repeatedly praises her husband's intellect and how he could have been more successful. The most telling repetitions are of the constant ringing of the doorbell, the arrival of guests and the fetching of chairs for the guests. As the stage is filled with chairs, we see Ionesco's other signature technique of overwhelming the audience with the multiplication of objects, which is symbolic of the absurdity of human life.

While the constant arrival of guests should have filled the stage with people, and we are given that sense, the stage is actually stark empty, except for the old couple and the empty chairs. The guests are invisible or non-existent, just like the many other things or references in the play, which are non-existent. When the play begins, the old man claims to love watching the boats in the sea as they look like tiny sunspots. However, there is no sun, and it being dark, the man cannot see any boats. The tea that he asks his wife to finish is non-existent. The existence of the son that the woman talks about with one of the guests is doubtful, just as the profound message of the old man is uncertain. For, the very speech through which the message should have been revealed fails to come into existence, as the man responsible for it turns out to be deaf and dumb. The conversations that take place between the couple or with the guests are hollow-sounding without depth or meaning, like the incoherent words uttered by the Orator.

An uncertainty similar to the existence of the son or the old man's profound message can also be seen in the kind of relationship shared by the old man and his wife. While we are given the impression that they are

man and wife, we see the relationship alternating between that of conjugality and of a mother-son relation. The man sits upon his wife's lap, while she strokes him lovingly. When he cries out for his mother, his wife assures him of her presence and calms him down by singing a lullaby. Once or twice we also hear the man telling the Beauty, one of his guests, that his wife has taken the place of his mother now. The old man's behaviour is almost infantile while that of his wife's is that of an adult taking care of a child calling him 'Poppet' or 'Poppety-poppet'. While the old man complains of boredom, the wife attempts to pull him out of it by suggesting games or stories with which they can entertain themselves. She constantly praises his intellect while wondering at the possibilities lost due to his lack of will and ambition. Just as their routine is cyclical, the old couple's existence itself is a circle, as they do not know the beginning from the end. In his nineties, the old man behaves like a child; the wife, his companion towards the end of life also becomes the mother, the gate, which seems to promise much actually leads them to a city in ruins, and the revelation, which would have saved humanity, is preceded by the old couple's death.

It is probably due to the man's lack of will and confidence that another possibility will be lost to the couple. They are determined to reveal the profound message to the world through the guests that have gathered there. However, the man would not speak. He has difficulty putting his thoughts into words and hence has hired an orator. Ironically, the Orator has neither the capacity to hear his message nor the language to reveal it. The Orator's failure to deliver the message highlight Ionesco's belief that while the entire human race struggle to know life's meaning, it remains ever elusive, escaping from the grasp of man like the couple who throws themselves out of the windows even before the message is delivered. Coming from a playwright who has expressed his distrust of language in his earlier plays like *The Bald Soprano* and *The Lesson*, *The Chairs* too highlights Ionesco's concern about the insufficiency of language as a medium of communication. The profound message remaining undelivered is significant as it helps to highlight the old man's failure to take responsibility, as has been seen in his refusal to accept his fault for losing friends, and his abandonment of his

mother as well as his denial of having a son (if they had one). The suicide in this context can also be seen as a part of the man's escape from responsibility.



LET US KNOW

For Albert Camus, the 'Existential Hero' is one who, like Sisyphus, grasped the absurd pointlessness of his task or existence and chooses to embrace it anyway. Sisyphus overcomes his fate by choosing a heroic attitude toward life's apparent meaninglessness and thereby proving that man has the capability to will meaning into any situation. In contrast, the Old Man is the non-hero who is paralysed by his situation and unable to rise above the meaninglessness.

The double suicide of the couple seems to be their only exit, trapped as they are in their semi-circular claustrophobic room surrounded by water on all sides, with their cyclical existence of the same stories and games cut off from any outside contact, overwhelmed with the burden of a profound message. The multiplication of the chairs on the stage and the growing number of guests who push the couple towards the windows, symbolically contribute to the sense of claustrophobia. The stagnant water that surrounds them is indicative of the stagnant lives the couple have been living for years, with nothing new happening. It is a circle of existence from where, if there is a possibility of escape, it is only through death.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q 5: Elaborate on the uncertainty that surround the Old man and the Old Woman.

Q 6: Discuss the two signature techniques of Ionesco seen in *The Chairs*.

16.4.1 Major Themes

"The theme of the play is nothingness". Eugene Ionesco is reported to have written so in 1952, to the first director of *The* Chairs,

Sylvian Dhomme. Then, in the programme for the original production of the play, he said, “As the world is incomprehensible to me, I am waiting for someone to explain it”. The overriding theme of The *Chairs* is then, absurdity itself. Ionesco’s third, this absurdist play deals with the larger overwhelming absurdity of human existence, where man is confronted with nothingness in its everyday reality and therefore, he has to constantly attempt to fill this nothingness with meaning. The futile attempt to find meaning in life is the theme of absurd drama, which is formulated around the paradox where only two answers are possible; the absurd silence or the futile and empty talk. Central to the absurdist notion of life is that it is meaningless and purposeless, and is characterised by repetitions. Apart from the cyclical nature of life, the isolation of mankind and failure of communication are the themes, which make the play an absurd one.

Cyclical Nature of Life:

The old couple live a cyclical existence in their island house where they tell the same stories and play the same games every evening. The old man declaring that he is sick to death of Tudor history, which his wife keeps referring to, tired of doing February, or being sick of the game “the two of us came”, provides us a glimpse into the life of these two old people who seem to be stuck in their cyclical existence. To highlight this further, Ionesco gives us speeches which sound quiet repetitive, with the woman merely echoing her husband’s words and phrases at times. The wife’s constant praise of the man’s intellect and the talk of what could have been if he had the will is another example of that repetition. The sense of repetition becomes all the more pressing upon the readers and the audience with the arrival of more and more guest and the bringing in of chairs to accommodate them. We are made to realise that just as the invisible guests appear to impatiently press upon the old couple, similarly, they are pressurised by the repetitions, which entrap them in a prison-like existence with no access to the past or the future.

Isolation of Mankind:

The old man and the woman are lonely and isolated in their semi-circular room, and they try to keep each other company by attempts at entertainment. The stagnant water that surrounds them cuts them off from the rest of the world. It isolates and confines them in their lonely and tedious lives. The old man, we get to know, has lost friends and probably family due to his intolerant nature. The couple does not have any visitor, nor do they go to visit anyone. They had a son who left them, and the old man had a mother whom he left to die alone. That they are utterly isolated is reflected in the number of empty chairs that fill up the stage, supposedly occupied by guest awaiting his message, but who are all invisible. The only other visible person, the Orator, hardly notices the couple, and when they leave him behind to convey their message, he looks all the more lonely as he has to face the crowd on his own. He tries to make communication, but in vain, remaining ever alone in his own silent world.

Failure of Communication:

Language, according to Ionesco, is not a very reliable medium of communication. He realised this while trying to learn English from an English primer and had revealed the idiosyncratic nature of language in *The Bald Soprano*. In *The Chairs*, communication is futile as the conversations between the old man and his wife are empty and hollow-sounding, one repeating phrases after the other, or pronouncing empty phrases like echoes. The old man shies away from communicating his message to the world despite its utter necessity, because he knows that he cannot put ideas into words. The conversations of the old couple with their guests also highlight the futility of communication, as it is only their words that the audience hear against the silent words of the invisible guest. Their conversations are characterised by repetitions, empty phrases, sometimes spoken hurriedly, rising to a crescendo and

then falling into long silences. The ultimate failure of communication takes place through the deaf-mute Orator in whose hands the old couple leave the responsibility of passing on their message. Just as words and phrases fail to establish a connect between human beings, the meaning of life remains elusive since it is through language that it needs to be done, and language has time and again proved its insufficiency.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q 7: Discuss *The Chairs* as an absurd play.

16.4.2 Major Characters

Had the guests in *The Chairs* been visible, this play would have probably had an absurdly large number of characters. However, while we are given the impression of a large gathering, there are only three real or visible characters. These three major characters are the Old Man, the Old Woman and the Orator.

The Old Man:

The protagonist of the play, the Old Man has been married to the Old Woman for seventy-five years, and entertains her nightly with the same story and role-playing games. He is bored of his repetitive existence. Life is so cyclical for him, in fact, that he seems to be confused about beginnings and endings, as well as about his age. Though he is ninety-five years old, he defers tremendously to his superiors and, is utterly infantile. His wife has to repeatedly praise him, love him and think of ways to drive away his boredom. He sobs on his wife's lap, upon whom he has conferred the role of a mother. He calls himself an orphan, though he is the one who abandoned his mother.

Living on the island, in a house surrounded by water on all sides, he spends his time looking at tiny boats in the water. Apart

from that, he devotes his time to the heroic quest of finding life's meaning. His quest appears to have been successful, as he seems to have arrived at the profound meaning of life, which would save humanity. He desires to share it with the world, but lacks the confidence to speak. He has intellect, so we are told, and could have achieved a much higher occupational position. However, he lacks the will or the ambition for a higher place, and has remained a janitor all his life. The partial reconstruction of his past through a chaotic retrospect hints at his lack or failure to take responsibility. He is a non-hero in his quest for a higher meaning in life, which remains unachieved due to his characteristic denial of possibilities. Unachieved heroism, and unfulfilled hopes due to his own reluctance to be responsible, makes the Old Man's life a tragic farce.

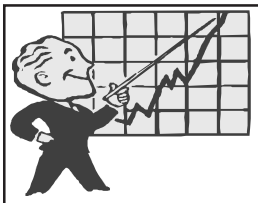
The Old Woman:

Called Sémiramis, she has been married to the Old Man for seventy-five years. On the island where the very thought of water makes her head spin, her only entertainment is listening to her husband's stories and role-playing games. While telling the same stories and playing the same games tires her husband, she keeps them fresh by erasing her memory every night. The stories and the games are always new to her. She frequently plays the role of the Old Man's surrogate mother, by allowing him to sit upon her lap and stroking him lovingly, by singing lullaby to him and encouraging him. She is also seen frequently reminding him about lost opportunities for a better life due to his shortcomings, while not stopping short of praising his intellect repeatedly. While she is a comforting presence for the Old Man, there is also a hint of passivity or obedience to her husband as she is seen bringing in chairs for his guests, selling programmes for the night and following him to the dark abyss of death.

The Orator:

The only real person or character on stage apart from the old couple, the Orator is the man hired by the Old Man to deliver his

profound message. Since he cannot express himself well, the Orator shall speak on his behalf. He is dressed as a 19th century artist, has all the bearings of an actor, but is more unreal than the invisible guests. Like a lifeless puppet, he walks up to the rostrum and when asked for, he signs autographs. The Old Man has put all his hopes into the Orator and believes that he would fulfil his responsibility of revealing the message. When the man welcomes his guests, and speaks with full exultation and joy at the prospect of a new future after the message, the Orator continues to deny or sign autographs as per his wish. When the old couple throw themselves out of the windows committing a double suicide, he remains silent and unmoved. Only when he begins to communicate with the guests do we realise that he is both deaf and dumb, a severe occupational hazard for an orator. The profound message, we realise was never comprehended by the Orator, we realise, and hence would never be delivered, for he does not have the language for it. The reason for this is because the Old Man has not taken responsibility for his life and for the delivery of the message, and thus the message becomes irrationally absurd.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q 8: Critically analyse the role of the Orator in the play.



16.5 LET US SUM UP

In this unit, we have tried to study Ionesco's play *The Chairs* in detail. We have seen that the play deals with man's existential crisis, his heroic quest for meaning and fulfilment and his non-heroic tragic failure. It is not fate or some divine power, which prevents him from achieving his goals, but his own utter boredom and reluctance to take responsibility. The old

couple live in a no-exit cyclical life where the end is the beginning and the beginning is the end, and where they follow the same routine for every day of their lives. *The Chairs*, we have seen, can rightly be called an absurd play, as it highlights the absurdity of the old couple's lonely existence. Their attempt at communication fails as their language is insufficient, and their lives meet a tragic end. It is a tragic farce, for while the old couple believe that they are dying heroic deaths leaving behind a profound message, the message is never delivered.



16.6 FURTHER READING

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16.7 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS (HINTS ONLY)

Ans to Q 1: *The Chairs*, like *The Bald Soprano* deals with Ionesco's major concerns... …It is also a one-act play... …many of the motifs seen in *The Chairs* runs through all of Ionesco's works beginning from *The Bald Soprano*... …The first performance of *The Chairs* received a similar reception as that of *The Bald Soprano.*

Ans to Q 2: The Old Man and the Old Woman are married for seventy-five years... …The Old Man is infantile and needs mothering from his wife... …The wife alternates between an authoritative position and that of a submissive one... …She may have had to play the role of a mother for long... …A glimpse into her suppressed sexuality is provided when she flirts with the Offsetlithographer.

Ans to Q 3: The old couple play games and tell stories... …most of the time it is the old man who tells the stories... …The woman is full of awe for her husband's intellect... …yet she cannot help but constantly remind him about lost opportunities... ...Through stories and conversations they try to recall a past they seem to have forgotten.

Ans to Q 4: Socialites, Field Marshals and Emperors are the kinds of guest who come to the Old Man, a mere janitor, to hear his message... …there is a sense of profundity attached to the message as it is the man's life-quest... …While it is the man's finding, it surely is something relevant for all.

Ans to Q 5: Inability to know something in its entirety leads to uncertainty... …the old couple do not know their beginnings from their end... …life moves in a cycle... …the woman's memory of the son is conflated with the man's memories of his mother... …husband-wife relationship is uncertain...language of communication is vague... …the message to be delivered is uncertain.

Ans to Q 6: Ionesco's concern about the futility of human existence is highlighted through his two signature techniques... …repetitions and multiplication of objects on stage.

Ans to Q 7: *The Chairs* shows us an elderly couple trapped in their circular lives in their semi-circular room surrounded by stagnant water on all sides... …Every evening they try to drive away their boredom through stories and games... …there is an important message to be shared with a great number of guests...the guests are invisible and the message is undelivered.

Ans to Q 8: The Orator is entrusted with the task of delivering the old ma's message to the gathered crowd... …His inability to do so highlights Ionesco's concern.



16.8 POSSIBLE QUESTIONS

Q 1: Discuss the notion of 'nothingness' in *The Chairs*.

Q 2: Critically analyse the different themes of the play.

Q 3: The Orator's failure to reveal the old man's message is symbolic of the larger futility that characterise man's search for meaning in life. Discuss.

Q 4: Examine the existential crisis of the old couple in the play *The Chairs*.

Q 5: Discuss the symbolic significance of the stagnant water that surround the island house of the old couple.

Q 6: Analyse the Old Man as an existential non-hero.

Q 7: Justify *The Chairs* as a tragic farce.

*** ***** ***



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Bentley, Eric. (Ed.). (1990). *The Theory of the Modern Stage*. Penguin Books: London.

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Web Resources:

http://www.theatrehistory.com/german/holocaust001.html

http://www.theatrehistory.com/german/bates002.html

http://www.theatrehistory.com/german/bates003.html

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bertolt_Brecht

Name of the Paper: Course Code:

Centre for Internal Quality Assurance (CIQA)
Krishna Kanta Handiqui State Open University
City Office, Housefed Complex, Guwahati- 06

Learner's Feedback on Course

Dear Learner,

Regarding the course as mentioned above, we would like to know your opinions and comments so as to improve the quality of self learning materials in future. Please respond to the following statements by ticking the number you feel most reflect your opinion. After completion of the additional comments, please detach the page and send/mail the same to us at the address given below.

The Director, Centre for Internal Quality Assurance, KKHandiqui State Open University
Housefed Complex, Dispur, Guwahati- 781006
(E-mail id: ciqa@kkhsou.in)

1. Approximately how many hours did you spend for studying the units in the course? | | | |
2. Please give your opinions (by √ mark) to the following items based on your reading of the block:

Sl. No.	Statements	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neither Agree nor Disagree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
I.	The SLMs of the course fulfil the learning objectives set out in the beginning of each unit					
II.	The units of the SLM could satisfy my academic needs and expectations					
III.	The Unit writers have excellent knowledge about the course contents					
IV.	Language and contents of the units were presented at a level which I could readily understand					
V.	Ample opportunity for participation in the activities provided in the units					
VI.	Used enough Illustrations (Diagrams, tables etc.) for conceptual clarity					
VII.	Quality of content is engaging, relevant, and up-to-date					
VIII.	The self check questions are very helpful					
IX.	The Possible/model questions and the answers to check my progress have benefited me a lot					

Additional Comments: *(Please feel free to provide your open comments)*

1. Which aspects of the SLM, according to you, worked well?

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2. What sort of changes/improvements do you feel KKHSOU could implement to improve the overall quality of the SLM?
