

# **BRITISH DRAMA**

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**BRITISH DRAMA**

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**Unit - I**

Introducing Drama - Origin and Development of British Drama

**Unit - II**

Marlowe, Doctor Faustus

**Unit - III**

Oscar Wilde, The Importance of Being Earnest

**Unit - IV**

T.S. Eliot, Murder in the Cathedral

**Unit - V**

Osborn, Look Back in Anger

**TABLE OF CONTENTS**

UNIT	TITLE	PAGE NO.
1	Origin and Development of British Drama	1
2	Doctor Faustus	79
3	The Importance of Being Earnest	99
4	Murder in the Cathedral	117
5	Look Back in Anger	151



**UNIT - I****Lesson 1.1 - Origin and Development of British Drama****Unit Structure****1.1 Objectives**

1.2 Introduction to Drama

1.3 The Rise of British Drama

1.4 Drama in The Post Restoration Era

1.5 Drama in The Modern Age

- Let Us Sum Up
- Review Questions
- Self-Study Questions

**1.1 Objectives**

*Through this unit, the learners will be able to*

- Familiarise themselves with the origin of drama
- Understand the development of British Drama
- Evaluate various tenets of British Drama
- Write critical essays on dramaturgy and the social and literary influences

This unit introduces you to drama as a genre as distinguished from other literary genres and helps you to trace the origins of drama, types of drama and also enables you to understand the origin and major tenets of British drama. While navigating through the unit, you may think of this genre in terms of the regional language literature that you are familiar with. Literature is a documentation of life. Therefore, it will help you if you have some experience with your own regional language literatures. If you are acquainted with drama in your own language, it will be an additional benefit for you. If you are not equipped with such background knowledge, you may simply concentrate on the discussion here but always attempt to establish some points of comparison so that you will have a thorough understanding of the points detailed here.

This unit is divided into two lessons. The first one introduces you to the major tenets of drama by offering an overview of the art form itself. It also scrutinises the several periods in the history over which various forms of drama emerged. By carefully reading this lesson, you will understand how drama evolved over a period of time and what are the major types of drama. The second unit will brief you about the rise of British drama and its development over various dynasties and historical periods. Several important playwrights of these periods will be discussed. We will now begin with an introduction to drama.

## 1.1 Introduction To Drama

### Introduction

Drama belongs to the genre of poetry but is classified as a type of fiction that is meant for performance. The origin of the word drama can be traced back to the Greek word that meant 'deed' or 'act'. The primary function of a drama is to be 'performed'. The nuances of drama and the structure of drama are described in Aristotle's *Poetics* (335 BC) and it demarcates between two types of drama; the tragedy and the comedy. We will discuss them eventually. Being in the Indian context, we should also understand that Bharata Muni's *Natya Shastra* (The Science of Performing Arts), arguably written during 500BC, is one seminal work that discusses the norms of several performing art forms including that of drama. Even though the seminal works on drama discuss the techniques, structures and characteristics of drama as a form of performing art, the word that we use most commonly to denote a dramatic performance is play. In simple terms, you may understand drama as a fictional or at times non-fictional representation written down to be performed and play as the art that is acted by the actors. In others words, drama is to be read and play is to be enacted. Many a time these two words are used loosely and interchangeably. But one must be cautious about the succinct distinction between them.

When we look at the western theatre, we understand that in Greece, in particular in Athens, drama originated as a ritual. Although the exact first performance cannot be determined, it is recorded in the literary history that the practice of drama as performance began with the rituals associated with the festival of the Greek god Dionysus. Thespis is attributed with the model of dramatic cult that emphasised the impersonation of the actor as the character who interacts with the chorus. The surviving works of

classical Greek period are those of Aeschylus, Sophocles and Euripides who wrote tragedies and Aristophanes and Meander who wrote comedies. Historical records suggest that by 5 BC in Athens, the dramatic art was more or less solidly institutionalised as competitions were held during the celebrations of Dionysus. It is also to be noted that the oldest surviving drama *The Persians*- a historical tragedy written by Aeschylus- won the first prize in the contest. 'Agon' which refers to the contest might have been in practice from 534 BC as per certain records. Initially the Greek drama had two forms such as tragedy and comedy but around 501 BC a third form was in vogue which is called the satyr. Before we discuss the types of drama it is important to look at how drama was practised outside Greece.

The expansion of drama outside the boundaries of Greece was facilitated by the geographical expansion of the Roman Republic during the period between 270 BC-240 BC. Modelled on Greek theatre, adapting the themes of Greek drama, the Roman drama made certain changes to the structure of drama. For example, the chorus which was an integral and important part of the Greek drama was edited out from the Roman Plays and they incorporated musical elements with the dialogues. *Collegium poetarum* or the guild of dramatists was established by 2 BC and Roman drama was flourishing. Plautus and Terence wrote comedies based on the subject matter dealt with in the Greek comedies. Seneca was the noted dramatist who dealt with tragedies. All the nine Senecan tragedies that survived are *fabula crepidata* or the plays based on Greek themes.

### Medieval Drama

When we read history, there are several references towards how theatre and drama were conceived in the public imagination as a corrupt and immoral practice. When we think about the Indian context, you can rationalise it as there was a stigma associated with theatre and film actors. Imagine how the circumstances and moral codes would be functioning centuries ago. In the 6<sup>th</sup> Century, the then Roman ruler Emperor Justinian ordered for a closure of all theatres and theatre related activities. However, the Byzantine theatre, though not much data is available, managed to preserve certain Greek plays which were used as models for the posterity. The aversion towards the art of theatre eventually underwent changes.

Drama, in the medieval England, was ritualistic. As the language of the sermons in the church was Latin, to make people understand the 'divine messages' and Biblical episodes, the clergy used to enact certain segments.

Although there are several critics like Benjamin Hunnigher argue that the church with its moral principles would never have performed such liturgical dramas, there are many medieval theatre historians like Heinrich Alt, E.K. Chambers and Karl Young who argued that the church used to enact Biblical events during the mass for making the meaning clear to the common people who did not understand Latin. 'Whom Do You Seek?' is an example of medieval liturgical drama that enacted the sequences of Christ's resurrection.

In Medieval England, the churches witnessed Nativity play during Christmas, the Passion Play that depicted the sufferings of Christ and his death on the cross, and Resurrection during Easter. The language of the dialogues which was Latin eventually changed to English. Arguably when more and more characters were being part of the play, the space near the altar became insufficient and the play moved out from the altar premises to the churchyard. Thus, we see the rise of mystery, miracle and morality plays and the drama emerging more as an art form that is more secular in nature than the religious shade it had until then. A spatial displacement also was witnessed when it shifted from the altar to the churchyard and eventually to the streets outside the boundaries of the church.

### **Mystery Plays**

Encyclopedia Britannica defines mystery play as one of the three principal kinds of vernacular drama in Europe during the middle ages which dealt with biblical themes or subject matter developed from plays presented in Latin by the clergy on church premises. These plays depicted subjects such as the Creation, Adam and Eve, the murder of Abel and the Last Judgment.

During the 13th century guilds started the production of plays in vernacular language at places away from the church premises. Thus, eventually the religious nature of the plays underwent a change and more secular themes emerged. Eventually the mode changed to that of a satire where satirical elements were consciously employed to mock physicians, soldiers, judges, and priests. Look at how the art of theatre used its power to criticise people in power and probably the corrupt practices that they are involved in. (This may remind you of the several street plays that vehemently attack social evils. If you are familiar with Tamil cinema, some sequences from the film *Anbe Sivam* may come to your mind).



According to Encyclopaedia Britannica over several decades, groups of 25 to 50 plays were organised into lengthy cycles in England. Chester plays and Wakefield plays are examples for such cycles.

At their height, the mystery plays were quite elaborate in their production. In England they were generally performed on pageant wagons, which provided both scaffold stage and dressing room and could be moved about readily. In France and Italy, however, a production might take place on a stage 100 feet (30 m) wide, with paradise represented at one end of the stage, hell at the other, and earthly scenes between the two. The plays did not attempt to achieve unity of time, place, and action, and therefore they could represent any number of different geographic locations and climates in juxtaposition. Mechanical devices, trapdoors, and other artifices were employed to portray flying angels, fire-spouting monsters, miraculous transformations, and graphic martyrdoms.

Mystery plays declined gradually and became extinct by the end of 16th century owing to several reasons. The church withdrew its support because the plays no longer had echoed any religious values. Secondly, the texts were considered as mere rambling by the Renaissance scholars and they were not inclined towards mystery plays. Thirdly, the common mass was enticed by the professional touring companies that had begun to arrive from Italy and they showed no sympathy towards the mysteries. In England, both mystery and miracle plays were considered as carriers of Christian Catholic sentiments and therefore they were gradually suppressed.

### **Miracle Plays**

Miracle play is also known as Saint's Play and it presents a real or fictitious account of the life, miracles and/or the martyrdom of a saint. It developed during the 10th and 11th centuries. This genre in fact evolved from the liturgical offices for adding enthusiasm to the calendar festivals. Initially these plays were in Latin but by the 13th century they were regionalised with the vernacular languages being employed as the medium. Also, they increasingly have non-ecclesiastical elements. Initially begun as part of the church sermon, these plays were eventually taken out to the public spaces.

According to Encyclopaedia Britannica

Almost all surviving miracle plays concern either the Virgin Mary

or St. Nicholas, the 4th-century bishop of Myra in Asia Minor. Both Mary and Nicholas had active cults during the Middle Ages, and belief in the healing powers of saintly relics was widespread. In this climate, miracle plays flourished.

The Mary plays showcase Mary's role as a *deus ex machina* which in Latin means God from the machine. *Deus ex machina* refers to a person or thing introduced suddenly and unexpectedly to a situation who/what is capable of offering a contrived solution to what appears to be an insoluble problem. In the Mary Plays, Mary saves the priest who sold his soul to Satan (much like Dr. Faustus whom you are going to meet in the next unit). She also saves a woman who is falsely charged with the murder of her own child. One such typical miracle play is the one titled *Sr. John the Hairy*. The titular character in fact seduces and kills a princess but later when he was caught, he is proclaimed as a saint by an infant. He then confesses his crime and then God and Mary appear and help John in reviving the princess. After this miraculous episode the 'murderer saint' is made a bishop! You might now understand why these plays are called miracle plays.

The Nicholas plays are also much like the Mary plays. One example is *Le Jeu de Saint Nicolas* written in AD 1200 by Jean Bodel. This play documents the liberation of a crusader and the conversion of a Saracen king. Henry VIII banned the miracle plays in the mid-16th century. As a result of this, most of the plays were destroyed or lost leaving little for us to explore now. Let us now look at the performance aspects of mystery and miracle plays.

### **Performance**

The plays were performed simultaneously at various stations or places. The chronological order of the events in the play was not a criterion that determined the performances. Randomly the plays were performed. Wheeled theatres, drawn by horses eventually became a common spectacle. For the spectacular events in the play simple techniques were employed. For example, to denote thunder loud drum beats were employed. A structure with a dragon's mouth painted on it represented Hell. The actors had simple costumes. The actors were members of different Guilds or trading companies. They were committed to entertain the public. These plays employed satirical and humorous elements eventually to evoke

laughter. Thus, in some of these plays we see that Satan indulges in ridiculous gestures, Herod is depicted as a ludicrous tyrant and Noah's wife is referred to as a shrew. Although these plays were acted across England during the thirteenth, fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, only four of them are surviving. Chester (with twenty-five plays), York (forty-eight plays), Wakefield (thirty-two plays) and Coventry (forty-two plays) are the preserved ones.

### **Morality Play**

Morality Play also known as Morality is an allegorical drama. During the 15th and 16th centuries this became a popular drama genre in Europe. In Morality Plays, moral qualities are personified and characters symbolise moral values such as virtue, vice, compassion and the like. Abstractions like death or youth are also personified. The purpose of this drama was largely to teach moral lessons.

Morality Play was an intermediary during the transition of ecclesiastical plays to more secular and professional drama. Hence, Morality Plays combined the elements of both mysteries and the secular drama. These were performed by semi-professional troupe of actors. These plays were usually short and had employed serious themes but also incorporated elements of satire and farce. For example, the Dutch play *The Miraculous Apple Tree* depicts the hilarious sequences after a pious couple, Goodfellow and Faith, is bestowed by God with an everbearing apple tree by touching which without permission make people stick to it at once. While the consequences of certain actions by characters in this play evoke humour, the play also preaches certain moral principles by making the audience contemplate on moral values and ethical decision making. Humour was a necessary ingredient of morality plays and often it was through the depiction of frolics of the character Vice. (Vice can be considered as a prototype of the Shakespearean clown).

The oldest surviving English morality play is *The Castle of Perseverance* written around AD 1425. This play is about the battle for the soul of Humanum Genus. Among all the morality plays, the one that is considered as the greatest and is still performed is *Everyman*. This play has several film adaptations too. The recent versions are available on some OTT platforms.

We understand that the action of morality plays pivots around a hero such as Mankind, Virtue, or Compassion. This protagonist will have certain

flaws in character which are assaulted by personified demonic powers like the Seven Deadly Sins. However, the redemption of the hero is granted usually with assistance from figures like the Four Daughters of God such as Mercy, Justice, Temperance and Truth. To wind up the discussion on mystery, and morality plays let us look at Britannica

Because the manuscripts of medieval English plays were usually ephemeral performance scripts rather than reading matter, very few examples have survived from what once must have been a very large dramatic literature. What little survives from before the 15th century includes some bilingual fragments, indicating that the same play might have been given in English or Anglo-Norman, according to the composition of the audience. From the late 14th century onward, two main dramatic genres are discernible, the mystery, or Corpus Christi, cycles and the morality plays. The mystery plays were long cyclic dramas of the Creation, Fall, and Redemption of humankind, based mostly on biblical narratives. They usually included a selection of Old Testament episodes (such as the stories of Cain and Abel and of Abraham and Isaac) but concentrated mainly on the life and Passion of Jesus Christ. They always ended with the Last Judgment. The cycles were generally financed and performed by the craft guilds and staged on wagons in the streets and squares of the towns. Texts of the cycles staged at York, Chester, and Wakefield and at an unstated location in East Anglia (the so-called N-Town plays) have survived, together with fragments from Coventry, Newcastle, and Norwich. Their literary quality is uneven, but the York cycle (probably the oldest) has an impressively realized version of Christ's Passion by a dramatist influenced by the alliterative style in verse. The Wakefield cycle has several particularly brilliant plays, attributed to the anonymous Wakefield Master, and his Second Shepherds' Play is one of the masterpieces of medieval English literature. The morality plays were allegorical dramas depicting the progress of a single character, representing the whole of humankind, from the cradle to the grave and sometimes beyond. The other dramatis personae might include God and the Devil but usually consisted of personified abstractions, such as the Vices and Virtues, Death, Penance, Mercy, and so forth. A varied collection of the moralities is known as the Macro Plays (The Castle of Perseverance, Wisdom,

Mankind), but the single most impressive piece is *Everyman*, an English rendering of a Dutch play on the subject of the coming of death. Both the mystery and morality plays were frequently revived and performed into the 21st century.

There is a closely related genre that we need to briefly discuss. This genre is called Interlude.

### Interludes

Interlude is a genre of drama that emerged towards the end of the fifteenth century. Accurate definitions or features are absent for interludes. Allardyce Nicoll in his book *British Drama* defines interlude as “a play in the midst of other festivities or business”. However, Morality and Interludes are considered similar just as the mystery and miracle plays are taken together. Interludes dealt with more secular themes with topics that touch upon the everyday life that is of public interest. At times, therefore, it had a controversial or instructive tone. John Heywood’s *The Four P’s* is a well-known interlude. It is sub titled as “a very merry interlude of a Palmer, a Pardoner, a Pothechar, and a Pedlar”.

## 1.2 The Rise of British Drama

### The Background

Renaissance and the revival of learning and scholarly texts along with great literatures paved way to the classic Greek and Latin plays being staged in schools and other similar institutions. Nicholas Udall who was the headmaster of Eton and later of Westminster scripted a play titled *Ralph Roister Doister* in 1550. This play meticulously followed the Greek and Latin traditions of dramaturgy. In 1552, at Christ’s College Cambridge *Gammer Gurton’s Needle* was performed. The authorship of *Gammer Gurton’s Needle* remains unknown. Both these plays were in the comedy vein. The first English tragedy was written by Thomas Sackville and Thomas Norton in 1561. This play was titled as *Gorboduc or Ferrex and Porrex*. This play was the first English play that was written in blank verse.

English drama could follow the Latin model that was promoted by the universities or it could then opt for its own form that was emerging as we had seen through the aforementioned genres. Europe witnessed an aesthetic struggle of deciding the dramatic types. The question was whether to follow the classical mode or to polish the already stemmed but not very

sophisticated form of drama. Elizabethan age witnessed the flourishing of English drama which took inspiration from the classic literature but was superior in its aesthetic and literary terms.

### **Drama in the Renaissance Period**

Before we begin discussing drama during the renaissance period, let us quickly recapitulate (assuming that you might have already studied it) what exactly is Renaissance. Renaissance is the term that refers to a “new birth” or “awakening”, as Trevelyan points out, in the cultural life of Europe. This chiefly includes a revival of interest in classical knowledge. According to V.C. Harris and C.B. Sudhakaran, who discuss various social and literary aspects of British colonialism, Renaissance is “largely a fourteenth century Italian phenomenon which gradually spread to other parts of Europe”. They list the chief characteristics of Renaissance as follows:

The emergence of cities and the increasing role they played in the cultural life of people

- The growing rivalry and enmity between nobles and the people
- The emergence of regional powers
- The conflict between Christian and emerging political morality
- The revival of classical knowledge
- The emergence of Humanism
- The development of new spirit of enquiry and enterprise which soon led to the geographical discoveries of distant lands
- The growth of literacy and spread of education, aided by, among other things, the printing press.

Now, if you go back to the plays of Shakespeare that you have read or studied, can you identify any of these themes in them? When we read literature in a postcolonial perspective, this Renaissance spirit of adventure and expedition that led to geographical explorations is not very naïve. When we see the centrality of humans (the basic premise of Humanist philosophy) in them, at present we are trying to read these literary products through a posthuman and postcolonial lens. Therefore, the glory that Europe witnessed during the Renaissance period was not so glorious for the other continents which were colonised by the imperial powers. When you read more literature of this period, you will certainly be able to understand how the chief characteristics of Renaissance are camouflaged



and parcelled through them to the reading public of Europe. The socio-political developments that Britain like other European countries witnessed get reflected in the literary work produced during the time. Britannica assesses the literary scene in Britain as:

In a tradition of literature remarkable for its exciting and brilliant achievements, the Elizabethan and early Stuart periods have been said to represent the most brilliant century of all. These years (roughly 1550-1660) produced a gallery of authors of genius, and scores of lesser talents of enviable ability to write with fluency, imagination and verve.

Drama was the focal point during this era though there were great poets and critics like Philip Sydney, who symbolised the Renaissance Universal Man, and Edmund Spenser.

Now, you need to understand that the golden age of England was the Renaissance England of Queen Elizabeth I, who ruled England from 1558 to 1603. (You are now familiar with Queen Elizabeth II and have witnessed her passing away in 2022). Queen Elizabeth I was one of the most powerful monarchs in the history of Britain. G. M. Trevelyan in his English Social History writes about Shakespeare's England:

After the economic and religious unrest of the middle Tudor period, followed the golden age of England. Golden ages are not all of gold, and they never last long. But Shakespeare chanced upon the best time and country in which to live, in order to exercise with least distraction and most encouragement the highest faculties of man. The forest, the field, and the city were there in perfection, and all three are needed to perfect the poet. His countrymen, not yet cramped to the service of machines, were craftsmen and creators at will. Their minds, set free from medieval trammels, were not yet caught by Puritan or other modern fanaticisms. The Elizabethan English were in love with life, not with some theoretic shadow of life. Large classes, freed as never before from poverty, felt the upspring of the spirit and expressed it in wit, music, and song. The English language had touched its moment of fullest beauty and power. Peace and order at last prevailed in the land, even during the sea-war with Spain. Politics, so long a fear and oppression again, were for a few decades simplified into service paid to a woman, who was to her subjects the symbol of their unity, prosperity, and freedom.

As mentioned earlier, when we discuss Renaissance Drama in Britain, we consider the drama that was produced between 1550 and 1660. Thus,

you need to note that the Renaissance drama extended to the reigns of King James I (1603 to 1625) and then that of his son King Charles I (1625-1649). Shakespeare began to write during the Elizabethan era but he continued writing in the period of King James I. Therefore, it is not possible to clearly demarcate the periods in terms of literary production. Roughly, we call it Elizabethan literature or in the case of drama, Elizabethan drama although some critics have come up with Jacobean Drama and Caroline Drama to describe the plays that were produced during the rule of King James I and King Charles I respectively. Let us use the word British Renaissance Drama for our convenience to refer to Elizabethan Drama, Jacobean Drama and Caroline Drama. Let us now look at some characteristics of the English theatre.

### **The Renaissance English Theatre**

As it is already stated, Italian Renaissance was not very influential in England but the Elizabethan golden age imbibed all essence of the Renaissance. Especially the theatre culture adopted and adapted a lot from the classical antiquity. When the rediscovery of the ancient culture happened, England during the Elizabethan period witnessed the emergence of a new national identity facilitated by the establishment of a church of its own. Roman and Latin traditions were not strictly followed in dramatic conventions. Of course, they were models but there was a tendency to drift away from imitating and mimicking the classic texts. Rather the writers preferred to develop the medieval drama, the native produce, into a secular genre eliminating the liturgic and ecclesiastical elements from it. Drama became a popular art form during this period and made the new Renaissance spirit accessible to the public. Thus, the Renaissance Drama incorporated the high seriousness of morality plays, the sweep of histories, the fantasy of romantic comedies and the farcical fun of the interludes, making it an aesthetic mix of several genres.

Britannica documents the not so bright aspect of socio-political milieu that controlled the Renaissance Theatre:

At the same time, the English theatre had to contend with severe restrictions. The suppression of the festival of Corpus Christi in 1548 as a means of reinforcing the Protestant church marked the rapid decline of morality plays and mystery cycles. Their forced descent into satirical propaganda mocking the Catholic faith polarized the audience and led to riots. By 1590 playwrights were



prohibited from dramatizing religious issues and had to resort to history, mythology, allegory, or allusion in order to say anything about contemporary society; flouting these restrictions meant imprisonment. Nevertheless, playwrights managed to argue highly explosive political topics. In William Shakespeare's histories, for instance, the subject of kingship is thoroughly examined in all its implications: both the rightful but incompetent sovereign and the usurping but strong monarch are scrutinized—a most daring undertaking during the reign of Elizabeth I (1558–1603). The situation for actors was not helped by the hostile attitude of the City of London authorities, who regarded theatre as an immoral pastime to be discouraged rather than tolerated. Professional companies, however, were invited to perform at court from the beginning of the 16th century (though on a smaller scale than on the Continent), and public performances took place wherever a suitable space could be found—in large rooms of inns, in halls, or in quiet innyards enclosed on all sides with a temporary platform stage around which spectators could gather while others looked out from the windows above. But such makeshift conditions only stalled the development of the drama and kept it on an amateurish level.

Elizabethan theatre improved these conditions significantly. During this time the public life was getting a theatrical representation. On the stage the struggles of nation building and creating an identity of their own were all showcased. The total Renaissance experience of the society was captured through plays. As play-going was not expensive the audience included the working-class people too. The same play would be staged later for the nobility. As Harris and Sudhakaran point out

The fact that the Elizabethan public was more trained to listen than to read helped drama to be the most popular form of artistic expression. The London theatres had “a broadly representative public” and they were “a meeting ground of humanism and popular taste”. They inherited a tradition of humanistic drama involving the revival of classical plays and the attempts at adaptations of Latin conventions of Senecan tragedy. This adaptability was the greatest resource of the Elizabethan theatre.

We should also understand the structure of the Elizabethan theatre.

During the tenure of Elizabeth there were regular weekday performances. These performances were legitimised from 1574 onwards. The first playhouse was built by James Burbage in 1576. It was built in the London suburb and was called the Theatre. Following the Theatre, there were many other stages built. The Curtain, the Rose, the Swan and the Globe are some of them. You might be familiar with the Globe. Shakespearean plays were regularly staged at the Globe theatre.

Elizabethan playhouse was an improvisation of innyard theatre. It had an enclosed circular structure and had two or three galleries for audience to sit. Spectators were allowed to stand in an unroofed area on three sides of the raised platform stage. This stage extended into the central part of the theatre. Behind the raised platform (stage), there was a wall with curtained door and above this there was an actor's gallery. These theatres accommodated large number of audience and the tickets were inexpensive. This theatre structure facilitated great proximity between the actors and the audience. Thus, plays became an intimate affair. "The absence of curtains and the impossibility of picture-stage scenery made the stage look bare leaving the imagined stage locality fluid and indeterminate, to be indicated, when necessary, by the actors themselves" (Harris and Sudhakaran 2004). The simplicity of the stage was a challenge both for the writer and for the actor as both language and acting had to be excellent so that the spectators could be attentive enough and use their imagination.



*The interior of the Swan theatre: Picture obtained from Encyclopedia Britannica*

Simple properties were used for performances. Most of them were brought to the stage and taken out while some other structures were left on stage permanently. All of the theatre buildings were round, square or octagonal and they had thatched roofs covering the structure surrounding an open courtyard. Just as how our proximity to the silver screen is decided by the money we spent on the ticket, the Elizabethan audience sat close to

the stage or stood in the yard depending on the money they paid. Let us look at Britannica for a quick summary of the theatre structure during the Elizabethan period:

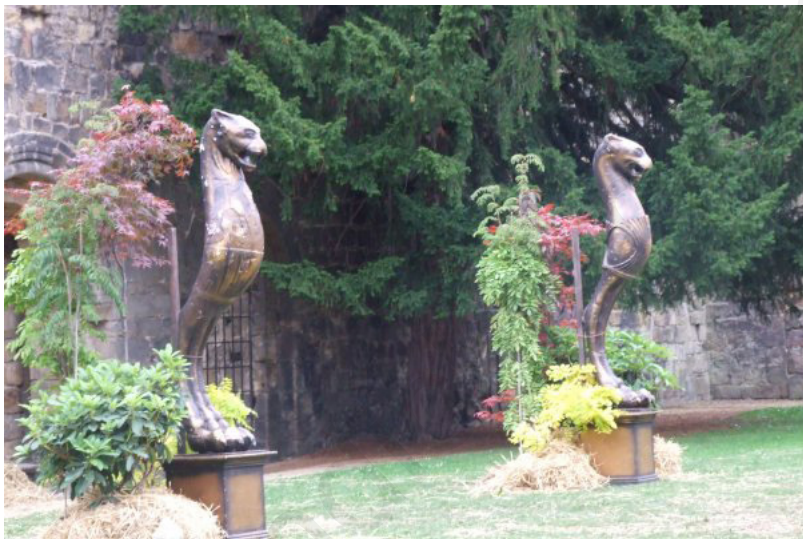
The typical Elizabethan stage was a platform, as large as 40 feet square (more than 12 metres on each side), sticking out into the middle of the yard so that the spectators nearly surrounded it. It was raised four to six feet and was sheltered by a roof, called “the shadow” or “the heavens.” In most theatres the stage roof, supported by two pillars set midway at the sides of the stage, concealed an upper area from which objects could be raised or lowered. At the rear of the stage was a multileveled facade with two large doors at stage level. There was also a space for “discoveries” of hidden characters, in order to advance the plot; this was probably located between the doors. Some scenes took place in a playing area on the second level of the facade, but, again, historians disagree as to which scenes they were.

There are touring companies in England which perform on open stage. The following pictures are of one such performance in Kirkstall Abbey in Leeds in 2010. The troupe performed *A Midsummer Night's Dream* in the open theatre. The plot of most of the Shakespearean plays are very popular and the spectators usually know it. Still to facilitate better understanding and for the benefit of those who do not know the play, now the company that performs usually provide a leaflet with the basic story lines and important episodes printed. Also the show manager in the beginning talks about the play and the plot line. Unlike the movies that we watch, or sometime the plays that we watch now, there will not be surprise elements for the spectators as the storyline is already stated. But think about the aesthetic mastery of the playwright when even after knowing the story line people enjoy and appreciate the play.

Chapter 6 of Bharatamuni's *Natyasastra* discusses the Rasa theory. He stated, “vibhavanubhava vyabhichari samyogad rasa nishpathi” which is translated into English by Daniel Meyer-Dinkgräfe as “Rasa is produced from a combination of Determinants (vibhava), Consequents (anubhava) and Transitory States (vyabharibhava)”. If the play-watching public is still active and if Shakespearean plays are still being staged and watched in open and closed theatres alike, you can imagine the brilliance of the playwright who knew his art very well so that he still manages to instil the Rasa in his spectators' minds. It is not easy to capture the audience when the storyline is already known to them. It is not VFX or CGI that holds the attention of the viewing public who come for these performances. The



attention is arrested and the audience experience the aesthetic pleasure because of the way the play is structured as an aesthetic unity.



## Elizabethan Drama

As we had a look at the theatre structure and the intricacies involved in the performances, we should now look at the major playwrights of the period. As we have already seen elsewhere in this chapter, Renaissance playwrights began with exploring the possibility of the comedy vein. However, modelled on miracle plays and masques and the revenge tragedy tradition, Elizabethan playwrights produced plays of various kinds which will be summed up later in this unit. Elizabethan England in its literary scenario especially that of dramaturgy, is the period of Shakespeare and Marlowe. However, there are several playwrights who wrote on various themes including those of the heroic lives of people whom they perceived as great to the events that centred the common people's everyday life.

### *The University Wits*

University Wits is a name given by Saintsbury to a group of playwrights who wrote in the second half of the 16<sup>th</sup> century. 'Wit' did not, during those days, had the shade of humour those days. It referred to wisdom or scholarship. There is no doubt that the playwrights who were branded as University Wits demonstrated their knowledge, skills and scholarship through their plays. But that was not the reason for calling them University Wits. These playwrights were all educated either in University of Oxford or in Cambridge. Thomas Lodge, George Peele and John Lyly studied in University of Oxford. Christopher Marlowe, Robert Greene and Thomas Nashe were graduates of University of Cambridge. Thomas Kyd who was not from these universities was also considered as a part of the University Wits as his plays resembled the styles and themes that the others in the group followed. University Wits are acclaimed as the first professional group of writers who pioneered the theatrical renaissance of the 16<sup>th</sup> century. The fifteen years that they were active in their writing career, they altered the native Interludes and Chronicle plays with their vivid and compact writing style. Thus, they paved way for the Shakespearean era that flourished sooner. According to Vallath (2011)

The University Wits had several features in common. (1) They had stormy careers, which in some cases were marked by crime. The lives of these reckless Bohemians were cut short on account of their debauchery or violent death. (2) They were actors as well as dramatists. They understood fully well the requirements of the stage and rightly felt the pulse of the audience. (3) They revised old plays and became independent writers. The

University Wits often worked in collaboration with each other or with other writers. Marlowe worked with Shakespeare (*Titus Andronicus*, *Henry VI*) and Fletcher. *Dido Queen of Carthage* left unfinished by Marlowe was later completed by Nashe after his death. Marlowe is also supposed to have collaborated with Greene and Peele in the *The Contention* and *The True Tragedy*.

Christopher Marlowe, with his exemplary use of blank verse, is rated as the greatest poetic dramatist of all of them, though all others had significantly contributed to British literature. According to Harris and Sudhakaran (2004):

Together they popularised their learning for theatres and bookstalls. In the main, they dealt with historical and pseudo-historical subjects in middle class plays that mixed low comedy, music and love. Peele's *Old Wives' Tale* (1595) and Thomas Nashe's *Summer's Last Will and Testament* (1600) are generally cited as examples of popular plays that successfully mixed spectacle, comedy, and music. Peele also wrote serious plays, sometimes bald and pageant like. His pastoral entertainment *The Arraignment of Paris* (1584) was designed to compliment the queen. Robert Greene's *Friar Bacon and Friar Bungay* (1594) and *James IV* (1598) complement and criticise the follies of the elite through the antics of vulgar characters. Efforts to achieve any courtly refinement were made only by John Lyly who wrote choristers. His *Gallathea* (1584) and *Endymion* (1591) illustrate this with courtiers, nymphs, goddesses making "rarefied love in intricate, artificial patterns, the very stuff of courtly dreaming".

We will read more about Marlowe in the next unit when we discuss his play *Dr. Faustus*. Now let us have a quick look at his plays. As stated earlier Marlowe was regarded as the most gifted and celebrated playwright among the University Wits. *Britannica* comments that only Marlowe "realised the tragic potential inherent in the popular style with its bombast and extravagance". His protagonists are usually "men of towering ambition" spoke in elevated blank verse. *Britannica* continues:

*In Tamburlaine the Great* (two parts, published in 1590) and *Edward II* (written in 1591; published in 1594) traditional political orders are overwhelmed by conquerors and politicians who ignore the boasted legitimacy of weak kings; *The Jew of Malta* (written in 1589; published in 1633) studies the man of business whose financial acumen and trickery give him unrestrained power; *The Tragical History of Dr. Faustus* (written

in 1593; published in 1604) shows the overthrow of a man whose learning and atheism threaten even God. The main focus of all these plays is on the uselessness of society's moral and religious sanctions against pragmatic, amoral will. They patently address themselves to the anxieties of an age being transformed by new forces in politics, commerce, and science; indeed, the sinister, ironic prologue to the *Jew of Malta* is spoken by Machiavelli. In his own time Marlowe was damned as atheist, homosexual, and libertine, and his plays remain disturbing because his verse makes theatrical presence into the expression of power, enlisting the spectators' sympathies on the side of his gigantic villain-heroes. His plays thus present the spectator with dilemmas that can be neither resolved nor ignored, and they articulate exactly the divided consciousness of their time.

Similar effects are achieved by Thomas Kyd in his *Spanish Tragedy* (1591) that tells the story of a hero seeking revenge for his son's death. Shaped as a revenge tragedy, in which the hero has to resort onto violence and bloodshed, this play contradicted the Christian values of peace and tolerance, thus making the hero's success "at once triumphant and horrifying". Thomas Kyd was also a translator. His *Ur Hamlet* was supposedly a source for Shakespeare's *Hamlet*.

John Lyly wrote plays not for the regular companies but for the companies of the child actors. Children of Paul's and Children of the Chapel Royal are among those companies for whom Lyly wrote. His plays were largely elegant adaptations of myths. However, the everyday life had some representations within them. Still, Lyly's plays had the magical aspects of a dreamy world. Lyly is given the credits for establishing the medium of prose for English comedy. His *Eupheus the Anatomy of Wit* (written in 1579; published in 1580) has an ornate prose style enriched with rhetorical figures. Shakespeare parodied this in his plays.

John Lyly's narrative style was followed by Robert Greene and Thomas Lodge. They shortened the length of the play and ensured that the plot is compact and clear. This gathered them a larger audience. *His Dedication of Menaphon: Alarum to Sleeping Eupheus* (which was later called as Greene's *Arcadia*) contains a literary style that he used in his pastoral romances. His best-known pastoral romance *Pandosto: The Triumph of Time* gave Shakespeare the plot of *The Winter's Tale*. *Tully's Love* is another work of Greene in this category. Thomas Lodge is known for his pastoral romances such as *Rosalynde: Eupheus' Golden Legacy* and *A Magarite of America*. The former one gave Shakespeare the plot of *As You Like It*.



Horace once criticised a fellow writer stating that he plagiarised several others' works and he is an upstart crow who beautifies himself with the beautiful feathers of others. Taking these words of Horace, Robert Greene accused Shakespeare of plagiarism. In his book, which he wrote a few years before his death, titled *A Groatsworth of Wit* he attempted a survey of the literary scene in London. In this book where he discussed several writers, towards the end he writes about a newcomer without taking the writer's name but leaving enough clues to identify the person. He refers to this writer as "the only shake scene in the country," and later calls him "an upstart crow, beautified in our feathers."

George Peele was a versatile writer who experimented with different types of drama. He is well known for the following five plays some of which are already mentioned. *The Arraignment of Paris* is a pastoral play and *The Battle of Alcazar* is a romantic tragedy. *The Famous Chronicle of King Edward* is a history play. He also wrote a mystery play based on a biblical theme titled *The Love of King David and Bathsheba*. Spoofing the dramatic conventions of his period he also wrote a romantic satire titled *The Old Wives' Tale*.

Thomas Nashe expressed his embarrassment about the follies of the period and he had shown the humanist spirit through his work. Ridiculing was the general tone that he adapted in his work and burlesque was the format that he modelled his plays on. He proved himself as a nuanced satirist through his work *Anatomy of Absurdity*. In a sense, Thomas Nashe revived the satire. His work might have inspired Shakespeare in dealing with subject matter such as folly and civility. In G. K. Hunter's perspective, the new "Humanistic education" of the age allowed the University Wits to develop a "complex commercial drama, drawing on the nationalisation of religious sentiment" in such a way that it addressed an audience "caught in the contradictions and liberations history had imposed".

Let us now look at Shakespeare, the most celebrated Elizabethan playwrights of all time.

*William Shakespeare*

Shakespeare was not just a dramatist as you know. He was a sonneteer, a poet and a playwright and occupies an unsurpassed and exceptional position in English literature. Harris and Sudhakaran argue that

Generally regarded as a man of supreme genius he had an immense capacity for assimilation, which made his work comprehensively accommodating every attitude and ideology, every nature finding a place there. It is this total inclusiveness of his aesthetic which enabled him to achieve what Keats called negative capability. He was totally involved in the Elizabethan theatre at all levels being an actor, dramatist and shareholder in the Lord Chamberlain's Players. His career as a dramatist was coterminous with the period of Renaissance and his plays fully realised its possibilities.

Would you believe that most of the earlier versions of printed plays of Shakespeare during his time were pirated versions? During those days the manuscripts of the plays were sold to the company that performed those plays. They were not usually sold to the printers. If there were printed copies available, it was the result of some printers or some proactive spectator managing to copy a manuscript either from the printer or by retaining the script from their memory. All those Quartos available during Shakespeare's time had inaccuracies in them. Two of his admirers and fellow actors Henry Condell and John Heminge published the first Folio in 1623. This volume comprised 36 plays in total. This contained the 19 plays which were published in various Quarto editions. Pericles was not included in both the Quarto and Folio editions. In 1632 and 1633 the second and third Folios were published. A fourth one was published in 1685. However, all these were much like the reprints of the first Folio. Shakespeare's thirty-seven plays can be divided into five groups such as comedies, tragedies, tragi-comedies or romances, histories and the Roman plays.

#### *Shakespeare's Comedies*

*The Two Gentlemen of Verona, Love's Labour's Lost, A Midsummer Night's Dream, As You Like It, Twelfth Night, Much Ado About Nothing, All's Well That Ends Well, The Merchant of Venice, Measure for Measure, The Taming of the Shrew and The Merry Wives of Windsor* are the most important comedies of Shakespeare. Shakespeare's comedies used popular and romantic forms much the same way as his contemporary clan of playwrights-the University Wits- wrote comedies. Critics claim that Shakespeare's comedies were draped with elements of elegant courtly revel/merrymaking. Shakespeare's comedies could be termed as festive comedies which gave access to a society "vigorously and imaginatively" at play. *The Comedy of Errors, The Taming of the Shrew, The Merry Wives of*

*Windsor* and *Twelfth Night* are comedies of intrigue, farcical ones with lot of emphasis on wit.

### *Tragedies*

Shakespeare's greatness and literary mastery find their complete expression in his tragedies. The Aristotelian idea of catharsis (the purgation of emotions) is used excellently by Shakespeare by generating both pity and fear in the minds of the readers/spectators. Though he had written several tragedies, *Hamlet*, *Othello*, *King Lear*, *Macbeth* and *Romeo and Juliet* are rated as exceptional ones by critics. According to Britannica:

The confusions and contradictions of Shakespeare's age find their highest expression in his tragedies. In these extraordinary achievements, all values, hierarchies, and forms are tested and found wanting, and all society's latent conflicts are activated. Shakespeare sets husband against wife, father against child, the individual against society; he uncrowns kings, levels the nobleman with the beggar, and interrogates gods. Already in the experimental tragedies *Titus Andronicus* (1592-1594), with its spectacular violence, and *Romeo and Juliet* (1595), with its comedy and romantic tale of adolescent love, Shakespeare had broken away from the conventional Elizabethan understanding of tragedy as a twist of fortune to an infinitely more complex investigation of character and motive, and in *Julius Caesar* (1599) he begins to turn the political interests of the history plays into secular character and corporate tragedy, as men fall victim to the unstoppable train of public events set in motion by their private misjudgments. In the major tragedies that follow, Shakespeare's practice cannot be confined to a single general statement that covers all cases, for each tragedy belongs to a separate category: revenge tragedy in *Hamlet* (1600), domestic tragedy in *Othello* (1603-1604), social tragedy in *King Lear* (1605), political tragedy in *Macbeth* (1606), and heroic tragedy in *Antony and Cleopatra* (1607).

### *Romances*

Shakespeare was inspired by his younger contemporaries Beaumont and Fletcher who experimented with the tragi-comedy vein. Shakespeare's last plays *Cymbeline*, *The Winter's Tale* and *The Tempest* clearly show this influence. These plays which were styled as romances were neither tragedies nor comedies. The story of *Cymbeline* is adapted from Boccaccio's

*Decameron* and the plot of *The Winter's Tale* also had some historical background which had already inspired Robert Greene in writing his prose romance *Pandosto: The Triumph of Time* first published in 1588, a later edition of which was retitled as *Dorastus and Fawnia* and published in 1607. According to Rudyard Kipling, Shakespeare might have received inspiration from "the yarns of a sailor back from a voyage to the West Indies, whom he might have overheard or met in some Thames-side tavern.

### *Histories*

Shakespeare's early plays were chiefly histories and comedies. Britannica comments that:

About a fifth of all Elizabethan plays were histories, but this was the genre that Shakespeare particularly made his own, dramatizing the whole sweep of English history from Richard II to Henry VII in two four-play sequences, an astonishing project carried off with triumphant success. The first sequence comprising the three Henry VI plays and Richard III (1589-1592), begins as a patriotic celebration of English valour against the French. But this is soon superseded by a mature, disillusioned understanding of the world of politics culminating in the devastating portrayal of Richard III, probably the first "character" in modern sense, on the English stage—who boasts in Henry VI Part 3, that he can "set the murderous Machevil to school". Ostensibly, Richard III monumentalises the glorious accession of the dynasty of Tudor, but its realistic depiction of the workings of state power insidiously undercuts such platitudes, and the appeal of Richard's quick-witted individuality is deeply unsettling, short-circuiting any easy moral judgments.

The deposition of a legitimate but unworthy king and its consequences through two generations formed Shakespeare's second sequence of histories such as Richard II (1595), Henry VI Part 1 and 2 (1596-1598) and Henry V (1599). Authority, obedience and order were the major concerns Shakespeare addressed through these plays. Shakespeare found the materials for his histories from the *Chronicles* of Raphael Holinshed published in 1577. He supposedly had taken some from two other chroniclers namely Edward Hall and John Stow. Unlike many of our movie makers of the present day, who takes inspiration from great work and try to adapt the great work resulting in lame and inferior aesthetic effect, Shakespeare even during those days remained faithful to the chronicles that he was adapting his historical plays from. That means he did not distort

many facts and even when he embellishes the script, it was not misleading the reading/viewing public. Even if he departs occasionally from historical facts, he was not mishandling the facts and it was for reasons of great dramatic effects.

### *Roman Plays*

Shakespeare along with his fellow-playwrights derived inspiration from Sir Thomas North's translation of Plutarch's *Lives*, first published in 1579 for the Roman plays. Others who used *Lives* as a resource for their writing were Beaumont and Fletcher, Ben Jonson, and Massinger. Thanks to the Renaissance's revival of interest in antiquity and history, the Roman plays were favoured by the Elizabethan playgoers. The greatness of the Roman empire always enticed the English mass and their empire building process and the subsequent expansions were all compared with that of the great Romans. Most of the time, as in the case of the history plays, Shakespeare remained faithful to the historical accounts of the great Romans. However, when he was following the main outlines, he sometimes amplified or simplified and sometimes eliminated or embellished certain segments for the aesthetic appeal of the play. Critics argue that this fidelity was violated in the case of *Coriolanus* in which he largely deviated from the original and entirely altered the psychology of the central character. *Julius Caesar*, *Antony and Cleopatra* and *Coriolanus* are the great Roman plays of Shakespeare.

*Pericles*, *Cymbeline*, *The Winter's Tale* and *The Tempest* written between 1608 and 1612 are generally considered as the last plays of Shakespeare in which his dramatic powers truly reached their zenith. The Britannica states:

In his last period, Shakespeare's astonishingly fertile invention returned to experimentation. In *Coriolanus* (1608) he completed his political tragedies, drawing a dispassionate analysis of the dynamics of the secular state...*Timon of Athens* (1607-1608) is an unfinished spin-off, a kind of tragical satire. The last group of plays comprises the four romances, *Pericles* (c.1607-08), *Cymbeline* (c.1609-10), *The Winter's Tale* (c.1610-11), and *The Tempest* (1611), which developed a long philosophical perspective on fortune and suffering. (A final work, *The Two Noble Kinsmen*, 1613, was written in collaboration with John Fletcher). In these plays Shakespeare's imagination returns to the popular romances of his youth and dwells on mythical themes-wanderings, shipwrecks, the

reunion of sundered families, and the resurrection of people long thought dead. There is consolation here, of a sort, beautiful and poetic, but still the romances do not turn aside from the actuality of suffering, chance, loss, and unkindness.

The playwrights who succeeded Shakespeare focussed more on themes related to the city and court life and the power politics there.

#### *Monarchs after Elizabeth I*

The Tudor dynasty ended with the reign of Queen Elizabeth I as she died in 1603. She was succeeded by the Stuarts. James VI and I ruled England between 1603-1625, and Charles I occupied the throne of England and Scotland between 1625-1649. Thereafter till 1660, it was the time of Oliver Cromwell's Protectorate. Restoration of monarchy occurred when Charles II occupied the throne of England and Scotland in 1660 and he ruled till 1685. William III & II (ruled England and Scotland between 1688-1702), and Queen Anne of Great Britain (ruled between 1702-1714) were also Stuarts. George I of House of Hanover took over the throne in 1714 and ruled Britain till 1727 marking the beginning of Hanoverian dynasty. George II succeeded him in 1727 and ruled the Great Britain till 1760. George III ascended the throne as the King of United Kingdom in 1760 and ruled till 1820. From 1820 to 1830 for a decade, George IV ruled United Kingdom and was succeeded by William IV from 1830-1837. Queen Victoria ruled from 1837 to 1901. From 1901 to 1910 Edward VII was the ruler. George V succeeded him and ruled the United Kingdom from 1910 to 1936. Though Edward VIII ascended the throne in 1936, he could rule the country only for a year. In 1937, George VI secured the power and remained in power till 1952. In 1952, Queen Elizabeth II (who passed away in 2022) ascended the throne and ruled England till her death as you know. From then own Charles III is the monarch as you are aware of.

#### **The Jacobean/Stuart Period**

The Elizabethan period was marked with hopefulness and confidence. However, in the early seventeenth century, the national mood gradually became tense and anxious, partially because James was not as skilful a ruler as Elizabeth. This period, called Jacobean from the Latin form of James's name, also is known as the early Stuart era after James's family



name. For ease of understanding, let us use the term Stuart Period to refer to the period after Elizabeth I till the coronation of King George I.

The Stuart Period thus began in 1603 when Queen Elizabeth I passed away and King James VI of Scotland became King James I of England too, occupying two thrones at the same time. This was a period which saw a flourishing Court culture but also enormous turmoil and unsteadiness, of plague, fire and war. (There were intense religious debates and political uproars which contributed to the civil war in the mid-seventeenth century between the Cavaliers and the Roundheads. This struggle between the Crown and the Parliament resulted in the victory of the Roundheads. We will see this briefly in an upcoming section). The Stuart Period in the political history of Britain ended with the death of Queen Anne, and the accession of King George I from the German House of Hanover in 1714. The morality, religious and political strives and the general social unrest were all themes for the post-Shakespearean playwrights.

### **Post-Shakespearean Drama (Early Stuart Drama)**

Those playwrights after the Shakespearean era, wrote in a satiric, antiromantic and realistic mode. The conventions of festive comedies of Shakespeare were redirected towards the celebration of “confidence in the dynamically expanding commercial metropolis”. Major playwrights who attempted this were Thomas Heywood, Thomas Dekker, John Day and Samuel Rowley. Harris and Sudhakaran (2004: 77) argues that “Ben Jonson, John Marston, Thomas Middleton, and George Chapman treated the sense of pride and industriousness that Heywood and others celebrated, as signs of avarice, anarchy and aggression, suggestive of the sickness of society”. Let us first look at Ben Jonson who is well known as “Shakespeare’s friend and nearest rival”.

#### *Ben Jonson*

Ben Jonson was popular for his comedies and is considered as the fountainhead for the modern comic tradition. *Sejanus* (1603) and *Catiline* (1611) were two prominent tragedies he wrote. Among his major plays are the comedies *Every Man in His Humour* (1598), *Volpone* (1605), *Epicoene; or, The Silent Woman* (1609), *The Alchemist* (1610), and *Bartholomew Fair* (1614).

*Every Man in His Humour* was successfully presented by the Lord Chamberlain’s theatrical company in 1598. This established Jonson as a

great playwright. In this play Jonson attempted to showcase the spirit and manner of Latin comedy by portraying the story of a young man with an eye for a girl, who has difficulty with a phlegmatic father, is dependent on a clever servant, and is ultimately successful—which was actually the standard plot of the Latin dramatist Plautus. Jonson managed to represent the four “humours” of medieval and Renaissance medicine—choler, melancholy, phlegm, and blood—through four of the main characters. These humours were thought to regulate human physical and mental composition.

***The Britannica comments on Jonson's plays:***

His early plays, particularly *Every Man in His Humour* (1598) and *Every Man Out of His Humour* (1599), with their galleries of grotesques, scornful detachment, and rather academic effect, were patently indebted to the verse satires of the 1590s; they introduced to the English stage a vigorous and direct anatomising of the time's deformities, the language, the habits, and humours of the London scene. Jonson began as a self-appointed social legislator, aristocratic, conservative, and authoritarian, outraged by a society given over to inordinate appetite and egotism and ambitious through his mammoth learning to establish himself as the privileged artist, the fearless and faithful mentor and companion to kings; but he was ill at ease with a court inclined in its masques to prefer flattery to judicious advice. Consequently, the greater satires that followed are marked by their gradual accommodations with popular comedy and by their unwillingness to make their implied moral judgments explicit; in *Volpone* (1606) the theatrical brilliance of the villain easily eclipses the sordid legacy hunters whom he deceives; *Epicoene* (1609) is a noisy farce of metropolitan fashion and frivolity; *The Alchemist* (1610) exhibits the conjurings and deceptions of clever London rogues; and *Bartholomew Fair* (1614) draws a rich portrait of city life parading through the annual fair at Smithfield, a vast panorama of a society given over to folly. In these plays, fools and rogues are indulged to the very height of their daring, forcing upon the audience both criticism and admiration; the strategy leaves the audience to draw its own conclusions while liberating Jonson's wealth of exuberant comic invention, virtuoso skill with plot construction, and mastery of a language tumbling with detailed observation of London's multifarious ephemera. After 1616 Jonson abandoned the stage for the court, but, finding himself increasingly disregarded, he made a hard-won return to the theatres. The most notable of his late plays are popular in



style: *The New Inn* (1629), which has affinities with the Shakespearean romance, and *A Tale of a Tub* (1633), which resurrects the Elizabethan country farce.

The vein of city comedy that Ben Jonson popularised was keenly followed by other playwrights such as Francis Beaumont and John Marston.

#### *Francis Beaumont*

Beaumont's literary career began when he left his studies at Oxford after his father's demise and joined London's Inner Temple in 1600. He began his literary life with an adaptation of an Ovidian legend in the form of a poem titled *Salmacis and Hermaphroditus* in 1602. In 1607, he prefixed to Ben Jonson's *Volpone* (1607) some verses. John Fletcher also contributed verses to the same volume. By then Beaumont and Fletcher had already begun to collaborate on plays for the Children of the Queen's Revels (a prominent company of boy actors that was active during most of the 16th and early 17th centuries).

It is difficult to identify Beaumont's plays from the 35 plays published in 1647 as by "Beaumont and Fletcher". To this volume, 18 plays were added in the 1679 collection. Critics maintain that only 10 of these plays were by the two friends, while Beaumont also contributed to the 3 plays substantially written by Fletcher and Philip Massinger. The rest of the plays are written by Fletcher alone and some of them are his collaborative work with other playwrights.

*The Knight of the Burning Pestle* is Beaumont's unaided work. The Knight of the Burning Pestle, according to *Britannica*,

parodies a then popular kind of play—sprawling, episodic, with sentimental lovers and chivalric adventures. It opens with The Citizen and his Wife taking their places on the stage to watch "The London Merchant"—itself a satire on the work of a contemporary playwright, Thomas Dekker. Citizen and Wife interrupt, advise, and insist that the play should be more romantic and their apprentice should take a leading part. Thereafter these two contradictory plots go forward side by side, allowing Beaumont to have fun with bourgeois naïveté about art.

Thus, *The Knight of the Burning Pestle* performed in 1607 and printed in 1613 is a hilarious insult of citizenry. This play scorns their taste for romantic drama. *The Masque of the Inner Temple and Gray's Inn* performed

in 1613 and supposedly printed in the same year is yet another play that is believed to be written solely by Beaumont.

### *John Fletcher*

Fletcher wrote comedies and tragedies between the years 1606 and 1625. As stated above, he collaborated with Beaumont and other playwrights of his times and produced several different plays from which it is difficult to identify which ones are mostly his own. As we have already seen, he began to work with Beaumont in 1607, at first for the Children of the Queen's Revels and from 1609 onwards until 1613 for the King's Men at the Globe and Blackfriars theatres. After 1613 he frequently collaborated with Philip Massinger, who actually succeeded him in 1625 as chief playwright of the King's Men. Massinger revised several of Fletcher's plays too. Nathan Field and William Rowley are the other playwrights whom he collaborated with.

### ***Britannica discusses the contributions of Fletcher:***

The masterpieces of the Beaumont and Fletcher collaboration—*Philaster*, *The Maides Tragedy*, and *A King and No King*—show, most clearly in the last, the emergence of most of the features that distinguish the Fletcherian mode from that of Shakespeare, George Chapman, or John Webster: the remote, often pseudohistorical, fairy-tale setting; the clear, smooth speech rising to great emotional arias of declamatory rhetoric; the basically sensational or bizarre plot that faces the characters with wild “either-or” choices between extremes and that can be manipulated toward a sad or a happy ending as the playwrights choose; the sacrifice of consistency and plausibility in characterization so that patterns can be made out of constantly shifting emotional states and piquant situations can be prolonged.

*The Faithfull Shepheardesse*, *The Mad Lover*, *The Loyall Subject*, *The Humorous Lieutenant*, *Women Pleas'd*, *The Island Princess*, and *A Wife for a Moneth* (all written between 1608 and 1624) are the best-known plays which are of Fletcher's sole authorship. All these plays portray extraordinary situations and extreme attitudes, presented through intense narratives. *The Loyall Subject* and *A Wife for a Moneth* are considered as the best among these plays. *A Wife for a Moneth* is an elaborate play, in which a bizarre sexual situation is handled with cunning sharpness. This play demonstrates Fletcher's tendency to make his characters personifications of vices and virtues. *The Wild-Goose Chase* is regarded as the best of

Fletcher's comedies. It is praised by critics for urbanity and consistency of tone along with irony and easy wit that it displays.

### **John Marston**

John Marston was one of the most vigorous satirists whose best-known work is *The Malcontent* (1604). In this play, he critiques the iniquities of a lewd court. This play as well as other major works were written for various children's companies, organized groups of boy actors famous during Elizabethan and Jacobean times. Educated in Oxford, Marston's literary career began in 1598 with *The Metamorphosis of Pigmaliions Image and Certaine Satyres*, an erotic poem in the Ovidian style. In the same year, obscure verses of *The Scourge of Villanie* were widely applauded. In this work Marston referred to himself as a "barking satirist."

### **Britannica comments on Marston:**

In 1599 Marston began writing for the theatre, producing *Histrionmastix* (published in 1610), probably for performance at the Middle Temple. In his character Chrisoganus, a "Master Pedant" and "translating scholler," the audience was able to recognize the learned Ben Jonson. A brief, bitter literary feud developed between Marston and Jonson—part of "the war of the theatres." In *Poetaster* (produced 1601) Jonson depicted Marston as Crispinus, a character with red hair and small legs who was given a pill that forced him to disgorge a pretentious vocabulary. For the Children of Paul's, a theatre company, Marston wrote *Antonio and Mellida* (1600); its sequel, *Antonio's Revenge* (1601); and *What You Will* (1601). The most memorable is *Antonio's Revenge*, a savage melodrama of a political power struggle with elements of parody and fantasy.

*The Dutch Courtezan* (produced 1603–04) as well as *The Malcontent* fetched him his place as a dramatist. *The Dutch Courtezan* with its coarse, farcical counterplot, was considered by critics as one of the cleverest comedies of its time. Marston used all conventions of contemporary revenge tragedy in his *The Malcontent*. But his wronged hero does not kill any of his tormentors and re-claims power by erudite Machiavellian tricks. In 1605 Marston collaborated with Jonson and with George Chapman on *Eastward Ho*. It was a comedy of the contrasts within the urban life. But the play's satiric references hurt the sentiments of the Scottish countrymen of the newly crowned James I, and all three authors were imprisoned. Critics often comment that Marston's satire in his satirical plays has so sharp a tone that they border on tragedy. His bitter scepticism mocked all values.

### **Thomas Middleton**

Thomas Middleton evaded Ben Jonson's "moral concerns with greed and self-ignorance". Middleton's characteristic form was the intrigue comedy. He employed satire in these plays in an unprejudiced way. The society was thus portrayed "as a mechanism in which each sex and class pursues its own selfish interests". His concern was not on individual follies. He paid more attention to the the social injustices and inequalities prevalent in his time. *The Roaring Girle* (1608) and *A Chaste Maid in Cheapside* (1613) are said to rival Jonson's *Bartholomew Fair* in comprehensiveness. However, their attitudes are opposed to that of Jonson's. *Women Beware Women* (1612) and *The Changeling* (1622) are tragedies that reflect Middleton's social concerns. These two plays focussed on how human beings are answerable for their own actions regardless of their social positioning.

### **George Chapman**

George Chapman, a drop-out of Oxford, is known for his translation of Homer which long remained the standard English version. He was a poet as well as a dramatist. His first work was *The Shadow of Night . . . Two Poeticall Hymnes* (1593) which later followed by several others. Harris and Sudhakaran (2004) point out that George Chapman is known for his *Bussy d' Ambios* (1604), and *Conspiracy and Tragedie of Charles Duke of Byron* (1608) which, "drawing on recent French history present the conflict between the traditional concept of magnificent heroism that had outlived its social function and pragmatic arbitrary monarchy". *The Widdowes Teares* (1612) is yet another play of Chapman that is well-known.

### **John Webster**

John Webster is known for his tragedies of State, and his treatment of political intrigue, treachery and all kinds of manipulations. *The White Devil* (1612) and *The Duchess of Malfi* (1613, published in 1623) are generally regarded as the paramount 17th-century English tragedies apart from those of Shakespeare. *The White Devil* (1612) is ambivalent, eliciting sympathy for its heroine who is presented as vicious at the same time as it is shown that she is at the mercy of a corrupt and malicious society. *The Duchess of Malfi* (1613) presents a heroine through whom is mounted the challenge to the male dominated world of power. As Britannica states "*The White Devil*, like *Macbeth*, is a tragedy of action; and *The Duchess of Malfi*, like *King Lear*, is a tragedy of suffering".

Thomas Dekker was his main collaborator and with him he wrote *Westward Ho* (1604) and *Northward Ho* (1605). Both these plays were published in 1607. According to *Britannica*, he is “also believed to have worked to varying degrees with William Rowley, Thomas Middleton, John Fletcher, John Ford, and perhaps Philip Massinger”.

Let us look at what Harris and Sudhakaran argue about the plays and playwrights of this period:

The early Stuart drama showed signs of the kind of “polite drama” that was to appear after the Restoration. The beginning of the comedy of manners could easily be seen in the plays written by John Fletcher and James Shirley, though they were more spiteful in their sarcasm of courtiers than the Restoration drama would be. The tradition of social and political criticism through theatre was carried on by John Ford (*‘Tis Pity, Shee’s a Whore*, 1633), Philip Massinger (*Believe as You List*, 1631), and Richard Brome (*The Antipodes*, 1638). Massinger and Brome probed at the very tensions that were to lead ultimately to the collapse of the Stuart regime. The outbreak of the Civil War in 1642 forced the theatres to be closed; this was done not because the playwrights were averse to politics or to change. But the crisis they were embroiled in was the one they had been preoccupied with on the stage for almost the whole of three generations.

We understand that Shakespeare’s perception of a crisis in public norms and private belief became a superseding concern of the drama until the theatres closed in 1642. The prevailing manner of the playwrights who succeeded him was realistic, satirical, and anti-romantic. Their plays predominantly focussed on two locations such as the city and the court.

In the seventeenth century the Lower House of the Parliament was dominated by the rich middle class. With rise of Humanist ideals and the spirit of Reformation, they became conscious of their democratic rights and privileges. The puritans too exerted their influence on the struggle between the King and the Parliament refusing revenues to the king, criticising his policies and impeaching his ministers. All these resulted in Civil War following which Charles I was executed. These political situations led to the closure of all theatres. Restoration drama emerged after the theatres reopened following the restoration of monarchy with Charles II ascending the throne.

## Restoration and Revival of Theatres

Even though the Parliament in 1642 outlawed dramatic performances, the stage did not completely vanish during the English Civil Wars and the subsequent Commonwealth. Since the time of Queen Elizabeth I, the Puritans had been staunch against the theatre, and they believed that it is satanic to have such performances entertained. Puritans opposed theatres. They considered theatrical performances as sacrilegious acts that should be banned. However, even when the parliamentary ordinances prohibited theatre performances, certain loopholes in the law allowed the nobles (many of whom has allied with the royalists) to stage plays and operas in their homes. Secret staging of short plays occurred during fairs in small towns. The traveling wits who toured the country furtively entertained people with short skits. These were the modes in which theatre activities stayed alive after the elimination of monarchy till its restoration in 1660.

Owing to the patronage and support the theatre artists derived from Elizabeth I, James I, and Charles I, most of London's actors, playwrights, and theatre owners had been royalist supporters during the Civil War. When Charles I was beheaded and Charles II went in exile, many of these theatre owners and actors also left the country. Some of them were fortunate enough to witness the revival of theatre in 1660 when Charles II ascended the throne. A decade long silencing demanded a renovation of the theatre practice itself. We will now look into the restoration drama in detail.

Charles II sanctioned patents for two acting companies to be established as the major production companies of their time. Sir William Davenant was granted one of these royal patents. Thus, the Duke of York's Company opened in 1661. The patent was later moved, in 1732, to the Covent Garden Theatre in the centre of Westminster, London.

The second royal patent was issued to Thomas Killigrew, who started the King's Company. Their theatre, Royal Drury Lane, or Drury Lane Theatre, opened in 1663. The theatre was built by Sir Christopher Wren. After a major fire accident in 1672, Sir Christopher Wren drafted out a new architectural outline and the second Theatre Royal was created. This theatre is still located in the "eastern part of the City of Westminster," and is "the oldest theatre in London that is still in use". Following these, several theatres emerged in England. Let us now look at the nature of Restoration drama.



### ***Nature of Restoration Drama***

The theatre had degenerated into a thing of the court. The middle classes for the most part kept themselves away from the theatre. The playhouse had become the riotous haunt of the upper classes and as a consequence, the plays written for the playhouse were distinctly calculated by the playwrights to appeal to a courtly and cavalier spectators. It is this social tendency that explains the rise of the heroic tragedy and the development of comedy of manners. They appealed to artificial aristocratic sentiments on the subject of honour; the other reflected the morally vicious but intellectually brilliant atmosphere of the saloons and coffee houses.

The heroic tragedy often but not always written in rhymed couplets and always dealing in a high rhetorical manner with the conflict between love and honour or love and duty, is a characteristic phenomenon of the 1660s and 1670s. Both native and foreign influences contributed to the development of heroic tragedy.

Heroic tragedy, though it kept free from the profligacy of comedy, was quite artificial. For a time its most popular form was that of the heroic drama, in which love, gallantry, and courage were depicted on a gigantic scale with little reference to life, and the dialogue of which was filled with sonorous rant and bombastic extravagance. In these heroic plays rhyme displaced blank verse. But in *All for Love*, the finest heroic tragedy, Dryden reverted to Shakespeare and blank verse. The heroic tragedy is artificial because in these plays admiration takes the place of pity and fear. Tragic pity and terror or elemental emotions confuse them and the balance is lost.

Dryden himself in his preface to *All for Love*, which is an adaptation of Shakespeare's *Antony and Cleopatra*, points out the source of the trouble:

That which is wanting to work up the pity to a greater height was not afforded by the story, for the crime of love which they both committed was not occasioned by any necessity, or fatal ignorance, but were wholly voluntary, since our passions are, or ought to be within our power. What moves greatly in a tragedy is the spectacle of man pitting himself against the inevitable; and since love was the main element relied upon to produce pity, the structure of the tragedy was threatened at its base. Finally, the Restoration Tragedy was an art of escape not of profound realisation, that is, it explored the chimerical rather than the actual.

Though the splendour of Restoration drama is generally attributed to the comic creativity, the development of Restoration Tragedy is a significant literary trend. Let us now look at the major playwrights and their work which was in the heroic tragedy mode.

### **John Dryden**

John Dryden's mastery of heroic tragedy is illustrated in his *Tyrannick Love or The Royal Martyr* (1669) and the two parts of *Conquest of Granada* (1670). These plays were written in Heroic couplet. But in his *All for Love* (1667), he used blank verse. *All for Love* pioneered the emergence of the new sentimental tragedy or she-tragedy. *Don Sebastian* (1689) is yet another heroic tragedy written by Dryden. *The Indian Emperour* (1665) and *Aureng-zebe* (1675) are the other plays that fall into the category of heroic tragedies. Though Dryden's tragedies are well-known and compact, his finest play is a comedy. *Amphitryon* (1690) is the most popular play of Dryden.

### **Thomas Otway**

*Alcibiades* (1675), *Don Carlos* (1676), *The Orphan* (1680) and *Venice Preserved* (1682) are the heroic plays that Thomas Otway wrote. Among these, *The Orphan* (1680) and *Venice Preserved* (1682) are the most significant ones. *Alcibiades* (1675), and *Don Carlos* (1676) are written in rhymed couplets. *The Orphan* (1680) is written in blank verse. *Venice Preserved* (1682) is his best work. It is a greater tragedy than *The Orphan* (1680).

### **Nathaniel Lee**

Major works of Nathaniel Lee are *Nero* (1674), *Sophonisha* (1676), *The Rival of the Queens* (1677) and *Mithridates* (1678). Conceits are plenty in his plays and his style is bombastic.

Other playwrights during this period were Elkanah Settle who wrote *The Empress of Morocco* (1673), John Crowne who wrote tragedies like *Caligula* (1698) and *Thyestes* (1681), and Nicholas Rowe who was well known for his plays *Tamerlane* (1702), *The Fair Penitent* (1703) and *John Shore* (1714).

### **Restoration Comedy**

William Shakespeare's *Much Ado about Nothing* might be considered the first comedy of manners. But as stated already, in England the genre



named comedy of manners flourished during the Restoration period. Ben Jonson's comedy of humours inspired the playwrights of Restoration theatre to satirise and laugh at the follies of their times. However, the dexterity that Jonson had in handling the comedy was not evident in the comedy of manners produced by many Restoration playwrights. In the context of Restoration theatre, comedy of manners (also known as anti-sentimental comedy) refers to a mode of realistic, satirical comedy drama that questions and comments upon the manners and social conventions of a so-called sophisticated and artificial society. Moody and Lovett argues that " Restoration comedy is a genuine reflection of the temper, if not of the actual life, of the upper classes of the nation, and as such it has a sociological as well as a literary interest". The plots of the Restoration comedies were usually love intrigues and the characters were types who represented mainly the people of fashion. Bo Jeffares comments on restoration comedy: "The plays performed reflected the taste of an aristocratic audience; there were high-flown heroic plays and tearful tragedies; and there were also comedies: dashing, witty, coarse, cynical, satiric and sardonic". These comedies were a direct departure from the Puritan morality and sentiments. Fashionable intrigue, sex, marriage and adultery were common themes which evoked protest from strict puritans who perceived these traits as immoral and contemptuous. Allardyce Nicoll sums up the characteristics of Restoration comedy as:

Comedy, as has been said by many critics from classical days to the time of Shakespeare, is above all other things a mirror of the age and in displaying the life of their time, Etherege and his followers were but adopting a sphere which had been occupied by many before them. If we condemn the society of the Restoration Court, we need not thereby condemn the dramatists of that period; the object was to display the fashionable life of their time, not to indicate the superior mental and moral qualities of a past age or to prophesy the improvements of the future. On a first reading, therefore, these comedies of manners may strike many as being immoral and vulgar, but for students of literature a true historical perspective must be gained.

The Restoration Comedies were considered as anti social and immoral by several critics because they represented many social institutions, the prominent one being marriage, in an obnoxious and ridiculous perspective. Jeremy Collier was among the most notable critics who attacked the profaneness and immorality of the Restoration comedies. He in his book *A Short History of the Profaneness and Immorality of the English Stage* (1698)

provided a scathing attack over the Restoration dramatists not sparing even the best ones of the period Dryden, Wycherly and Congreve. He critiqued the way these playwrights treated religion and morality and condemned their 'stage behaviour' by stating that "their smuttiness of expression, their swearing, profaneness and renewed application of scripture, their abuse of the clergy, their making their top characters libertines, and giving them success in their debauchery". Collier found these traits of the Restoration comedies to be objectionable and obnoxious. His criticism in fact ignores the functions of art and he has the restricted view of art having a moral function and is a tool to enhance the morality of a society. Collier's view ignores the several different functions of art. Art can just exist as it is without any moral function. Art for art's sake proclaims this idea. In his essay 'On the Artificial Comedy of the Last Century', Charles Lamb critiques Collier's objections to Restoration comedies and maintains that Restoration comedies are neither moral nor immoral but they are amoral. Let us now look at the major writers of Restoration comedy.

### **William Congreve**

Congreve deserves the credit of being the finest writer of Restoration comedies. He was a scholar and a translator who also wrote poetry. *The Old Bachelor* was his first play that was performed in 1693. Sir Joseph Wittol and Captain Bluff are the popular characters from *The Old Bachelor*. His not very appreciated play *The Double Dealer* came out in the same year and was distasteful for the admirers of Comedy of Manners. *Love for Love* that came out in 1695 was much appreciated. Congreve is much known for his *The Way of the World* (1700) and it was an excellent example of comedy of manners. Rickett remarks about Congreve's dramatic artistry:

In construction and grasp of character, Congreve steadily improved with each succeeding play. But from the very first he exhibited himself as a master of light and witty dialogue. Therein lay his great strength. He has the easy gaiety of Etherege and the satirical force of Wycherley, and speedily he showed how well he could excel these dramatists on their own.

Edward Albert praises Congreve as one of the greatest dramatists and states that

In his work the comedy of manners reaches perfection. His plays are a faithful reflection of the upper-class life of his day, but their undoubted immorality is saved from being objectionable by brilliant wit, a hard finish and a total lack of realism. In the artificial society which he depicts,

moral judgment will be out of place. The tone is one of cynical vivacity, the characters are well drawn. Congreve's prose is lucid and pointed, and shows an excellent ear for rhythm and cadence. In all things he is the polished artist, whose distinctive quality is brilliance.

Thus, Congreve's style is covered with subtle irony. There is a subdued tone of joviality in his dialogue touched by wit. Congreve skilfully uses English prose in all its variety, richness and fullness so that he may adopt it to the character and disposition of each speaker in the play.

### **George Etherege**

Etherege's plays established the comedy of manners. In a sense, he pioneered the genre that was later taken forward by Congreve. Etherege's plays offer a realistic portrayal of the graceful, heartless and licentious upper classes of the period. The prose dialogue is natural and brilliant, and its light airy grace conceals some deficiency of plot and construction as Kumar and Thayil argue. *The Comical Revenge or Love in a Tub* (1664), *She Would if She Cou'd* (1668), and *The Man of the Mode or Sir Fopling Flutter* (1676) are his major plays.

### **Sir John Vanbrugh**

Rickett points out that "in sheer intellectual force, Vanbrugh's work is on a lower plane than Congreve's; but by way of compensation he has a more genial humour, and a genius for farcical development denied to Congreve, who excelled in satire". His three best comedies are *The Relapse* (1696), *The Provok'd Wife* (1697) and *Confederacy* (1705).

### **George Farquhar**

Farquhar was a clergyman, an actor, and a soldier who died at the age of 29. He did not produce any extraordinary plays. Britannica states:

His first play, *Love and a Bottle*, was well received at London's Drury Lane Theatre in 1699 and was followed in the same year by *The Constant Couple*. A sequel to the latter, *Sir Harry Wildair*, appeared in 1701. Between 1702 and 1704 he wrote *The Inconstant* (adapted from John Fletcher's *Wild-Goose Chase*), *The Twin-Rivals*, and *The Stage-Coach*, a farce translated from French. Farquhar's real contribution to the English drama came in 1706 with *The Recruiting Officer* and, in the following year, with *The Beaux' Stratagem*, which he finished on his deathbed. In these plays he introduced a verbal vigour and love of character that are more usually associated with Elizabethan dramatists.

His plays had freshness as well as wit and a lively human sympathy.

### ***Decline of Comedy of Manners***

Stage productions underwent a change from the 1700s. Eventually the appeal of restoration drama became restricted and there were several protests from public and from critics about the immorality and anti-social traits that the Restoration plays proliferated. England witnessed the emergence of Coffee Houses and the Coffee House culture resulted in serious discussions on problems of public. This turn of interest from courtly matters to the socio-political problems of the public further asserted the decline of the Restoration plays. Moreover, drama as a genre itself was challenged by the novel and newspapers, which expressed the concerns of the rising middle class. One Restoration playwright whose plays, at least two of them- titled *The Careless Husband* and *The Non-Juror*, reflected the trends of the new literary era was Colley Cibber. Drama became more realistic and began to deal with the social and political aspects of life. In dramatization as well, several changes have occurred. England was witnessing the emergence of other literary genres and the emergence of modern drama.

### **1.3 Drama in the Post Restoration Era**

In this lesson, we will briefly look at the developments after the Restoration period in the socio- political milieu of Britain and analyse how these changes have repercussions and reflections in the literary imagination of those times. We will quickly look at the status of British Drama during the years after Queen Anne ascending the throne in 1702. From this point, we will move to the modern period when drama flourished again and briefly discuss the major movements in drama as a literary form designed for performance. Let us first look at the scenario after the reign of William III.

#### **The Age of Reason (1700-1750)**

The rise of political parties (the Whigs and the Tories) was a major change that happened to the political landscape of Britain. This had influence on the literary landscape too. For propagating their ideologies, each of these parties attempted to bribe notable men of letters to join their parties. Some of the writers had strong political bias and they wrote for the political propaganda of the parties which they associated themselves with. Writers praised the party ideals and leadership assuming pseudonyms and

sometimes even with their own identities. Pamphlets and periodicals were circulated by political parties to propagate their ideologies. The advent of periodical writing allowed great scope to the talented prose writers of the period and this in turn resulted in the development of prose. In a sense, we can say that, thus the lucid, clear prose style evolved perhaps for the first ever time in the literary history of Britain. Edward Albert stated that "It was the golden age of political pamphleteering and the writers made the most of it".

Another important factor that influenced this period was the emergence of clubs and coffee houses. With these clubs and coffee houses, people began socialising and this resulted in discussions and debates on current affairs. Drama declined in the early 1700s. The rising interest in politics and the decline of drama resulted in a clear increase in the number of the reading public. Thus, new publishing houses emerged and attempted to publish translations of notable work and other famous texts of the times. The rise of middle class and the new morality also were the reasons for the decline of drama. The period between 1700 and 1750 is known as the Age of Pope or Age of Reason. Though poetry and prose flourished during this age, drama was totally absent from the literary scenario. The glory of Restoration drama was completely obsolete. Joseph Addison's *Cato* is the only notable work during this period. *Cato* was an endeavour of Addison to introduce the French rhetorical dramatic traditions to the English stage. Richard Steele's play *The Lying Lover* was a failure on stage. Britannica states : "Sententious and ill-constructed, with much moralizing, it is nevertheless of some historical importance as one of the first sentimental comedies". Sentimental comedy became popular during the age of Johnson. George Lillo (1693-1739) established a domestic drama or form of tragedy, the characters and incidents of which were to be taken from common life instead of from romance or history. His famous works are *London Merchant* and *Fatal Curiosity*.

### **The Age of Transition (1750-1798)**

The Age of Reason is also known as the Age of Johnson because Dr. Samuel Johnson is the most representative writer of this period. Decline of the party spirit, the French Revolution, renaissance of learning, the new realism, the rise of middle class, and the humanitarian spirit were the major features of this period. In poetry, this period is known as the age of transition. The adherence to the classical tradition and the probe for a new

romanticism was the chief characteristic too which makes this period the age of transition.

As stated earlier, the sentimental comedy developed further during the Age of Johnson but was extremely limited in the literary scope for drama. Sentimental comedies appealed more to the middle-class spectators. Oliver Goldsmith and Richard Sheridan were the dramatists who worked to revive the comic spirit of the Restoration drama by omitting all manners and features of sentimental comedy. The middle-class audiences were upset and uneasy about the vulgarity involved in Comedy of Manners. Sentimental comedy provided the middle-class with powerful stories filled with sentiments that made the audience sob for the characters. Britannica defines sentimental comedy as:

a dramatic genre of the 18th century, denoting plays in which middle-class protagonists triumphantly overcome a series of moral trials. Such comedy aimed at producing tears rather than laughter. Sentimental comedies reflected contemporary philosophical conceptions of humans as inherently good but capable of being led astray through bad example. By an appeal to his noble sentiments, a man could be reformed and set back on the path of virtue. Although the plays contained characters whose natures seemed overly virtuous, and whose trials were too easily resolved, they were nonetheless accepted by audiences as truthful representations of the human predicament. Sentimental comedy had its roots in early 18th century tragedy, which had a vein of morality similar to that of sentimental comedy but had loftier characters and subject matter than sentimental comedy.

Sentimental comedy had two noticeable features. Firstly, the characters display sensibility excessively. Secondly, they utter intensely homiletic dialogues. Steele's *The Lying Lovers*, Hugh Kelly's *False Delicacy* and Richard Cumberland's *The West Indian* are considered as the best examples of sentimental comedy. Goldsmith and Sheridan pioneered the anti-sentimental comedy movement. As Nicoll points out: "Goldsmith endeavours to revive the spirit of *As You Like It*, where Sheridan strives to create another *Way of the World*".

Oliver Goldsmith followed the classical tradition of perceiving tragedy as the superior form of drama and considered comedy as an inferior portrayal of follies of the common folk. For him, tragedy enacted the



misfortunes of the great people. Two essays he composed such as *The Present State of Polite Learning* (written in 1759) and *On the Theatre or A Comparison between Laughing and Sentimental Comedy* (written in 1772) documented his distaste in sentimental comedy and his appreciation of the classic vein of drama. His preface to his anti-sentimental comedy *The Good Natured Man* (1768) exposes the hollowness of the sentimental comedy. Rickett writes:

Goldsmith's *She Stoops to Conquer* (1773) approaches in atmosphere more closely to Shakespeare's romantic comedy, which it may be noted, after about 1735, had rapidly come into an esteem which it had not enjoyed since the early seventeenth century. There breathes over the play an atmosphere of romantic sentiment—not the sentimentalism of Goldsmith's contemporaries, but a peculiar union of emotions and intellect which colours the figures and words of Hardcastle and of Tony Lumpkin and of Diggory alike. It contains the immortal character of Tony Lumpkin who is the source of laughter and the spirit of true jollity and mirth. Goldsmith's *Good Natured Man* is excellent in parts; *She Stoops to Conquer* excellent throughout, with a bright whimsical humour and a fresh charm of dialogue not attained since the days of Congreve. Less witty than the Restoration dramatists, Goldsmith is greatly superior in his humanity and taste.

Sheridan attempted to revive the spirit of Congreve's plays. His prose comedy *Rivals* (1774) was a great success. *St Patrick's Day or The Scheming Lieutenant* was written in 1775 and it was in the genre of farce. In the same year he produced an operatic play titled *The Duenna*. However, Sheridan's best play *The School of Scandal* appeared in 1777. His last play was *The Critic, or A Tragedy Rehearsed* published in 1779 and it has been praised as the best burlesque in the literary history. Kumar and Thayal point out that:

Sheridan's prose comedies revive the brilliant spirit of the Restoration comedies but without the immorality of the Restoration plays. We see the polite world of fashion, but Sheridan makes its vices appear foolish by exaggerating them in humorous portraiture. The plots are ingenious and effective, though they depend largely on a stagy complexity of intrigue. He has created some immortal characters—Mrs. Malaprop, Bob Acres, Sir Anthony Absolute, Faulkland and Sir Fretful Plagiary. All of them are drawn with admirable skill. The dialogue is brilliant in its picturesque,



epigrammatic repartee. The plays are remarkable for their vivacity and charm.

After Goldsmith and Sheridan, there were no notable playwrights till G.B. Shaw and Oscar Wilde. There were no remarkable tragedies to mention at all. Johnson's *Irene* (1749), John Home's *Douglas* (1756) and Joanna Baillie's blank verse tragedies such as *Count Basil* (1798) and *De Montfort* (1798) are not of any particular significance in the literary history.

During the Age of Wordsworth (1798- 1850) there were no notable playwrights. Poetry, novel, and essay flourished during this age.

### **Drama in the Early Nineteenth Century**

The typical Victorian attitude was not favourable for the nourishment of drama in England during this period. Matthew Arnold states that "In England, we have no drama at all. Our vast society is not homogeneous enough, not sufficiently united, even any large portion of it, in a common view of life, a common ideal capable of serving as a basis for modern English drama". During the Romantic period, though Shelley, Byron, Southey and Lamb wrote plays, these plays were to be read in private and not to be performed on stage. Therefore they were called the Closet Plays.

During the Victorian era Tennyson was an accomplished poet who excelled in his dramatic outputs too. Browning's *Strafford* (1837) and *A Blot in the Scutcheon* (1843) were notable plays. Charles Reade's *The Courier of Lyons* (1854) and *Drank* (1879) were largely melodramas and these are not considered as meritorious plays. Lord Lytton's *Money* (1840) was a moral comedy. Tom Taylor's *Still Waters Run Deep* (1855) and *The Ticket-of-Leave Man* (1863) were the pioneering works that exhibited some trends towards realistic drama. A pseudo-classic tragedy in declamatory style was written by Sir Thomas Talfourd known as *Ion*. During the 19<sup>th</sup> century many societal changes were occurring. Educational reforms, development of journalism, women's emancipation movements, the rapid growth in industrialisation and increased awareness of class conflict were all factors that shaped the sensibilities of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century.

### **Drama in the Nineteenth Century**

Theatres flourished once again and the middle-class were not apprehensive about the moral corruption that was prevalent in the theatre practices during the Restoration period. More theatres were opened and

writers wrote and plays were staged. Romanticism was not coveted and was eventually dismissed. This gave way to the drama in the mode of realism.

There were a handful of foreign playwrights who contributed to the development of realist drama in England. Ibsen, Hebbel, Dumas, Augier, Gorky and Strindberg were the most popular foreign playwrights who exerted their literary influence on the British playwrights. Ibsen's *A Doll's House* captures the heroine Nora who was the symbol of the new woman who asserts her individuality. Ibsen's plays had great emotional appeal and at the same time they were plays of ideas. Ibsen pioneered the problem plays. In problem plays, the author problematises several matters of social concern and leaves the audience to rationalise them and to elicit conclusions on their own. Ibsen's plays influenced the forthcoming British plays. His plays were "stories of lives, discussion of conduct, unveiling of motives, conflict of characters in talk, laying bare of souls, discovery of pitfalls-in short, illumination of life".

T.W. Robertson, Henry Arthur Jones and A.W. Pinero are considered as the pioneers of modern British drama. Nicoll elaborates on Robertson's contribution to the realist drama:

Nevertheless, we must acknowledge two things, that he carried his realism as far as the audiences of his time could permit and that he was able to incorporate into these plays a quality which still succeeds in giving them an appealing charm to readers and spectators who have passed far beyond the world for which they were originally intended. One of Robertson's chief virtues was that he set out to bring life into the theatre, abandoning the distressed maidens and black villains and impossibly noble heroes, and, that in doing so, he tried to avoid any doctrinaire approach. Although his basic creed is essentially Victorian he takes a wide view of the world around him

Satirising the snobbish society Robertson through his plays attempted to reveal the follies of the aristocratic society through his plays. Thus, the artistic excellence clubbed with the societal reality and the realist dramas became popular. Robertson's major plays were *Ours*, *Caste*, *School*, *Home*, *M.P.*, and *David Garrick*.

*The Silver King* was the first play written by Henry Arthur Jones and it was a melodrama. But his second play *Saints and Sinners* depicted the realistic portrayal of class conflict, meaninglessness of conventional

puritanism, the selfishness of the middle-class provincial society. A.W. Pinero wrote farces in the beginning such as *The Squire*, *Sweet Lavender*, *The Magistrate*, *The Schoolmistress*, *The Dandy Dick*, *The Weaker Sex*, *The Profligate* and *The Second Mrs. Tranquary*. In these plays, he attempted to endorse realism in the construction of both the character and the situation. Realistic atmosphere is created in his more serious plays like *Trelawny of the Wells*, *The Notorious Mrs. Ebbsmith*, *Iris*, and *Midchannel*. *Britannica* states that his plays

...combine wildly improbable events with likable characters and a consistently amusing style. Pinero was at the same time studying serious drama by adapting plays from the French (including *The Iron Master*, 1884, and *Mayfair*, 1885) and also mining a profitable vein of sentiment of his own, as in *The Squire* (1881) and *Sweet Lavender* (1888). Seriousness and sentiment fused in *The Profligate* (1889) and—most sensationally—in *The Second Mrs. Tanqueray* (1893), which established Pinero as an important playwright. This was the first of several plays depicting women battling with their situation in society. These plays not only created good parts for actresses but also demanded sympathy for women, who were judged by stricter standards than men in Victorian society.

Nicoll argues that “His sentimentalism and often conventional treatment of character cannot take from his significance as a pioneer who helped to build a foundation for the twentieth century realistic theatre and who pointed out to others the virtues of the plays of ideas”.

### **Oscar Wilde**

Oscar Wilde's comedies like *Lady Windermere's Fan* (1892) and *The Importance of Being Earnest* (1895) brought back the taste of the Restoration plays. *The Importance of Being Earnest* was a vehement critique of the sophisticated hypocrisy of the Victorian age. *A Woman of No Importance* (1893) and *An Ideal Husband* (1895) are the other notable plays that Wilde wrote. The former play made the critic William Archer to state that Oscar Wilde's plays “must be taken on the very highest plane of modern English drama”.

## 1. 4 Drama in the Modern Age

Twentieth century British drama was developed and flourished largely through the works of George Bernard Shaw (popularly known as G.B. Shaw or GBS). G.B. Shaw published essays on theatrical practices in *The Saturday Review*. Shaw had published more than 150 in which he evaluated more than 212 plays. His *Plays Unpleasant* and *Plays Pleasant* are collections of his plays which launched the New Drama in England following the dramatic mode of Ibsen. Ibsen and socialism influenced Shaw and he published *Quintessence of Ibsenism* in 1891. Shaw's works popularised Ibsen in England. We will look at GBS and his contributions to literature in another section. Now we should look at the general traits of British drama in the twentieth century.

As stated earlier, the Irish movements in drama and theatre had influenced the twentieth century British drama. Foreign influences in terms of the dramatic genres employed by Henrik Ibsen, Anton Chekhov, Leo Tolstoy, Maxim Gorky, Bertolt Brecht and several others were evident in the British drama that emerged as a new mode of drama in the twentieth century. Expressionism, experimental drama and scientific and technological advancements during the period had their imprints on the modern drama.

The first half of the twentieth is an era of social and political turmoil which destabilised the tenacity and complacency of the Victorian period. The two world wars and the growing anxiety and quest for knowledge resulted in several social changes which in turn affected the literary outpourings during the modern period. In short, it was an age of inquisition, interrogation and great anxiety. However, the literary imagination was not curtailed. Thus, we have Scott James commenting on the period:

The writings, expressive of many temperaments, reveal the intellectual atmosphere in which G.B. Shaw, H.G. Wells, Arnold Bennett, John Galsworthy, G.K. Chesterton, Harley Graville Barker and Graham Greene were to find their essential and necessary milieu. In one sense, men were being made by their time, in another they were making it. Against this background too, we must set quieter and more reflective spirits like Henry James, Joseph Conrad, W.H. Hudson, Norman Douglas and a number of poets. It was an exciting age for writers- an age which marked a definite break with the past, a challenge to authority, an assertion of the right to be anarchistic in thought and in form-romantic, realistic, passionate-a self-

conscious age when writers were intensely critical of the composition of society, and were beginning to be critical of the individual soul.

As noted earlier, Irish drama and dramatic conventions influenced the 20<sup>th</sup> century British drama. Many theatres emerged and this mushrooming of the theatres naturally encouraged the playwrights to write more not as closet dramas but as problem plays in the Irish fashion to be performed on the stage. The Manchester Theatre Company was in the forefront to promote the performance of problem plays. St. John Irvine, W. Stanley Houghton, and Allan Monkhouse were playwrights who wrote for this company. A major theatrical reformation occurred with the establishment of Irish National Theatre in Dublin. Critiquing the stark realism in drama, W.B. Yeats and J.M. Synge emphasised on the emotions, legends, folklore and the jovial side of Irish life as themes in modern drama. Poetic drama was revived through The Abbey Theatre.

Expressionism also had its influence in the British theatre. Edward Albert argues that expressionism “aimed to offer a deep, subjective, psychological analysis, not so much of an individual as of a type, but it made much of the subconscious”. Dramatists who employed expressionism brought in symbolic figures and to a great extent this tendency made the drama a little obscure. O’Casey’s *The Silver Flassie* and J. B Priestley’s *Johnson over Jordan* are examples of the British plays that belong to the expressionist mode.

### **Realism in Drama**

The realistic drama is also known as naturalistic drama or problem plays. As these names suggest, this genre presents the actualities of the life and of the times. Henry Arthur Jones, Sir A.W. Pinero and John Galsworthy wrote in the first half of the twentieth century. Though GBS championed the new drama mode in England, we have got a good number of other playwrights too who managed to bring in the tenets of modernism and realism into the English stage.

### ***George Bernard Shaw***

GBS used drama as a moral and ethical tool. He rejected the romantic ideals and with intellectual and moral courage examined the manners and morals of the society. Religion, domestic conditions, finance, prostitution, marriage conventions, social prejudices, romanticising nationalism,

medical profession were some of the themes Shaw explored to unveil the stark realities of human predicament. Let us now look at Britannica:

When Shaw began writing for the English stage, its most prominent dramatists were Sir A.W. Pinero and H.A. Jones. Both men were trying to develop a modern realistic drama, but neither had the power to break away from the type of artificial plots and conventional character types expected by theatregoers. The poverty of this sort of drama had become apparent with the introduction of several of Henrik Ibsen's plays onto the London stage around 1890, when *A Doll's House* was played in London; his *Ghosts* followed in 1891, and the possibility of a new freedom and seriousness on the English stage was introduced. Shaw, who was about to publish *The Quintessence of Ibsenism* (1891), rapidly refurbished an abortive comedy, *Widowers' Houses*, as a play recognizably "Ibsenite" in tone, making it turn on the notorious scandal of slum landlordism in London. The result (performed 1892) flouted the threadbare romantic conventions that were still being exploited even by the most daring new playwrights. In the play a well-intentioned young Englishman falls in love and then discovers that both his prospective father-in-law's fortune and his own private income derive from exploitation of the poor. Potentially this is a tragic situation, but Shaw seems to have been always determined to avoid tragedy. The unamiable lovers do not attract sympathy; it is the social evil and not the romantic predicament on which attention is concentrated, and the action is kept well within the key of ironic comedy.

*Play Pleasant and Unpleasant* (1898) contained seven plays of which three were grouped as Plays Unpleasant and four Pleasant. *The Widower's Houses* (1892), *Mrs. Warren's Profession* (1894) and *The Philanderer* (1893) are the unpleasant plays. *Arms and the Man* (1894), *Candida* (1895), *The Man of Destiny* (1895) and *You Never Can Tell* (1897) are grouped as the Plays Pleasant.

Shaw's next collection of plays, *Three Plays for Puritans* (1901), continued what became the traditional Shavian preface—an introductory essay in an electric prose style dealing as much with the themes suggested by the plays as the plays themselves. *The Devil's Disciple* (performed 1897) is a play set in New Hampshire during the American Revolution and is an inversion of traditional melodrama. *Caesar and Cleopatra* (performed 1901) is Shaw's first great play. In the play Cleopatra is a spoiled and vicious 16-year-old child rather than the 38-year-old temptress of Shakespeare's *Antony and*



*Cleopatra*. The play depicts Caesar as a lonely and austere man who is as much a philosopher as he is a soldier. The play's outstanding success rests upon its treatment of Caesar as a credible study in magnanimity and "original morality" rather than as a superhuman hero on a stage pedestal. The third play, *Captain Brassbound's Conversion* (performed 1900), is a sermon against various kinds of folly masquerading as duty and justice.

*Major Barbara* (1905), *The Doctor's Dilemma* (1906), *Getting Married* (1908), *Androcles and the Lion* (1912), *Pygmalion* (1912), *Back to Methuselah* (1921), *St. Joan* (1923), *The Apple Cart* (1928), *Too True to be Good* (1932), *The Millionairess* (1936), *Geneva* (1938) and *Buoyant Billions* (1949) are the other major plays of George Bernard Shaw.

Bernard Shaw excelled in his characterisation and dramatic technique. Edward Albert points out that:

He excels in brief, witty exchanges and, above all, in the handling of extremely long speeches when his characters put forward their carefully reasoned arguments. He had the art of making the long discourse as interesting and as dramatic as action, and this was something new to the stage. His brilliance in this has never been surpassed.

As Nicoll points out, Shaw's characters were the "embodiments of intellectual concepts" and his dramas were "ceaseless dances of thought". Wit was the essence of the Shavian comedies. His humour was dry and intellectual. Shavian plays put forth novel and unconventional ideas for the progression of the human life. Social institutions and their code of conduct were critiqued by Shaw in his plays.

### ***John Galsworthy***

John Galsworthy was one such prominent literary figure who installed realism into the English stage. Galsworthy's first play was *The Silver Box* (1906) and this play dealt with the societal differences between the rich and the poor. His plays often presented the actual inequities and injustice that the people are subjected to, based on their social and economic status in the society. *Strife* (1909) dealt with the questions of accumulating wealth and labour. His play *Justice* (1910) as the title hints talked about the evils and perils involved in the justice system and judiciary. Class struggles based on value system are well presented in *The Skin Game* (1920). Discrimination based on race is portrayed in his *Loyalties* (1922). Masculine authority in

the domestic realm and the disastrous offshoots are presented in *A Family Man* while *Window* deals with illegitimate progeny and the intriguing issues related to it. *The Eldest Son*, *The Pigeon*, *The Mob* and *The Forest* are other important social plays that vocalised various issues in the society and problematises the common perceptions on social justice, race, caste structure, religion, capitalism, and economic structure. Galsworthy's naturalism was similar to that of Ibsen. His moral earnestness was similar to that of Shaw. The psychological insight, social passion and the aesthetic economy were the characteristics of Galsworthy's plays. He occupies a significant position in British drama.

### ***Harley Granville Barker***

Known for his criticism of Shakespeare's works, Barker wrote realistic plays. In his plays he dealt with issues related to social institutions such as family and societal concerns like the position of women in a patriarchal society. His plays did not subscribe to the notion of art being emotionally appealing. He approached the subject matter with intellectual precision. *The Moving Ann Leete* (1899), *The Voysey Inheritance* (1905), *Waste* (1907), *The Madras House* (1910), and *The Secret Life* (1923) are his most popular plays.

### ***William Somerset Maugham***

Realistic drama was the mode that Somerset Maugham adapted. When we read his plays, the readers feel that they are reading the realistic but extremely sarcastic and cynically humorous observations of a sharp social commentator. His *A Man of Honour* is a realistic tragedy though most of his plays were comedies. *The Circle* (1921), *Our Betters* (1917), and *For Services Rendered* (1932) are other famous plays.

### ***Sir J.M. Barrie***

Barrie is a Scottish playwright. He wrote sentimental comedies and was inimical towards the intellectual and realistic conventions of modern drama. What *Every Woman Knows* is his most popular sentimental comedy. *The Professor's Love Story* (1894), *Quality Street* (1902), *Marie Rose* (1920) and *A Kiss of Cinderella* were his popular sentimental romances. Fantasy and realistic elements were visible in his later plays such as *The Admirable Crichton* (1902), *What Every Woman Knows* (1908), *The Will* (1913), *Dear Brutus* (1917) and *The Boy David* (1936).

**J.M. Synge**

When the Irish theatre rejuvenated, J.M. Synge was the greatest dramatist in this new spirit of modern drama. He wrote both comedies and tragedies. Folktales and the real life alike became the themes of his tragedies and comedies. *The Shadow of Glen* (1903), *The Well of Saints* (1905) and *The Tinker's Wedding* (1907) were his finest comedies. The most important one is *The Playboy of the Western World* (1907). His one act play, which is titled as *Riders to the Sea* (1904) is a powerful tragedy. Synge in essence opposed the popular realistic drama of the times because he thought such dramas lacked the beauty and joy of life. Therefore, he largely depended on myths, legends and folktales for his plays. However, in *Riders to the Sea* we can see the portrayal of human predicament and precarity.

**Sean O'Cassey**

Sean O'Cassey is an Irish playwright who is popular for the naturalistic tragi-comedies. *The Shadow of A Gunman* (1923), *Juno the Paycock* (1924), *The Plough and the Stars* (1926), *Within the Gates* (1934), *The Stars Turn Red* (1940), *Purple Dust* (1941), *Red Roses for Me* (1946), *Oak Leaves and Lavender* (1946), *Cockadoodle Dandy* (1949) are his most notable plays. Though there is a comical strain in his plays the grim and tragic elements are also visible in the plays. Objectivity and impressionistic vividness are the characteristics of his plays.

**James Bridie**

James Birdie was a Scottish playwright who had a prominent role in establishing the Scottish theatre. He co-founded the Glasgow Citizen's Theatre in 1943. In 1931 his first play *The Anatomist* appeared and this was based on a notorious criminal case. *Jonah and the Whale* (1932); *A Sleeping Clergyman* (1933), were based on a criminal case; *Marriage Is No Joke* (1934); *Colonel Wotherspoon* (1934); *The King of Nowhere* (1938); *One Way of Living* (1939), an autobiographical drama; *Mr. Bolfry* (1943); *Dr. Angelus* (1947); and *The Queen's Comedy* (1950) were the major plays of Bridie. Edward Albert comments that Bridie's plays are "a peculiar mixture of argument, philosophy, violent incident, wit, and whimsical fancy".

**J. B. Priestley**

Priestley was also a prolific dramatist, and he has robust, good-humoured comedies as *Laburnum Grove* (1933) and *When We Are Married*

(1938) were the early plays which were successful on stage. Influenced by the time theories of John William Dunne, he experimented with expressionistic psychological drama such as *Time and the Conways* and *I Have Been Here Before* (both 1937) and *Johnson over Jordan* (1939). *An Inspector Calls* (1946) was a mystery drama with moral overtones which also utilised the time distortion concept. Many of his plays featured deft characterizations of ordinary people in domestic settings.

### **Sir Noel Coward**

Coward's early plays were light comedies such as *I'll Leave It to You* (1920) and *The Young Idea* (1923), but his reputation as a playwright was not established until the serious play *The Vortex* (1924). In 1925 the first of his robust comedies, *Hay Fever*, began to be staged in London. *Bitter Sweet* (1929) was his most popular musical comedy. *Private Lives* (1930) is another important comedy. *Design for Living* (1933) showcases a worldly situation where characters struggle to have a symbiotic co-existence. Britannica states that

"His patriotic pageant of British history, *Cavalcade* (1931), traced an English family from the time of the South African (Boer) War through the end of World War I. Other successes included *Tonight at Eight-thirty* (1936), a group of one-act plays performed by Coward and Gertrude Lawrence, with whom he often played. He rewrote (with help from director David Lean and two others) one of the short plays, *Still Life*, as the film *Brief Encounter* (1945)".

*Present Laughter* (1939) and *Blithe Spirit* (1941) are usually acclaimed as the ones among his better comedies.

### **Laurence Housman**

His first play, *Bethlehem*, was privately produced in 1902 but, like many of his plays, was for some years prohibited from public performance due to censorship. *Prunella* (1906) was an enticing fantasy in which Harley Granville-Barker collaborated. This was not curtailed by censorship. In 1922 Housman became prominent, with the publication of the first of three collections entitled *Little Plays of St. Francis*.

### **Sir Terence Rattigan**

*French Without Tears* (performed in 1936) and *While the Sun Shines* (performed in 1943) were his earlier plays and were farces. *The Winslow*

*Boy* (performed in 1946) was a drama based on a real-life case in which a young boy at the Royal Naval College was unjustly accused of theft. *Separate Tables* (performed in 1945) is known as his best-known work. It was based on the theme of isolation and frustration that result from rigidly imposed social conventions. *Ross* (performed in 1960) explored the life of T.E. Lawrence (of Arabia). *A Bequest to the Nation* (performed in 1970) documented the intimate, personal aspects of Lord Nelson's life. The radio play *Cause Célèbre* was his last play. It was broadcast in 1975 and later was performed on stage in 1977.

### **Denis Johnston**

Denis Johnston was an Irish playwright. *The Old Lady Says "No!"* (1929), *The Moon in the Yellow River* (1931), *A Bride for the Unicorn* (1933), *Storm Song* (1934), *Blind Man's Buff* (1936) (with Ernst Toller), *The Golden Cuckoo* (1939), *The Dreaming Dust* (1940), *A Fourth for Bridge* (1948), *'Strange Occurrence on Ireland's Eye'* (1956), *Tain Bo Cuailgne – Pageant of Cuchulainn* (1956), and *The Scythe and the Sunset* (1958) are his major plays. Moody and Lovett state that: "attempting no direct realistic representation of life, his plays use whatever means-poetic, colloquial, stylised, symbolical, allegorical-that will communicate most tellingly what he thinks important to say".

### **Historical Plays**

John Drinkwater pioneered the historical plays during the period. *Abraham Lincoln* (1918), *Mary Stuart* (1921-1922), *Oliver Cromwell* (1922), and *Robert E. Lee* (1923) were the major plays. These were not merely historical plays that document the historical happenings in their chronological order. On the other hand, these plays portrayed the stark realities of human lives.

Clifford Bax was critically acclaimed for his effective treatment of the characters and delicate sense of style. *Mr. Pepys* (1926), *Socrates* (1930), *The Venetian* (1931), and *The Immortal Lady* are the major historical plays. Ashley Duke's *The Man with a Load of Mischief* (1924), Reginald Berkley's *The lady with the Lamp*, Alfred Sangster's *The Baronets* (1933) and Norman Ginsbury's *The First Gentleman* (1940) are the other historical plays.

### **British Drama beyond 1950**

Anticonventional drama developed during the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Anti-conventional drama was pioneered by Peter Levin Shaffer.

Shaffer wrote plays such as *Five Finger Exercise* (1958), *The Royal Hunt of the Sun*, *The Battle of the Shrivings* (1970) and *Equus* (1973) which were reactions against the conventional dramatic mode. John Whiting was another playwright who skilfully employed the novel stage theories in his plays such as *Marching Song* (1954) and *The Devils* (1960). *Vivat! Vivat Regina* was a political play written by Robert Oxton bolt in 1970. The play tells the story of two rival monarchs Scotland's Mary, Queen of Scots and her cousin, Queen Elizabeth I of England. The play's title is in Latin and it stands for "Long live! Long live the Queen!". The title is taken from the acclamation at the Coronation Service.

A major development in the field of drama was facilitated when the English Stage Company at the Royal Court Theatre in 1956. John Osborne was the greatest product of the English Stage Company. His first play, *The Devil Inside Him*, was written in 1950 with his friend and mentor Stella Linden. With his play *Look Back in Anger* (1956), the Angry Youngman cult was inaugurated. The anti-hero Jimmy Porter exemplified the troublesome youth and the difficulties of human life. Britannica points out that :

The hero, Jimmy Porter, although the son of a worker, has, through the state educational system, reached an uncomfortably marginal position on the border of the middle class from which he can see the traditional possessors of privilege holding the better jobs and threatening his upward climb. Jimmy Porter continues to work in a street-market and vents his rage on his middle-class wife and her middle-class friend. No solution is proposed for Porter's frustrations, but Osborne makes the audience feel them acutely... *Luther* (1961), an epic play about the Reformation leader, again showed Osborne's ability to create an actably rebellious central figure. His two *Plays for England* (1962) include *The Blood of the Bambergs*, a satire on royalty, and *Under Plain Cover*, a study of an incestuous couple playing games of dominance and submission. The tirade of Jimmy Porter is resumed in a different key by a frustrated solicitor in Osborne's *Inadmissible Evidence* (1964). *A Patriot for Me* (1965) portrays a homosexual Austrian officer in the period before World War I, based on the story of Alfred Redl, and shows Osborne's interests in the decline of empire and the perils of the nonconformist. *West of Suez* (1971) revealed a measure of sympathy for a type of British colonizer whose day has waned and antipathy for his ideological opponents, who are



made to appear confused and neurotic. Osborne's last play, *Déjàvu* (1992), a sequel to *Look Back in Anger*, revisits Jimmy Porter after a 35-year interval.

His plays showcased the rebellious youth and displayed the pivotal issues of the period though the plays did not offer any solutions for the pertinent problems of the characters.

The plays that were written by writers such as Arnold Wesker, Shelagh Delaney and John Osborne were referred to as Kitchen Sink Drama. This term was used to describe the plays written after 1950s which largely depicted the lives of the working or lower middle class people and dealt with domestic themes. John Bratby's painting which had a kitchen sink it was the actual source of this term kitchen sink drama because that was the first time the artists began to focus their attention into the domestic space closely. Thus, a trend began in painting later became a practice in drama too. Kitchen sink drama foregrounded the minute details of domestic interiors. This was largely a reaction against the drawing room comedies and middle class dramas stereotypically dealing with the sophisticated arena of the society as can be seen in Noel Coward's plays. This actually challenged the poetic drama popularised by T.S. Eliot and Christopher Fry. Kitchen sink realism thus problematised the drama that showcased escapism through the well-made plays.

### **Arnold Wesker**

Arnold Wesker is recognised as a social realist and he was the founder member of the New Wave of British theatre of the late 1950s. The three plays which make up the *Wesker Trilogy* (1960) - *Chicken Soup with Barley*, *Roots* and *I'm Talking about Jerusalem* - were first performed at the Belgrade Theatre in Coventry between 1958 and 1960. The trilogy, which drew on Wesker's working class Jewish background, was first performed in its entirety at the Royal Court Theatre, London, in 1960. *The Kitchen* (1961), was first performed in 1959. It was based on his own experience and was revived by Stephen Daldry at the Royal Court in 1994. In *Chips with Everything* (1962), he showed the persistence and victory of class differences in a public school youth who had strived to escape from them.

*Their Very Own and Golden City* (1965) and *The Friends* (1970) were his other plays.

### **Absurd Drama**

is a post-World War II designation for particular plays of absurdist fiction written by a number of primarily European playwrights in the late 1950s. It is also a term for the style of theatre the plays represent. The plays focus largely on ideas of existentialism and express what happens when human existence lacks meaning or purpose and communication breaks down. In his introduction to the book *Absurd Drama* (1965), Esslin wrote that

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

The term 'absurd' was used and popularised by French existential writers like Sartre and Camus and they used the term to denote the essential meaninglessness of life and the struggles that the individual has to take up to find one's own meaning in the existence when there is a sense of meaninglessness that is strongly felt and experienced.

### **Samuel Beckett**

Samuel Beckett is an Irish writer who experimented with the Absurd Theatre in the most successful manner. Existential angst and futility of life and its meaninglessness are well captured in his *Waiting for Godot* (1953). In this play, what appears to the superficial view as a concentration on the sordid manifests as an attempt to deal with the most essential aspects of the human condition. Britannica states:

The two heroes of *Waiting for Godot*, for instance, are frequently referred to by critics as tramps, yet they were never described as such by Beckett. They are merely two human beings in the most basic human situation of being in the world and not knowing what they are there for. Since man is a rational being and cannot imagine that his being thrown into any situation should or could be entirely pointless, the two vaguely assume that their presence in the world, represented by an empty stage with a solitary tree, must be due to the fact that they are waiting for someone. But they have no positive evidence that this person, whom they call Godot, ever made such an appointment—or, indeed, that he actually exists. Their patient and passive waiting is contrasted by Beckett with the mindless and equally purposeless journeyings that fill the existence of a second pair of characters. In most dramatic literature the characters pursue well-defined objectives, seeking power, wealth, marriage with a desirable partner, or something of the sort. Yet, once they have attained these objectives, are they or the audience any nearer answering the basic questions that Beckett poses? Does the hero, having won his lady, really live with her happily ever after? That is apparently why Beckett chose to discard what he regarded as the inessential questions and began where other writing left off.

*Endgame* (1957) describes the termination of the relation between a master, Hamm, and his servant, Clov. They occupy a circular structure with two high windows (in the image of the inside of a human skull). The action might be seen as a symbol of breaking of the tie between the spiritual and the physical phases of humans. In *Krapp's Last Tape* (one-act, first performed 1958), an old man listens to the confessions he recorded in earlier and happier years. Encyclopaedia continues:

This becomes an image of the mystery of the self, for to the old Krapp the voice of the younger Krapp is that of a total stranger. In what sense, then, can the two Krapps be regarded as the same human being? In *Happy Days* (1961), a woman, literally sinking continually deeper into the ground, nonetheless continues to prattle about the trivialities of life. In other words, perhaps, as one gets nearer and nearer death, one still pretends that life will go on normally forever.

Nihilism and negativity were imprinted Beckett's legacy was continued with the plays that Harold Pinter writes.

## Harold Pinter

Pinter's plays are renowned for the employment of understatement, small talk, reticence—and even silence—to communicate the essence and crux of a character's thought, which often does not become evident but hides beneath and contradicts. In 2005 he won the Nobel Prize for Literature. *The Room* (first produced in 1957) and *The Dumb Waiter* (first produced in 1959) were his first two plays. They are one-act dramas that established the mood of comic menace. This tone and mood figured again in his later works. His first full-length play was *The Birthday Party* (first produced 1958; filmed 1968), bewildered the spectators initially and lasted only a week. However, later it was televised and revived successfully on the stage.

Pinter's radio play *A Slight Ache* (first produced in 1959) was adapted for the stage in 1961. His second full-length play, *The Caretaker* (first produced in 1960 and filmed in 1963), established him as an excellent practitioner and proponent of the Theatre of the Absurd.

*The Homecoming* (first produced in 1965) was his next major play. *The Homecoming* established him as the creator of an inimitable dramatic idiom. Plays in this vein include *Landscape* (first produced in 1969), *Silence* (first produced in 1969), *Night* (first produced in 1969), and *Old Times* (first produced in 1971). His most important and successful plays to follow were *No Man's Land* (first produced in 1975), *Betrayal* (first produced in 1978), *Moonlight* (first produced in 1993), and *Celebration* (first produced in 2000). Britannica states that:

Pinter's plays are ambivalent in their plots, presentation of characters, and endings, but they are works of undeniable power and originality. They typically begin with a pair of characters whose stereotyped relations and role-playing are disrupted by the entrance of a stranger; the audience sees the psychic stability of the couple break down as their fears, jealousies, hatreds, sexual preoccupations, and loneliness emerge from beneath a screen of bizarre yet commonplace conversation. In *The Caretaker*, for instance, a wheedling, garrulous old tramp comes to live with two neurotic brothers, one of whom underwent electroshock therapy as a mental patient. The tramp's attempts to establish himself in the household upset the precarious balance of the brothers' lives, and they end up evicting him. *The Homecoming* focuses on the return to his London home of a university professor who brings his wife to meet his brothers and father. The woman's

presence exposes a tangle of rage and confused sexuality in this all-male household, but in the end she decides to stay with the father and his two sons after having accepted their sexual overtures without protest from her overly detached husband.

Dialogue is of central importance in Pinter's plays and is perhaps the key to his originality. His characters' colloquial ("Pinteresque") speech consists of disjointed and oddly ambivalent conversation that is punctuated by resonant silences. The characters' speech, hesitations, and pauses reveal not only their own alienation and the difficulties they have in communicating but also the many layers of meaning that can be contained in even the most innocuous statements.

Pinter wrote radio and television dramas besides the stage productions and a number of successful motion-picture screenplays were also written by him.

### ***Henry Livings***

Henry Livings followed the conventions of Absurd Theatre in some of his plays such as *Big Soft Neslie* (1961), *Nil Carborundrum* (1962) and *Kelly's Eye* (1963). *Honour and Offer* (1968), *The Finest Family in the Land* (1970) and *Pongo Plays* (1971) were not examples of absurd drama though.

### ***John Arden***

John Arden also experimented with absurd plays. *Live Like Pigs* (1958), *The Happy Haven* (1960) and *Left Handed Liberty* (1965) were the prominent ones among them. Britannica states:

*The Happy Haven*, produced in 1960 in London, is a sardonic farce about an old people's home. *The Workhouse Donkey* is a crowded, exuberant, and comic drama of municipal politics. *Armstrong's Last Goodnight* (1964) is a drama set in the Borders region of Scotland in the 1530s and written in Lowland Scottish vernacular. *Left-Handed Liberty* (1965), written to mark the 750th anniversary of the signing of Magna Carta, characteristically dwells on the failure of the document to achieve liberty. His writing became more politically committed, as evidenced in the two radio plays *The Bagman* (1972) and *Pearl* (1978).

His later plays such as *The Non-Stop Connolly Cycle* (1975), a six-part drama based on the life of the Irish patriot James Connolly, as well as the Arthurian drama *The Island of the Mighty* (1972), *Vandaleur's Folly* (1978),

and *The Little Gray Home in the West* (1982), among others—were written with D'Arcy.

### **Anne Jellicoe**

Anne Jellicoe wrote in the “New Drama” vein. She wrote *The Sport of My Mad Mother*, *The Knack*, *Shelley*, *The Giveaway*, *The Rising Generation*, *You'll Never Guess!*, *Clever Elsie*, and *A Good Thing or a Bad Thing*; trans. Rosmersholm, *The Lady from the Sea*, and *The Seagull*; founded the Cockpit Theatre Club to Experiment with the Open Stage (1951); wrote screenplay for *The Knack* (1965) and teleplay for “Det” (1970).

### **David Mercer**

Mercer's first play *Where the Difference Begins* (1961) was written for television. It was the first part of a trilogy, *The Generations* (1964). His *Suitable Case for Treatment*, televised in 1962, won a Writer's Guild award and was filmed in 1965 as *Morgan—A Suitable Case for Treatment*. From that play emerged Mercer's view of the world as anarchic, despairing, and insane. This outlook was also apparent in *The Governor's Lady*, his first stage play (performed 1965). This play centred around a man who in utter frustration turned into a baboon and attacked his cold wife. His other full-length plays include *Ride a Cock Horse* (1965), *Belcher's Luck* (1966), *Flint* (1970), *After Haggerty* (1970), *Duck Song* (1974), and *Cousin Vladimir* (1978). Mercer offers portrayals of people wronged in their environment and these plays underscores the characters journeys to find solace only in eccentricity and madness.

### **Edward Bond**

At the Royal Court Edward Bond's first play, *The Pope's Wedding* (1962) was staged and this was followed by *Saved* (1965). The latter caused a sensation because of a scene depicting the stoning to death of a baby, and was the subject of a court action because of its violence and blasphemy. Bond did not stop confronting his audiences with scenes of violence and cruelty based on imperialism, economic exploitation, war, apartheid, and social responsibility. This trend is evident in such plays as *Narrow Road to the Deep North* (1968), *Black Mass* (1970), *Passion* (1971), a rewrite of Shakespeare's *Lear* (1971), *Bingo* (1974), and the two-part *A-A-merica!* (*Grandma Faust and The Swing*; 1976). In 1978 the Royal Shakespeare Company performed *The Bundle at the Warehouse* and in the same year Bond directed and produced *The Woman*. *The Woman* is the first new play



to be presented at the National Theatre. However, after the commercial success of *Restoration* (1981) Bond's brand of left-wing didacticism fell increasingly out of favour and few of his plays found West End productions. His later plays include *September* (1990) and *Coffee* (1995). Several of his plays have been produced in New York, including *Saved and Early Morning* (1968).

### **Christopher Hampton**

Christopher Hampton wrote a number of plays on a range of social themes. His own stage plays include *When Did You Last See My Mother* (1966), performed at The Royal Court Theatre, *Total Eclipse* (1968) about the relationship between Rimbaud and Verlaine. He has also written some comedies such as *The Philanthropist* (1970); *Savages* (1974) and *Treats* (1976).

The Russian formalist notion of 'defamiliarisation' was adapted by the German playwright Bertolt Brecht in his Epic Theatre during the 1920s. Brecht termed it as alienation effect or *Verfremdungseffekt*. This German term translates as estrangement effect. Brecht envisages the theatre as an artistic tool for the viewing public to distance themselves from the characters. The absurdity and meaninglessness of life that are being staged must be watched and discarded by the audience without them emotionally being indulged in it. Brecht employed this technique to evoke a critical distance and attitude in the audience so that they would be able to act against the state of society or its manner represented on stage rather than merely accepting it or sympathising with characters.

He has written some screenplays as well and these include translations of classics such as Ibsen's *A Doll's House* (1970); *Tales from the Vienna Woods* (1977) and Moliere's *Tartuffe* (1984), and his television work includes *The History Man* for the BBC, *The Ginger Tree* (1989) and *Tales from Hollywood* (1989).

### **Poetic Drama in the Twentieth Century**

E-gyankosh describes the revival of the poetic drama in detail.

The English poetic drama in the early twentieth century was a reaction against the naturalistic prose drama of Ibsen, Shaw and Galsworthy. The language used by the dramatist while presenting

social problems was tough and because of that drama was prosaic rather than poetic in the early decades of the twentieth century. Poetic drama has a long and respectable history, so much so that surveys of its poetic drama movement of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The poetic drama had a late start in England. During the thirty years from 1890 to 1920 the pure poetic play was almost non-existent in England. However, in Ireland, it attracted some of the Abbey theatre authors. Stephen Philips remained strictly faithful to the verse form. The English poetic drama had its heyday during the Elizabethan age. Poetic drama was revived only at the beginning of the 20th century and reached to make poetic drama a source of moral and spiritual uplift of the secular audience. And early in the 20th century, everyone was making a lot of fuss about the fact that Shakespeare wrote in verse. Everyone got very excited about the meaning. The versification of drama is any drama written as verse to be spoken; another possible general term is in the second half of the twentieth century verse drama falls almost completely out of fashion with dramatists writing in history. 19th Century failure of poetic drama marks the beginning of the revival of poetic drama in the 20th century in the history of a nation there can be only one great age of poetic drama.

Thus, we know that there was a conscious attempt to move away from the realistic mode of drama, the absurd theatre conventions, and the theatre of cruelty to retrospect the old tradition of poetic drama.

Though the Victorian poets tried experimenting with poetic drama, there were no exemplary productions. Tennyson's *Queen Mary*, *Harold* (1877) and *Becket* (1884) are some of the popular poetic or verse dramas. Browning also had written verse dramas like *Strafford* (1837), *King Victor and King Charles* (1842), *The Return of the Druses* (1843), and *A Soul's Tragedy* (1846). Nineteenth century was largely a period when prose flourished and verse dramas were not popularised. Thus, this century did not contribute much to poetic drama.

There was not a congenial ground for flourishing of poetic drama in the 20<sup>th</sup> century thanks to the solid acceptance of realistic drama. Revival of poetic drama was attempted by Yeats in the Abbey Theatre but Yeats was more a poet than a dramatist. The tradition of poetic drama was re-established by T.S. Eliot. This revival had a much greater connection with

the deeper religious beliefs and the social attitudes of their authors when compared to the prose drama of the period.

Stephen Philips (1864-1915) wrote several plays in blank verse. The notable ones among them were *Paolo and Francesca*, *Ulysses* and *Nero*. Though they were very popular, critics often dismiss them “as colourful spectacles in blank verse, having little dramatic quality”. Masfield, was the poet-Laureate, who wrote popular poems like *The Everlasting Mercy*, *Reynard the Fox*, *Dauber*, and the like. He attempted many plays as well. The most well-known one among them is *The Tragedy of Nan* and *The Tragedy of Pompey the Great*. He was the friend of the famous Irish dramatist, Synge. Masfield took English peasant life as his theme in *The Tragedy of Nan*, and used prose with a poet’s vision.

Gordon Bottomley (1874-1948) did not seek to bring the common life back to the poetic drama like Masfield. He attempted to examine moral questions of good and evil through stories far removed from the contemporary scenario. Poetic imagery and use of symbolism embellished the prose of his dramas. John Drinkwater’s famous play *Abraham Lincoln* came out in 1918 at the end of the war and rightly became very popular. “It is a powerful picture of the famous President, the man of courage, integrity and moral vision who piloted the ship of the state through the storm of the Civil War and met with a tragic end. The story is rich enough for dramatic treatment and the play is a masterpiece”.

Lord Dunsany (1878-1957) began as a dramatist with a play *The Glittering Gate* (1909) and later wrote several successful one-act plays. Although he wrote in prose, his plays were actually romantic poetic dramas by virtue of the romance on which they are build and his ability to conjure up the atmosphere of the East. His *A Night at an Inn* is a popular one-act play.

Poetic drama in a sense originated in Ireland. It saw a bright revival of the dramatic literature. The establishment of the Abbey Theatre, Dublin in 1904, attracted Yeats, Synge, and Lady Gregory who became its directors. The idea of a national drama, the Irish drama originated in the minds of these popular writers and they wrote plays for this stage. Later it invited the attention of more playwrights but these three remain the most notable figures. “They looked upon the drama as a thing of the emotions and reacting against the current realism, sought their themes among the legends, folk-lore and peasantry of Ireland. In their drama we have poetry in the truest sense.” Yeats (1865-1939) wrote some twenty plays for this

theatre, leaving aside his lyric poetry for the time being, in order to put the Irish drama on a firm footing. Among this poetic dramas, mention may be made of *The Shadowy Waters* (1900), *The Golden Hemet* (1910), *Deirdre* etc. He gave inspiration to the Irish national theatre.

In the disintegration of social life before and after World War I and in the general mood of anxiety and despair, these dramatists strengthened faith in the permanence of life, art and beauty. They attempted to create a taste for poetic drama and this enabled T.S. Eliot to carry out his experiments with this genre.

### **William Butler Yeats**

W.B. Yeats never considered drama as a representational art and therefore he had objections towards the realistic drama. 'The Tragic Theatre' is an essay in which he discusses his concerns about realistic drama. Yeats in this essay argues that

Our movement is a return to the people...The play that is to give them a quite natural pleasure, should tell them either of their own life, or of that life of poetry where everyman can see his own image, because there alone does human nature escape from arbitrary conditions

Ancient folklore and mythology of the Irish people became the favourite themes rather than the stark realities of human life. To capture the attention of audience to the theatre, he depended on the Greek and Shakespearean conventions of theatre. In Raymond Williams's perspective Yeats was against

the artificial narrowness of theme which the practices of naturalism seemed to predicate; he wished the drama once again to rest on human integrity, and in particular to attend to those deeper levels of personality which it has been the traditional interest of literature to explore

Spiritual themes were explored in his earlier plays such as *The Countess Cathleen* (1892) and *The Land of Heart's Desire* (1894). Raymond Williams further argues that *On Baile's Strand* (1904) was the most successful play written by Yeats and in this play he "achieves an end for which all important drama in this century has sought the interpenetration of different levels of reality in an integral and controlled structure". *The Shadowy Waters* (1900), *The King's Threshold* (1904), *The Hour Glass* (1904) *Deirdre* (1907), *The Resurrection* (1913), *At the Hawk's Well* (1917), *Calvary* (1921) and

*The Cat and the Moon* (1926) are the other plays that he wrote. T.S. Eliot commented on the poetic drama of Yeats as

He started writing plays at a time when the prose play of contemporary life seemed triumphant...We can begin to see now that even the early imperfect attempts he made are probably more permanent literature than the plays of Shaw.

W.B. Yeats' plays were more like dramatic meditations where there is life, philosophy and reality but there is an aesthetic perspective towards the realities of life itself.

### ***T.S. Eliot***

The conventions of poetic drama and a theory on them were elaborated by T.S. Eliot in his essay *Rhetoric and Poetic Drama* published in the year 1919. According to Eliot

A speech in a play should never appear to be intended to move us as it might conceivably move other characters in the play, for it is essential that we should preserve our position of spectators, and observe always from the outside though with complete understanding.

In his essay written in 1920 he argued that "the essential is to get upon the stage this precise statement of life, which is at the same a point of view, a world-a world which the author's mind has subjected to a complete process of simplification". Eliot has great clarity about the importance and excellence of the literary form drama. He conceives it as a literary and aesthetic device that is an excellent tool in capturing the varying human emotions and states of mind owing to the performativity aspect of it. Eliot believed that the intense emotions can be expressed through poetic drama. He emphasised the importance of figuring out a writing mode that would help the modernist writers to be trendy but also at the same time being worshippers of verse dramas of the classical period.

By narrating the life of medieval saint but embedding the text with satirical elements that aim at the contemporary evils and socio political trends, *The Murder in the Cathedral* (1935) is cited and celebrated as one of the epitome example of poetic drama in its modern avatar. In this play he presents an excellent mix of prose, verse, the use of classical conventions like the chorus to illustrate the superiority of poetic drama over the prose drama. It was more as a revolt towards the overemphasis on realistic mode

of drama, that Eliot conceived his verse drama. Raymond Williams argues about T.S. Eliot's language in the following words:

His language reasserts control in performance...This is his most important general achievement... there is the same control over character. The persons are individualised so far as is necessary, but they are contained by the total pattern.

His language was flawless and had the flow of familiar lives. While combining archaic aesthetic elements with the modern-day conventions, Eliot's dramatics was very distinct and unique in its style, characterisation, plot plan and the language. *The Family Reunion* published in 1939 is one of the most important plays of Eliot in which modern people's lives are depicted in a language they are familiar with. The Greek myth of Orestes is being retold in the modern context in this play.

Taking *The Family Reunion* as a point of reference let us now look at another play of Eliot. *The Cocktail Party* published in 1950 pictures the life of modern upper-class Londoners. With minimal imagery and evocation, it takes the form of a clear statement of social life in verse. It does not employ many rhetorical devices or the conventional chorus as elements in it. But this drama is also rich with life. *The Elder Statesman* published in 1958 was a not widely celebrated play. In his plays he experimented with the possibility of verse carrying the essence of life with dramatic vigour and vitality without making it sound artificial. In his essay *Poetry and Drama* (1950) he stated that:

It (poetry) must justify itself dramatically, and not merely be fine poetry shaped into a dramatic form. From this it follows that no play should be written in verse for which prose is dramatically adequate...In verse drama prose should be used very sparingly indeed...We should aim at a form of verse in which everything can be said that has to be said, and that when we find some situation which is intractable in verse, it is merely because our form of verse is inelastic...But if our verse is to have so wide a range that it can say anything that has to be said, it follows that it will not be 'poetry' all the time. It will only be 'poetry' when the dramatic situation has reached such a point of intensity that poetry becomes the natural utterance, because then it is the only language in which emotions can be expressed at all.



T.S. Eliot through his verse dramas revived the tradition of poetic drama which got submerged in the flow of realistic drama in the modern literary scenario.

Christopher Isherwood the Anglo-American novelist also followed the poetic drama tradition in the modern literary sphere. He collaborated with W.H. Auden and wrote three plays in verse.

*The Dog Beneath the Skin, or Where is Francis? A Play in Three Acts* was the first one in the Auden-Isherwood collaboration. It was published in 1935. The Group Theatre performed this play in 1936. This play vividly describes the quest by the hero Alan Norman to find Sir Francis Crewe, the missing heir of Honeyput Hall in Crewe. During his journey he is accompanied by a dog, who apparently is the Sir Francis in disguise. Interestingly there are two different endings for this play. In Isherwood's version, which is printed in the text, Sir Francis condemns the villagers and joins some ambiguous revolutionary movement. In Auden's version, which was performed on stage, Sir Francis deplores the villagers and is killed. The play was based on two earlier plays of Auden *The Froppy* written in 1930, and *The Chase* written in 1934.

*The Ascent of F6* was the second one in the Isherwood-Auden collaboration and was published in 1936. It was performed in 1937. J.E. Luebering provides a quick summary of the play.

F6 is an unconquered mountain in the Himalayan range. An experienced and renowned climber named Michael Ransom leads an expedition of fellow Britons up the slope of F6 in competition with a group of climbers from a different (unnamed) country. En route, all Ransom's climbers perish; Ransom dies when he reaches the peak, after realizing that his accession to other people's ambitions has contributed to his destruction".

The plot of this drama illustrates the modern man's quest towards conquering heights (in material terms) and the consequent villainy that is involved in his search for excellence.

*On the Frontier: A Melodrama in Three Acts* was the third and last play in the Auden-Isherwood collaboration. It was first published in 1938. Group Theatre staged it later the same year at the Cambridge Arts Theatre. The plot of this play reveals the story of a war between the fictional European countries of Ostnia and Westland. Some critics consider this play as an

anti-war satire. Isherwood was one modern playwright who could carry on with the legacy of T.S. Eliot when it comes to the case of poetic drama. There was yet another playwright who was able to blaze the spectators with his linguistic exuberance that befitted the Elizabethan audience and was successful in bringing it back to the modern era. That playwright was Christopher Fry.

Christopher Fry was an actor, director, satirist, and writer of satires and plays. He became popular as a playwright through the play titled *The Lady's Not for Burning* (1948). This play was an ironic comedy set in medieval times. The heroine in this play is charged with being a witch and the plot revolves around the social circumstances which are sarcastically treated by Fry with terse wit and wisdom. *A Phoenix Too Frequent* (1946) is another important play of Fry. *The Boy with a Cart* (1950) is a legend of miracles which is formatted as a mystery play. *A Sleep of Prisoners* (1951) and *The Dark Is Light Enough* (1954) also have the theme of religion as the crux. In his play *Venus Observed* (1950) he employs simple but poetic language. Like the play *The Lady's Not for Burning*, *Venus Observed* also has elevated poetic undertones. He has written a historical play titled *Curtmantle* in 1962 which is often compared to the style and format of Eliot's *Murder in the Cathedral*.

Fry also joined in writing the screenplays of the epic films *Ben Hur* (1959) and *Barabbas* (1962). His skills in poetic drama and the dexterity in using a lingua that is at ones easy to perceive and is engaging made him write plays for radio and television. In 1978, he published *Can You Find Me: A Family History*. Stephen Spender, Louis Macneice, Ronald Duncan, Norman Nicholson, Anne Ridler are the other notable writers of this genre.

### **Recapitulating Modern British Drama**

The period from the end of the nineteenth century to the present one has witnessed the dramatic developments of the art and literary form drama. It all began with Ibsen, Chekhov, Shaw and Beckett, Pinter, and Stoppard carried it forward. Disintegration of the society, the collapse of values, increasing social unrest were all permeating the themes discussed in the plotlines. Many modern playwrights propose that social order is a mere illusion and believe that the world is an absurd entity. Thus, there are several bizarre characters appearing in and confronting bizarre situations. Black humour is employed to portray the meaninglessness of life and the existential angst. In the plays of Samuel Beckett, one can find

that comic laughter is in fact replaced by grimmer forms of comedy which is intercepted with violence, farce and sick jokes. Modern drama is thus marked with the dejection of conventional social myths and the value system, and the structure of the play itself being disintegrated to denote the lack of any order, or moral codes or compactness in human existence.

The audience, therefore, do not anticipate good cheer and innocuous jokes from the modern plays. They were never the 'feel-good' dramas. The audience approach the drama with a mindset that is prepared to be challenged by the plot and characters. The convictions of audience certainly get questioned through the play and the audience are prepared to watch it and ponder over it. This tendency still continues and is extended to other genres where problematisation of a 'safe and sound' social existence actually occurs continually. These plays present a situation where the characters who have been familiar with particular set of social and ethical values and certain norms and behavioural codes that they nurtured being entangled in bizarre circumstances where everything that they learnt as the 'right' and the 'correct' fails. There was a radical attempt from the modernist who experimented with drama to question the existing realities and philosophically engage the audience in questioning their own belief systems and practices. It challenged the notions on which several social institutions were founded. The subversion of reality by portraying how violent and surreal the living conditions are was the major aim of these playwrights. Absurdity and futility of human existence become more apparent in the Theatre of Absurd as we have seen. Like the characters who endlessly wait for Godot warned the audience about their own hopes and longings. Especially in the post war period, with the socio-political unrest and the individual trauma that everyone went through, the plays captured the fragmented world and the fragmented human mind that perennially confuses between good and bad and virtue and vice. It was by presenting a compulsory detachment from the characters that these playwrights managed to influence the audience. Rather than experiencing the cathartic or therapeutic agenda, the audience attempted to deviate from the reality that is presented on the stage. The baffling ordeals on stage puzzled the audience and they thus began to question their own belief system juxtaposing it with the meaninglessness that exists around them.

John Arden, Arnold Wesker, Alan Ayckbourn, Edward Bond, David Hare, Trevor Griffiths and Howard Brenton were playwrights who were the other modernist who experimented with the existential angst. The state of

the modern society in the post-war period was powerfully explored in the plays of these writers.

Many recent plays are evidently political in their intent and they are oriented towards subverting and dismantling the potential audience's comfortable illusions. These plays through their powerful situations, characters and dialogue force the audience to step out of their 'imaginary' comfort zones. Usually these plays are violent and are conceived thus deliberately. In Edward Bond's play *Saved* (1965), a baby is stoned and punched to death. In Brenton's *The Romans in Britain* (1980) one male character rapes another male. Through these plays, the playwrights maintained that we live in a completely irrational world. Stoppard's play *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead* (1967) takes its title from the final scene of the Shakespearean tragedy *Hamlet* and presents the title characters in utterly confused and bizarre situations. This tragi-comedy is often compared to the play of Beckett *Waiting for Godot* because both characters in both plays appear to be two halves of a single character. This fragmentation itself is an indication of the lack of order and completeness. Bernard Shaw in the beginning of the century began asking questions about the prevailing assumptions in the society and later in the 1950s the playwrights questioned the existence of humans itself.

Feminist drama evolved and flourished during this period. Ibsen's *A Doll's House* was very significant a play in the literary and cultural history because the protagonist Nora and the questions that she raised towards a predominantly masculine world were reverberating in the society. The major exponents of feminist drama were Anne Jellicoe, Shelagh Delancy and Caryl Churchill.

### Let us sum up

We began with the discussion of how drama originated. We have seen that there is a clear connection that drama has with rituals. You may be familiar with Girish Karnad's plays like the *The Fire and the Rain* which are based on certain myths also present certain metanarrative within it. Art, thus, is not just for pleasure. Like literature, art unveils the hidden depths of human minds, explore the unconscious and present the not so ravelled truth covered in its aesthetic essence to the humanity to enjoy and to analyse. Thus, art has a therapeutic agency. Drama is literature as well as art. Clubbing the literariness and the aesthetic essence of theatre and

performance into one form is indeed a majestic mix. Hence, drama truly expresses human conditions, experiences, plights, follies and predicament.

We have visited the Greek and Roman traditions of dramaturgy and looked at how these great classic traditions influenced the conceptualisation of English drama at various stages. We have also understood that drama in England was also a by-product of religion. We looked at how miracle, mystery and morality plays evolved and how eventually drama moved out of the sacred altar. This shift of space from the pious to the public made drama a popular genre. We traversed through decades and saw how England witnessed the superior plays of Shakespeare, Marlowe and other University Wits, along Ben Jonson. We have also seen how the socio-political conditions in the Europe had influenced literature of the times and how the theatrical practices were influenced. If you juxtapose it with your own times, you will be able to see how political realities are having their imprints on cultural products. If you look at the South Indian context, you will be able to identify the radical measures that the society especially the younger segment takes up in problematising the questions of caste identity and its operations in various societal structures. Then, you will be able to locate these awakened sensibilities being given representations in contemporary cultural products like films and literature. The discourses on caste, creed and economic disparities affecting the stratification of the society have been clearly depicted in several recent films. If you connect the socio-political realities of your times with the representations they get in literature or other cultural products like drama, films, music or dance, you will be able to also understand how literature and culture were defined and redefined by the changes in the socioeconomic and political lives of the Elizabethan, Victorian or modern era.

Thus, we can read the influence of French revolution, or the geographical explorations and imperial project of Britain in the literature produced from England. This does not get confined to the geographical boundaries of Britain. But it extends to the territories elsewhere as Britain then was an empire on which the sun never sets. The colonies across the globe also wrote about their cultural experiences of empire. Though that is not our prime objective in this course, as literature students it is always important to read a text be it print or visual juxtaposing it with the socioeconomic and political conditions of its productions.

Going back to the unit, we have also seen how the Restoration theatre was considered as immoral. Again it is important connect with the times of its production. You may be able to see several parallels in the realms of your familiarity-that is in the Indian context. Think about it. But now let us move on with the Victorian era and we saw the slim theatre activities there. The modern period which was largely marked by the World War I was an era of realism in theatre. There were several movements like Absurd Theatre which experimented with realism and surrealism. Epic Theatre of Brecht was another important modern theatrical trend. We also saw how human life is philosophically conceived and dramatically presented as an endless waiting for someone who never comes! This existential angst and the uncertainty and frailty of life are elegantly captured in a short story by Italo Calvino titled 'The Man Who Shouted Teresa'. As a literature student you should read this story and if possible watch the picturization of it which is available on YouTube. Modern drama dealt with the post war depression and the inevitability of facing cruelty and inhuman attitudes that are part of any civilisations. There was an apparent overtone of disillusionment and writers of the period through their poetry, novels and short fiction along with drama gave visibility to the challenges, frustrations and troubleshooting strategies that human beings adapt to survive. But hostility and despair were not the only themes. The writers were able to challenge the snobbish attitude of the society through the satirical renderings of the upper-class elitist hypocrisies.

In this unit we have also reviewed how the mode of poetic drama was revived by eminent writers like Eliot and Yeats. We have looked at the customised versions of the Elizabethan model dramas too. The poets experimenting with the genre of poetic drama illustrates how the aesthetics of the art form elevates when different literary forms like poetry and prose are mixed in the ideal proportions. We have also looked at some other writers who experimented with poetic dramas not to showcase the antique themes but to illustrate the piquancy of the modern- day realities and living conditions. In short, in this unit by discussing several playwrights and looking at some of their major works we understood the genre of drama and gained insight into the conventions of British drama. Now with this background knowledge, let us look at some of the fascinating plays in the British literary history beginning with Marlowe's Dr. Faustus.



**Review Questions****Write a short essay on Medieval Drama.**

Drama in England began as a religious activity focusing on instructing the masses about the “truth of their religion”, says W.H. Hudson. By the 14th century, religious drama in England took a new shape in the form of miracle and mystery plays.

Often miracle and mystery plays are confused as one, but they are not. Miracle plays dealt with the life of saints whereas Mysteries dealt with themes taken from the Bible, points out Nicoll. Miracle plays were vernacularized - Latin was replaced with French and English for the masses to understand better. These plays also soon strayed away from their original ecclesiastical themes. Miracle plays were mostly about the Virgin Mary or Saint Nicholas, both of them believed to have had special healing powers.

Mystery plays were intended to show the story of the fall of man and the redemption that followed. These plays were enacted in Cycles - appointed to the Trade Guild of different towns, the bulk of plays were divided and appointed to different towns and they were performed chronologically. These are known as the Corpus Christi plays, as they were staged during the Corpus Christi festival in the early summer. Only four cycles of plays are known to us today - Chester (25 plays), York (48 plays), Wakefield (32 plays), and Coventry (42 plays).

Simple costumes were added for better effects. One special feature of Mysteries is the mild element of humour that was added to attract the audience.

**Write about the emergence of English drama after the mediaeval period.**

Soon the mystery plays gave way to morality plays of the 15th century. Morality plays focused on moralistic teachings instead of purely Biblical lessons. Hudson comments that the emergence of this form of drama was “very natural at a time when allegorical poetry was immensely popular”.

**Morality Plays:**

Morality plays focused more on mental and moral qualities. These were made into personified abstractions and stock characters - like Free Will, the Five Senses, Good Angels, Bad Angels, etc. - and were enacted for the audiences. Humour was one of the prominent features of Moralities.

The most noticeable of these characters is the Devil, or the Vice, who was portrayed with a comical touch. The Vice is considered to be the “direct forerunner of the Shakespearean clown”. A well-known Morality play is Everyman, whose author remains unknown.

Interludes:

Before drama acquired its Elizabethan form, a late variant of the Morality play emerged, known as the Interlude. Nicoll defines it as “a play in the midst of other festivities or business.” These were short pieces of humorous enactments that discussed the topics of everyday society rather than overtly religious themes. They were often satiric in nature. One famous interlude we know today is the Four P’s by John Heywood.

Classical Influence:

The first proper tragedy and comedy of English drama take inspiration from ancient Greek and Latin plays. The first proper comedy was Roister Doister written by Nicholas Udall around 1550. As for tragedy, Thomas Sackville and Thomas Norton jointly created Gorboduc (alternatively known as Ferrex and Porrex), a proper Senecan tragedy in 1561.

**Write an essay on Elizabethan Theatre and about the major themes that the playwrights employed.**

After the production of the first comedy and tragedy plays in the late 16th century, there was a period of confusion. One group of writers wanted to follow the classical conventions of drama and create imitations. Another group of playwrights were keen on catering to the public taste by turning towards romantic drama. Eventually, the latter group gained prominence and playwrights like William Shakespeare gained more popularity.

**Elizabethan Theatre:**

The term Elizabethan theatre generally refers to the performance plays that gained prominence during the reign of Queen Elizabeth I. In this period, actors were recruited by performing troupes (as unregistered actors were considered rogues and vagabonds) and performed plays of the leading playwrights of the era. Theatres started popping up on the outskirts of London - the first one was ironically named “The Theatre” and was erected in 1576. Soon, major playhouses like The Globe, The Curtain, The Rose, etc. were built.

Before Shakespeare attained his glory, a group of writers called the *University Wits* were more prominent. This group included famous writers like Christopher Marlowe and Thomas Kyd. Many of Shakespeare's plays take inspiration from the works of the University Wits. In this period, tragedy and comedy were the two most popular genres of drama.

### **Major Themes employed in Elizabethan dramas:**

Some of the major themes found in the plays of the Elizabethan period include:

- Anti-semitism (eg., *The Jew of Malta*)
- Supernaturalism (eg., *Hamlet*)
- Passions and Ambitions of a Heroic figure (eg., *Julius Caesar*)
- Romance and Pastoral Romance (eg., *As You Like It*)
- Revenge (eg., *The Duchess of Malfi*)

### **Write an essay on Restoration Drama.**

After the Stuart Restoration in England, there was an immense change in the country's society. As Hudson describes, King Charles II's court was the "most shameless court" that the country had ever known. People began to turn towards profligacy and licentiousness. This state of immorality was noticeable in the literature and drama of the period.

### **Features of Restoration Drama:**

During the Puritan period, all the theatres were ordered to close. When the theatres were re-opened by Charles II in 1660, drama flourished, both as a result of oppression and encouragement from the throne. Two main genres of drama emerged in the Restoration period - Comedy of Manners and Heroic Tragedy.

The plays of this period were filled with "bawdy humour" and indecency. Plots and characters were artificially heightened out of reality. For the first time in the history of English theatre, women were encouraged to act.

### **Comedy of Manners:**

Comedy of Manners was a genre of drama that mocked the manners of upper-class England. It contained crude humour and sexually suggestive language. Importance was given to wit - the dialogues were polished, and the satire was aimed to reflect the unnaturalness of upper-class society. A good example of Comedy of Manners is *The Way of the World* by Congreve.

### Heroic Tragedy:

Extremely artificial and extravagant, the tragedy of this period was filled with gallantry and heroic romance. The Heroic Tragedy genre contained noble protagonists and elaborate speeches that were as far as possible from reality. These plays were imitated either from classics or Shakespeare's works. John Dryden was one of the most prominent writers of Heroic Tragedy.

### What are the tenets of Modern English Drama?

English drama declined during the Victorian period. This was rectified in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century when new movements emerged in drama. This period is commonly known as the Modern period of English drama and was influenced by many artistic movements like symbolism, naturalism, realism, expressionism, etc. Watson says that Modern drama is "a room with one wall removed".

### Features of Modern English Drama:

- Realism - Drama in England took a turn for realism in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The World Wars caused great damage to society and this is reflected in terms of realistic plays. It also portrays the modern "sense of fragmentation" that was caused as a result of the wars.
- Avant-Garde - This term refers to any art that is revolutionary and jolts the reader/audience out of their comfort zone. The modern drama was filled with avant-garde elements that showcased the nasty state of reality everywhere.
- Intrinsic - The new age of drama was keenly focused on the psychological aspect to art. It explored the subconscious of characters and lets the audience understand the motives behind a character's actions.
- Anti-conventional - Modern drama stood against everything conventional. Playwrights explored new themes and techniques in their works to arrive at more effective portrayals of stories and characters.
- Critical and Skeptical - 20<sup>th</sup>-century drama was not very fond of romantic elements.

New genres like problem plays and kitchen-sink dramas started emerging - they shed

light on the everyday problems of the domestic life of middle and working-class people.

### **Self-study Questions**

1. Write an essay on the origin of drama.
2. How did drama emerge as a secular art form rather than a ritual in the historical and religious landscape of Britain?
3. Write an essay on the status of drama in the medieval period.
4. Who are University Wits and what are their contributions to English drama?
5. Write an essay on Shakespeare's tragedies.
6. How does the Restoration Theatre 'qualify' to be called as the theatre of profaneness?
7. Write an essay on poetic drama.
8. What are the tenets of modern drama?
9. How relevant is epic theatre and theatre of absurd if you look through the philosophical lens?
10. Who are the major dramatists during the post-war period and what are the features of these plays?

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**UNIT - II**

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**Lesson 2.1 - Doctor Faustus**

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**Structure**

- 2.1: Objectives
- 2.2: Introduction
- 2.3: Summary and Analysis of the Play
- 2.4: Let Us Sum Up
- 2.5: Review Questions
- 2.6: Self-Study Questions

**2.1 Objectives**

*Through this unit, the learners will be able to*

- Understand the sociocultural background of the play
- Familiarise with the dramatics of Christopher Marlowe
- Analyse and evaluate the themes and undertones of the play *Dr. Faustus*
- Write critical essays on the play

**2.2 Introduction**

The Elizabethan tragedy *The Tragical History of the Life and Death of Doctor Faustus*, commonly referred to as *Doctor Faustus*, is written by Christopher Marlowe and this play is based on a German legend in which Faust is the protagonist. The massive intellectual, economic and political changes which took place in the sixteenth century England are reflected in the play. Renaissance and Reformation initiated such changes and these were palpable in all aspects of the social life. Before we study the narrative of the play, it is also important to understand the socio-political contexts which this play is rooted in.

The Renaissance as we said in Unit one was a 14 century Italian phenomenon that spread to different regions in Europe. Owing to the re--discovery of classical Greek and Roman texts and the knowledge of antiquity, a spirit of inquiry, and intellectual and aesthetic reawakening



occurred in the Europe. In England, politics and religion were intertwined with national identity owing to the connection between the Protestant Reformation and England's Renaissance. The spirit of inquiry did not restrict itself to the upgradation of knowledge but it extended to geographical explorations. Europeans began their exploration across seas and this wander thirst was also pursued by the Britain. Establishing colonies in the world became a European agenda and there was a palpable sense of pride in the national identity. In their *Analysis of Major Literary Works*, Sudip et.al. (2010) sum up the political and social conditions of England that followed the Renaissance phenomenon as follows:

During the reign of Henry V as king of England, which began in 1485, government centralisation and efficient bureaucracy brought England political stability. This allowed Renaissance ideas to flourish. Henry VIII became king in 1509. His inability to conceive a male heir with his wife Catherine of Aragon led him to demand for a divorce. When Pope Leo X refused that demand, largely due the political pressure of Spain, Henry broke with Roman Catholic Church. The Act of Supremacy in 1534 established the Church of England, with the monarch as its head. This initiated in England an era of serious religious strife, though not as bloody as similar struggles in other parts of the world. After Henry VIII's death, Edward VI, who continued England's Protestant course, ruled for a short period. At his death, Mary Tudor, a half-Spanish Catholic became queen and attempted to return England to Catholicism, Religious persecution earned her the name "Bloody Mary", and her marriage to her cousin Philip II of Spain raised concerns about England coming under the political and religious influence of Catholic Spain. Mary's death led to the crowning of Queen Elizabeth, who reversed England's catholic drift but maintained a largely centrist position regarding religion and politics. Spain's preeminent role on world stage, fuelled by gold from its conquest of the Americas, led to England's continued anxiety about that country's Catholicism and the effects it might have on England. This concern was eased by a large military failure incurred by the Spanish Armada in 1588.

This history is very important for readers of Marlowe's *Doctor Faustus*. Faustus's scorn towards the Pope and even his final damnation can be traced back to the general attitude of the public and the literati of the period. You should note that when the play begins, Faustus is seen pondering about learning the black arts. We see that he rejects the study of theology and prefers magic because of his reading of Jerome's Bible, a

revised edition that was often negatively identified with Catholicism by England's Protestants. So, Marlowe implies that the hubris, hamartia and the catastrophe are all results of Faustus reading the 'wrong' version of the Bible.

Several factors contributed to the rise of Humanism. First Martin Luther and the Protestant Reformation weakened the hold Roman Catholicism held over European religion during the middle ages. Translations of rediscovered classical texts as well as contemporary continental writers increased the general trend toward secularisation. Previously, books were hand copied, but the invention of printing by Johann Guttenberg in 1445 and its introduction into England by William Caxton in 1476 made books more readily available. The style and content of education also changed. Tutors and universities added the study of the newly recovered classical texts to the subjects taught during the medieval period. Students read these texts not only to improve language skills but also to understand their ethical, social and political content. Classical values influenced English society, as did those of contemporary Italian texts like Niccolo Machiavelli's *The Prince* (1513) and Baldassare Castiglione's *The Book of the Courtier* (1528). Not only the elite but professionals, artisans and merchants recognised the value of education, both for its personal and economic value. Literacy increased. (excerpt from *Analysis of Major Literary Works*)

*Doctor Faustus* places the humanistic spirit of the era in context. The medieval perceptions of the supremacy of the 'other world' and the inferiority of the materialistic life on the earth underwent a change when humanist philosophy emerged. The centrality of humans problematised the medieval ideologies and supremacy of the 'other' world. The medieval perceptions of collective values as important became insignificant with humanism focussing more on the individual, individualistic traits and values. Renaissance and the humanist philosophy changed the perceptions of the society when it emphasised the centrality of human existence and the happiness that the individual is rightfully entitled with.

The "New Science" was the scientific revolution that dejected the theological inquiry in terms of scientific temperament. Astronomical advancements made by Galileo and Copernicus theorised the way humans perceived the cosmos. The present era's scientific temperament originated from the departure from the theologically centred interpretations of the

cosmos. Marlowe's protagonist Doctor Faustus exemplifies this newly awakened scientific temperament and the quest for knowledge that is defined beyond the theologically determined categories or elements. In a sense, *Doctor Faustus* is a satire as it satirises the New Science and Humanism by depicting a scholar who tries to learn black arts owing to his unquenchable thirst for knowledge and the faith in human intellect.

The traits of Renaissance were visible in the way the Europeans travelled around the world establishing trading companies and colonies. Trading and commerce enriched the life of the people and they had an increasingly prosperous life. Rise of middle class was another social phenomenon that was a result of the explorations. All these contributed not only to the socio-political and economic well-being of the country but also catered to the cultural life of the people. The social structures were altering quickly because of the influx of wealth through commerce. Increased social mobility powered by a rejuvenated emphasis on the secular knowledge production and dissemination culminated in the most celebrated personality type that exemplified Renaissance Individualism. Christopher Marlowe's heroes are seekers of greatness and power. In *Tamburlaine the Great* a shepherd becomes a warrior king. It does not mean that all poor folks could become rich. But it means that there were possibilities for the common people to assume powerful and wealthy positions thanks to the economic advancements. Most of his tragic heroes are victims of their own quest for power, knowledge and wealth. In a sense, we can see that the ambitious characters and their faith in their own strives towards actualising their ambitions were representative of the society which was awakened and affected by the Renaissance, Reformation and the traits of Humanism, geographical expeditions and the New Science.

### **Faust and Faustus**

Faust is the protagonist of a classic German legend which was based on the historical figure Johann Georg Faust. The legendary Faust is a scholar who is very successful but he is not satisfied with his learning or life. This quest and thirst for the better life makes him engage in a treaty with the Devil. The pact is that he will exchange his own soul with the Devil if the Devil provides him unlimited knowledge and material pleasures.

The legend of Faust has inspired several literary, filmic, theatrical and musical productions which have interpreted the legend differently. As the legend describes the greed for power, knowledge and pleasure

of the human being, eventually the adjective 'Faustian' implicated the abandoning of spiritual and moral values and the acceptance of power, knowledge, pleasure, and material benefits.

Faust denies to be the Doctor of Theology and preferred the designation as the Doctor of Medicines. Therefore, he throws his scriptures and religious manuscripts away and concentrates on magic. But, ultimately, he sacrifices his soul to the Devil and die a miserable death. Though there are several renditions of this popular legend in the literary and cultural history, Christopher Marlowe's reinterpretation of the legend as *The Tragical History of Doctor Faustus* (1592) stands out in its literary merits and critical qualities.

## 2.3 Summary and Analysis of the Play

### The Prologue

Faustus is born to poor parents in Rhodes, Germany, grows up and eventually goes to Wittenberg to study theology. Through his studies, he becomes financially sturdy but he begins to turn away from theology. Instead, he begins to turn towards the study of magic and necromancy- the magical art of raising the dead.

The Chorus appears in the Prologue and in a few others parts in the play. One can see that the role of Chorus in *Doctor Faustus* resembles the use of Chorus in Greek drama. Chorus was not a component during the Elizabethan times but some playwrights occasionally included it in their plays for various purposes. A Chorus provides background information, at times serves as a commentator, sometimes hold together the scenes or fill in plot points.

Martin Luther studied and taught in a university in the city of Wittenberg. The reference to the knowledge hub by Marlowe could be seen as his conscious attempt to signal that his protagonist Faustus is an intelligent man as he studied in Wittenberg. He was not an ordinary man but a man with great intellect.

There is an interesting reference in the prologue to the story of Icarus. This myth is recalled by the use of the phrase "the waxen wings".

### **The Fall of Icarus**

Daedalus and his son Icarus were imprisoned by King Minos in an island. To escape from the island, Daedalus made wings with wax and feathers so that he and his son could fly away from the island. Ignoring the warning given by his father, Icarus flew high, closer to the sun only to get the wax melted which resulted in his fall. He plummeted down into the ocean and died.

This allusion or reference to Icarus and his doom is a brilliant prediction of the impending disaster. The myth of Icarus illustrates how human ambitions can cause disastrous ends for himself. So, the Chorus referring to the wax wings is actually a way to hint the fate that the protagonist of the play would be subjected to. Like Icarus, he too ignores the warnings and embraces his doomed fate.

### **Act I Scene I**

In the first scene, we see Faustus the young scholar in his study contemplating what new orientation should he take in his pursuit of knowledge. Although he thinks about philosophy, medicine and theology, he is inclined towards studying magic because he believes that it will make him powerful. He needs to get some advice on this and he wants to hear what his friends Valdes and Cornelius have to say about his choice. Therefore, he sends his servant Wagner to fetch his friends.

Wagner goes to bring Valdes and Cornelius along and then Faustus is alone at his study. To provide unsolicited advice then appear a Good Angel and a Bad Angel. The Good Angel advises him to pursue the disciplines that was initially thinking about but the Bad Angel tells him to opt magic as his new discipline.

Valdes and Cornelius who are sorcerers themselves arrive then and definitely them being sorcerers advise Faustus to pursue magic. Faustus was expecting this suggestion and perhaps he wanted someone else to confirm this urge to learn magic. As they agree on Faustus turning his academic attention into the art of magic, all three of them go out to practise magic.

It is interesting to note that Faustus prefers to address him in third person singular whenever he has to refer to himself. Thus, we see Faustus not using the first person pronouns often but resorts to use he, his, him. Don't you think he is portrayed as a bit megalomaniac here? Just as Ted

Hughes talked about the hawk in his poem Hawk Roosting, Faustus here is very proud of himself and his intellect and is presented as a person who would like to hear his own name even though he is the one who says it! This is a clue that Marlowe gives to his audience to identify the primary hamartia- hubris or pride. In this scene there are several allusions. There are allusions to the notable figures of Musaeus and Agrippa. The former is a legendary Greek poet of the pre-Homeric period and the latter is Henricus Cornelius Agrippa who wrote many tracts on necromancy. Also, there are allusions to the Greek god Jupiter (Jove).

“Golden Fleece” is an allusion to the Greek myth of Jason and the Argonaut’s Quest for the Golden Fleece. Jason set out on his ship Argo from Greece to search for the famous Golden Fleece of Clochis. Many mythological Greek heroes joined him in his voyage. He encountered several of the monsters (depicted in Greek mythology) on his way. This allusion serves as an aid to provide Faustus and the audience with the predictable issues or dangers that could be involved in the academic odyssey that Faustus is going to undertake.

Even when Faustus is pictured as a learned man, Marlowe wanted to sketch his character with some incompleteness in terms of knowledge. Therefore, Faustus when he quotes from the Bible or employs Latin quotes, there are errors in them. This purposeful insertion of erroneous components or incomplete verses are to indicate the lacunae in the knowledge that Faustus gathered. It could be an attempt to indicate that the man deviates from the ‘proper and approved’ disciplines because he has not truly mastered them or not acquired or absorbed the essence of those learning. Marlowe might have been hinting that a person who has thorough mastery in disciplines like theology or philosophy, would not deviate into the not recommended disciplines of magic and necromancy. The moralisation of education is an intent of the playwright.

### Act I Scene 2

Two scholars, apparently well wishers of Faustus, meet Wagner and they wonder where Faustus is. While being questioned Wagner tell them that he went out for dinner with Valdes and Cornelius which alarms both the scholars as they already knew that Valdes and Cornelius were magicians and necromancers. They have an inkling that Faustus might be practising them too. Therefore, they plan to visit the rector to see if he can



do something to prevent Faustus from practising magic. Magic as a field of study is demoralised and it is seen as blasphemy. The conventions of the Church and the principles in the Holy Bible are violated by Faustus in his pursuit of magic.

### **Act I Scene 3**

In this scene we can see Faustus evolving as a skilled magician. It is a tempestuous dark night and Faustus draws a magic circle around himself in order to summon a demon. Once Faustus is done with his invocation, Mephistopheles appears in front of him and seeks the reason for invoking him. The figure of Mephistopheles evokes a feeling of disgust in Faustus and he sends the demon back asking him to reincarnate as a Franciscan Friar and to come back.

When Mephistopheles comes back, the curious Faustus asks him several questions about God, heaven and hell which make the demon angry and upset. He is a fallen angel and he hates to hear anything about the lost paradise and the bliss. Those memories are something that Mephistopheles hates. As Faustus does not get any proper responses to his queries, he commands Mephistopheles to be his servant. Mephistopheles then is very clear and makes it clear to Faustus that his master is Lucifer and he will pay heed to Lucifer's commands. He denies to obey a mortal's commands. Then there is a turn of events. Faustus decides to engage in a pact with Mephistopheles so that he can keep the demon as a servant. Therefore, he offers a deal: he will trade his soul for 24 years of life with Mephistopheles as his servant! An amused Mephistopheles, being interested in this contract, decides to go back to hell to discuss the matter with his master Lucifer.

We can clearly see a connection between the story of the lost paradise and the impending disaster that Faustus should anticipate. Like how Lucifer and his cohort lost the paradise by plotting against the will of God, by going against the norms and scriptures Faustus also invokes trouble. Mephistopheles is an important devil in the cohort only subservient to the second most prominent fallen angel Beelzebub and the master of all devils Lucifer. Faustus is symbolically Lucifer who negated the rules of the Heaven and became a victim of God's wrath. Pride is seen as the hubris for both these characters. He stated that we must live by our values and any professional or business enterprises that we undertake must be passionately handled to beget the desired outcome.

**Act I Scene 4**

Wagner and a Clown enter and Wagner is asking the service of the Clown as his servant. But the Clown is not inclined to become Wagner's servant. Wagner then invokes two devils namely Baliol and Belcher to frighten the Clown. His plan works and a scared Clown pleads Wagner to send him back. Wagner sends the devils back and as they are gone Clown agrees to be Wagner's servant. In return he requests Wagner to teach him magic to summon spirits. The Act I closes with this scene which more or less looks like a sub plot.

You must be familiar with how such sub plots operate in films. They run parallel to the major plot with a similar plotline but the purpose would be largely to evoke laughter. For example, if the romance between the hero and the heroine is the central plot, there will be a comedian falling in love with a female (who also handles comedy) mimicking the major plot. Here, Wagner's actions are a miniature of what Faustus did. In other words, like his Master, the servant Wagner also invoked spirits. The hierarchy of abilities and scholarship are very evident here. The Master has mastery over magic and he was capable of invoking the major devil. Wagner, who is not skilled was able to summon two demons who were not ranked as high as Mephistopheles.

**Act II Scene 1**

It is almost midnight and Faustus is in his study waiting for Mephistopheles to return with Lucifer's response. Faustus, as he waits, reconsiders his decision to surrender his soul to the devil. He realises that it is not a wise decision and almost admits it as a very wrong deed. The Good Angel also advises him to not to surrender his soul and to reconsider his decision. But the Bad Angel manages to have more power over Faustus's mind and Faustus is steadfast in his decision to have the knowledge of magic and he thinks it is alright to have his soul surrendered to the devil.

At midnight Mephistopheles arrives with the news that Lucifer accepted the pact and agreed to provide with the much desired knowledge in return for Faustus surrendering his soul. To make the pact concrete, Mephistopheles asks Faustus to sign the contract with his blood. Faustus cuts his arm and with the blood signs the agreement. Now as Faustus sold his soul, a number of devils arrive and exhibit the potential extravaganza that Faustus would now have; pretty women, immense treasures, kingship, knowledge and other similar carnal pleasures. Faustus is happy to witness

the material benefits that he is going to enjoy. Mephistopheles also informs him that he can sleep with any woman of his choice and can summon any troupes in the world to wage wars or to safeguard him. He is also given the power to control the nature. When Faustus realises that he has the power to control even the weather conditions, he is overjoyed. But this makes him crave for more. So he demands Mephistopheles to provide him with all books that would educate him with the knowledge of assuming control over all devils too! Mephistopheles agrees and provides him with the book.

Faustus signing the contract is an interesting scene. Mephistopheles then says: "It is a comfort to the wretched to have companions in misfortune" which clearly indicates that Faustus is actually signing the pact to enter his doom. It also indicates that the evil minded ones always love to see others in wretched conditions also. The human psychology is explored very well here though Marlowe put it into the dialogues of a devil. When Faustus signs the contract he utters: "Consummatum est" which translated as "It is finished". According to the gospel of John, these are uttered by Jesus on Cross and these are his last words. So, a symbolic death of all virtues that were left in Faustus is staged. In another sense, we can also see a sarcastic or ironic representation of the cause of the death of Jesus. When Jesus was punished for the sins of others, Faustus is going to be punished for his own sins and perhaps for all those sins of those sinners who sought knowledge and power in the most undesirable fashion.

## **Act II Scene 2**

Robin the Ostler steps in. He stole a book from Faustus and he brings it with him. Robin wants to use the knowledge he gathers from the book for his sexual pleasure as he aims to summon beautiful women and to make them dance nude in front of him. When Robin is about to conjure women, his friend Rafe enters and wonders why Robin seems ecstatic. Robin discloses the secret and offers the book to Rafe. Rafe is excited as well because the 'new knowledge' would help him to seduce the maid Nan Spit whom he was eying on for long.

This scene shows the chain reaction that wickedness produces. Faustus's quest for knowledge of magic in turn affects Wagner, Robin and Rafe. Marlowe suggests that once the evil is unleashed there is no possibility of revoking it. Sin nurtures more sin.

### Act II Scene 3

Faustus and Mephistopheles converse about Heaven and Faustus feels bad about the virtues that he lost forever. He again reconsiders his decision. Good Angel and Bad Angel once again step in and attempt to get Faustus on their side. But Faustus though in a dilemma decides to adhere to his decision because he thinks that as he has already sinned he will anyway not be permitted in heaven. He does not want to miss out the earthly pleasures that Mephistopheles can offer him. Mephistopheles and Faustus carry on with their conversation and eventually God and Heaven again become the subject matter of their discussion. Mephistopheles provides some answers to the curious Faustus but he is reluctant later and restrains from engaging in any conversation regarding God and Heavenly bliss because he cannot bear the pain of parting with the heavenly bliss. When Faustus demands answers for his questions about God and Heaven Mephistopheles leaves and returns with Beelzebub and Lucifer. Lucifer iterates that the topics of God and Heaven are not included in their contract and therefore Faustus should not ask those questions ever again. Faustus agrees to Lucifer's command.

The devils are pleased by Faustus's obedience. Lucifer therefore asks Faustus if he would like to see the Seven Deadly Sins. Faustus replies that nothing would make him happier than the sight of the Seven Deadly Sins. Thus, Pride, Covetousness, Wrath, Envy, Gluttony, Sloth and Lechery in their human form appear in front of Faustus but he is disgusted by the sight. When Lucifer is about to leave, he tells Faustus to think about Hell and not about Heaven. He promises that he will return again to take Faustus for a tour in Hell.

In this scene, Mephistopheles describes the universe especially the planets to Faustus and this universe is not the solar centric one. Thus we see Mephistopheles describing the planets rotating around the Earth which aligns with the Ptolemy's geocentric theory and it does not take into account the Copernican theory of heliocentrism.

The second act ends there.

### Act III Scene 1

Mephistopheles and Faustus are waiting for the Pope in his chamber. Faustus becomes invisible and plays tricks on the Pope when he arrives with his large retinue of attendance. Faustus eats the food meant for Pope

and drinks the wine which obviously make everyone feel that the place is infested with a ghostly presence. Pope crosses himself to be saved from evil but Faustus boxes the Pope's ears which scare them all and the churchmen run away from the chamber. Then, when the friars return by chanting a dirge to scare off the devilish spirits, they are beaten by Mephistopheles and Faustus and they both run from the chamber.

This scene actually criticises the extravagant and unholy life that the Popes enjoy. If they are true to their worship to God, they would not have been scared of the demons or the evil tricks played by Faustus. The clergymen are all corrupted. If we read history parallel to this scene, we will be able to understand that Marlowe is sarcastic here about the papal agency and general corruption within the Church.

### **Act III Scene 2**

This scene takes us back to Rafe and Robin who managed to learn magic using the book of Faustus. Using the magic they learnt, they managed to steal a silver goblet from Vintner. Vintner comes to the scene to find out the goblet. Robin casts a spell on him which prevents him from locating the silver goblet. Though Vintner is sure that Robin and Rafe have stolen his goblet, because of their magic trick, he is unable to find the lost goblet. When Robin has had enough fun with the tricked Vintner, to torture him, he summons Mephistopheles who was busy in Constantinople. As he is invoked, Mephistopheles arrives but is angry because he had to leave in a hurry from Constantinople. He is displeased and decides to punish Robin and Rafe. Mephistopheles threatens them that he will turn them into an ape and a dog.

Again, like the previous scene in which the two tricksters appeared, this scene also is a parallel plot. But here there is an indication that Mephistopheles is capable of punishing the ones who summoned him. This hints that the devil does not subjugate completely to human commands.

The third act ends there.

### **Act IV Scene I**

Carlous and Faustus are having dinner. Carlous asks him if he can bring Alexander the Great and his paramour in front of him. Faustus agrees. But a knight who was present there along with others who were part of Carlous's company becomes very sceptical about Faustus's ability in performing this task. Faustus sends Mephistopheles to bring the souls

of Alexander and his paramour back. When Mephistopheles does this and when Alexander the great and his paramour stand in front of the knights Carlous is amazed. He promises that he will reward Faustus with riches. As the knight was doubting Faustus's powers, Faustus punishes the knight- the knight has grown horns on his head. Everyone enjoys the joke but Carlous requests Faustus to remove them. Faustus obeys him. Again, this trick induces great veneration towards Faustus and his dexterity. There is an old interpretation that a man will have horns if his wife cheats on him. When the knight grows horns on his head, Faustus cracks jokes on him by talking about his wife's chastity.

#### **Act IV Scene 2**

Faustus and Mephistopheles are getting ready to return to Wittenberg. A Horse-Courser comes there wishing to purchase Faustus's horse. As Mephistopheles insists on taking the money and giving the horse away, Faustus does so. While handing the horse over to the Horse-Courser Faustus tell him not to take it into water. But the Horse-Courser does not pay much attention to this and he leaves with the horse. Faustus falls asleep and then the Horse-Courser returns all drenched. He rode the horse into waters and the moment the horse touched water, it disappeared. The Horse-Corser demands his money back and he needs it immediately. Mephistopheles tells him not to bother Faustus, the angry Horse-Courser yanks on Faustus's feet until he is awake. Faustus orders Mephistopheles to attack his attacker. Mephistopheles immediately catches the man and this scares him very much. Horse Courser then tells Faustus that he would even pay more money if he will command Mephistopheles to leave him. Hearing about more money Faustus commands Mephistopheles to let the Horse Courser go free. In fact Mephistopheles proves to be kinder than Faustus.

#### **Act IV Scene 3**

Faustus is in a dinner with the Duke and Duchess of Vanholt. The Duke is already impressed by Faustus. But Faustus wants to please the Duchess. She is pregnant and Faustus asks if she has any wishes that could be fulfilled. She says that she loves to eat grapes. It is winter season and there are no grapes available anywhere. But Faustus says that he will get her wish fulfilled and thus orders Mephistopheles to fetch the best ever grapes in the world for the Duchess. Mephistopheles does it and both the Duke and the Duchess are stunned because they could never imagine grapes



being available during winter. Then Faustus explains that there are several regions in the world where it is summer and his obedient spirit was sent to fetch the grapes from one of those places. This trick completely entices the Duke and the Duchess. The Duke promises to reward Faustus with precious gifts. With this trick, Faustus created a great impression and thus he got another noble man on his side. The fourth act ends with this scene.

### **Act V Scene I**

Wagner thinks that his master Faustus is preparing for his own death because he has given all his possessions to Wagner. But he is still not a god-fearing person as he wanders outside drinking and partying. Wagner wonders about this nature of Faustus. Wagner thinks that if Faustus is contemplating death, he should be preparing his soul for Heaven. Wagner understands that Faustus is sinning and is enjoying the worldly pleasures.

Faustus and his three friends enter the scene. They are discussing the prettiest women on earth. One of these scholar friends asks Faustus if they can see the earth's most beautiful woman who they think is the Helen of Troy. Faustus brings her to life and surprises the friends.

As his friends leave, an Old Man enters the scene. He advises Faustus and asks him to repent his sins. He asks Faustus to be abstained from such sinful actions and asks him to think about holy matters and to confess his sins. When Faustus hears these words, he again thinks about his sins and his mind swings between the holy and the unholy. He decides to beg forgiveness from God and begins to repent. Mephistopheles listens to this and he becomes angry. He says that he will destroy Faustus. Faustus is threatened and he is scared. Therefore, he continues his pact with the devil. It is almost the time for him to die.

Faustus understands that it is time to die. As his final wish, he requests Mephistopheles to allow him to make love with Helen of Troy. As still the pact is active, Mephistopheles brings Helen back. The Old Man reappears and he sees Helen. He is tempted by her beauty and wants to take her for himself. As the Old Man also sinned, after Helen leaves, the devils approach him to offer him some deal. Instead of approving their deal, the Old Man curses himself for being tempted and thus having sinned. He manages to send the devils away with the power of his faith. This scene shows the power of faith in chasing away the devilish spirits.

Sudip et.al. in their book extensively discuss the allusions present in this scene.

In Greek mythology, Helen of Troy was the most beautiful woman on earth and the cause of the Trojan War. When she was stolen by Paris, her husband Menelaus sent a Greek fleet of 1000 ships to Troy-Paris's city- in order to take her back. It was during the ten years of this war that the great Greek hero Achilles was killed by a poisoned arrow fired that hit him in the heel. However, Troy finally fell to the Greeks and the city was utterly destroyed.

The allusion to Semele refers to one of the human mistresses of Jupiter, king of Roman Gods. Jupiter promised to give her anything she wanted and she asked to see Jupiter in all his glory. However, when she did actually see the god in his full might, it was too much for her and she died.

The allusion to Arethusa refers to a character from Roman mythology. Arethusa was a water nymph whom the river god Alpheus fell in love with. However, she fled from him and she was turned into a fountain in Sicily. Though the Old Man mentions her in reference to Jupiter, there is no myth associating the two. (p.149)

## Act V Scene 2

Faustus is in conversation with his fellow scholars. The scholars understand the Faustus is troubled. Then Faustus tells them that he is doomed and he will be going to hell and is going to die that night. However, the scholars are not able to believe his words. They then attempt to turn him towards God. But Faustus is not ready to go to the holy path because he believes that he has already walked away from the heavenly and the holy. Faustus eventually tells them about his pact with the devil and they are indeed petrified. They promise to stay with him through that night. Faustus wants to ensure their safety and therefore asks them to pray for him by being away from him in another room.

The scholars listen to him and leave him alone. They move to another room. During the final hours of his life Faustus sit down and thinks about all episodes in his life. He regrets his decision to engage in an agreement with the devil. He thinks that he should not have sold his soul to the devil. Faustus still hopes for forgiveness but he understands that it is too late and

his destiny is doomed. He knows that he has to suffer in the hell. The clock strikes 12 and the devils arrive at midnight to take Faustus to hell.

### Epilogue

The Chorus states that Faustus is dead. The Chorus explains that he has been taken to hell because he desired too much from life.

This play makes us question the purpose of life. The role of faith in life is also a major focus of this play. The Renaissance individualism is being criticised as the renaissance humanism emphasised the centrality of humans. Ethical issues are also foregrounded in the play as there is always a struggle between good and evil. The moral corruption of the church and the clergy is also detailed in several scenes. When human greed exceeds all limits they will have to pay for their actions.

At the same time, Faustus is an intriguing character. Several of his dialogues make us question whether it is wrong to search for more knowledge. But Faustus becomes power greedy and he sins. This causes his downfall. In several scenes he is determined enough to adhere to his decisions. But at certain points, he subjugates himself to the vulnerable human situations where he feels powerless and wishes for strength from the Supreme Power- God. The angels became demons because they revolted against God. Similarly as Faustus sought more knowledge, he became a sinner. When the forbidden fruit was eaten by Eve and Adam, they became conscious about their existence and this invited the downfall of humans. The fallen angels and fallen humans are results of their quest for knowledge and power. In that sense Faustus himself is an allegory of the struggle between the omnipotent God and the 'powerless- everyone -else'.

### 2.4 Let Us Sum Up

Renaissance and the spirit of the age is well captured in the play *Doctor Faustus*. Christopher Marlowe illustrates the scientific temperament that generated in Europe as a result of renaissance. The play discusses how knowledge is power and how unlimited power corrupts the society. Faustus is like Lucifer who wished for the godly status. Faustus wanted to have powers that unlimited knowledge could fetch him. Like Lucifer, he too is befallen as he is corrupted by his own greed for power.

This play looks at Faustus as a man with great hubris (pride) and greed. Renaissance humanism is also being foregrounded and discussed in this play. If it is the right of humans to gather knowledge, should they be persecuted for the knowledge that they crave for and accumulate? The tragedy of Faustus leaves us with several similar questions.

## 2.5 Review Questions

### 1. Discuss Dr. Faustus as a Renaissance Hero.

Renaissance in England brought a new wave of culture and education - classical texts were revived, and the interest in acquiring knowledge was widespread among men. This period also saw the domination of religious ideals and Christian theology. Dr. Faustus, a play written in 1592 by Christopher Marlowe deals with the titular protagonist and his unquenchable thirst for power, knowledge, and material wealth.

During this period, common belief was that Man was put on Earth by God, and it was according to God's will that one must abide. When went out of his way against the will of God, it was considered the greatest of sins, like Lucifer's. In this view, we see that Dr Faustus strays away from God's plan for him - he throws himself into learning necromancy and black magic and eventually commits all seven sins.

Here are a few characteristics that are typical of a Renaissance hero. Upon careful observation, we find that Faustus harbours all of these qualities.

- Craving for infinite knowledge
- Love for the sensual, passionate, and beauty
- Greed for material possessions
- Domination of classical art, literature, and values

"Marlowe's Faustus is a martyr to everything that Renaissance valued - power, curious knowledge, enterprise, wealth and beauty," says George Santayana, a famous Spanish-American philosopher. True to this statement, we can understand why Faustus is widely considered a Renaissance hero.

### 2. Write an essay on Christopher Marlowe as an Elizabethan playwright.

Christopher Marlowe, the famed Elizabethan playwright, is a significant character in English literature history. Marlowe's influence to the Elizabethan theatrical environment is obvious. He was born in 1564,

the same year as William Shakespeare. Despite his terrible death at the age of 29, his plays continue to enthral audiences to this day.

Marlowe's writings capture the spirit of the Elizabethan era, which was distinguished by a vibrant cultural and intellectual milieu. His plays, including "Tamburlaine the Great," "Doctor Faustus," and "The Jew of Malta," have a particular style that is consistent with the theatrical traditions of the time. Marlowe's poetry embraced the grandeur and spectacle appreciated in Elizabethan theatre. His plays captivated spectators with their larger-than-life tales, ambitious heroes, epic themes, and heightened vocabulary.

One of Marlowe's most famous achievements was his pioneering use of blank verse, which had a significant impact on the evolution of English play. Prior to Marlowe, rhymed verse was the predominate poetry style in English plays. Marlowe, on the other hand, revolutionised the theatrical landscape with his investigation of blank verse, unrhymed iambic pentameter. His use of this adaptable and rhythmically strong style became a defining feature of Elizabethan theatre, laying the framework for future writers such as Shakespeare.

Furthermore, Marlowe's investigation of complicated and contentious issues distinguished him from his contemporaries. His plays challenged cultural norms and customs by delving into serious philosophical and moral concerns. Marlowe, for example, analyses the human yearning for knowledge and power in "Doctor Faustus," in which the title character sells his soul to the devil in exchange for superhuman skills. This investigation of ambition, the quest of knowledge, and the repercussions of one's actions struck a chord with audiences at the time and continues to do so now.

The representation of imperfect and ethically ambiguous characters by Marlowe also added to the richness and complexity of his plays. Unlike the idealised heroes and heroines usual in Elizabethan theatre, Marlowe's characters were nuanced. Tamburlaine, for example, is a vicious conqueror who seeks power at any costs. These complex figures not only represented the fundamental intricacies of human nature, but they also questioned dominant moral ideals.

Marlowe's own life and turbulent reputation added to his attraction as a playwright, in addition to his contributions to the theatre. The speculation surrounding his espionage activities and his untimely demise gave his character an aura of mystery. Despite his brief career, Marlowe

made a lasting influence on Elizabethan theatre, setting the path for future writers and influencing the works of his contemporaries, including William Shakespeare.

Finally, the importance of Christopher Marlowe as an Elizabethan playwright cannot be emphasised. He revolutionised the theatrical scene of his period with his pioneering use of blank verse, investigation of complicated subjects, and portrayal of morally conflicted people. His plays are still studied, produced, and loved, reflecting his enduring impact as an Elizabethan theatre master. Marlowe's contribution to the literary canon demonstrates his skill, innovation, and long-lasting influence on English literature.

## 2.6 Self- Study Questions

- 1) How does Marlowe use the comic characters-Robin, Rafe, the Horse-courser and the clown to elucidate Faustus's decline?
- 2) Discuss the role of Faustus's long soliloquies in scene 12 in moulding our understanding of his dramatic personae?
- 3) Pick out evidences from the text to show that Faustus is both guilty and good.
- 4) 'Faustus is predestined to damnation'. Comment on the statement using the concepts of free will and predestination.
- 5) Does Doctor Faustus fit into the Aristotelian concept of Classical tragedy? How?
- 6) 'Marriage is but a ceremonial toy'. Who made this comment in the play Doctor Faustus? Why?
- 7) Elucidate the various stages of Doctor Faustus's damnation in Marlowe's play, Doctor Faustus?
- 8) Doctor Faustus is a typical Renaissance Man. Substantiate with examples.
- 9) Is Doctor Faustus a morality play? If yes, what are the moral lessons Marlowe tries to convey in the play?
- 10) How is the relationship between heaven and hell and its complexities defined in Doctor Faustus?





**UNIT - III****Lesson 3.1 - The Importance of Being Earnest****Structure**

- 3.1: Objectives
- 3.2: Introduction
- 3.3: Oscar Wilde
- 3.4: The Importance of Being Earnest
- 3.5: The Importance of Being Earnest as a Satire
- 3.6: Major Themes
- 3.7: Let Us Sum Up
- 3.8: Review Questions
- 3.9: Self-Study Questions

**3.1 Objectives**

*Through this unit, the learners will be able to*

- Understand the sociocultural background of the play
- Familiarise with the dramatics of Oscar Wilde
- Analyse and evaluate the themes and undertones of the play
- Write critical essays on the play

**3.2 Introduction**

*The Importance of Being Earnest*, in full *The Importance of Being Earnest: A Trivial Comedy for Serious People* is a play in three acts written by Oscar Wilde. It was performed in 1895 and later was published in 1899. It is conceived and accepted as sharp satire of Victorian social hypocrisy. This amusing play is considered Oscar Wilde's greatest dramatic and literary attainment. Before we move on to the analysis of the play and the underlying themes in the play, let us first look at Oscar Wilde as a major literary figure and as a playwright. Therefore, in this unit you will begin with a brief bio sketch of Oscar Wilde, the nature of his literary and aesthetic imagination and the critical reception that he had during his period. Following this we will look at the play and as we did with *Doctor*

*Faustus*, we will attempt to summarise the play. Thereafter, in this unit we will discuss how *The Importance of Being Earnest* is a significant play in the British literary history.

### 3.3 Oscar Wilde

Oscar Wilde was born on October 16, 1854, in Dublin, Ireland. His full name is Oscar Fingal O'Flahertie Wills Wilde. Oscar Wilde's greatest literary achievement or his great reputation rests on his only novel, *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1891), and on his comic masterpieces *Lady Windermere's Fan* (1892) and *The Importance of Being Earnest* (1895). He was a proponent of the Art for art's sake movement which is called the Aesthetic movement.

Wilde's father, Sir William Wilde, was Ireland's chief ear and eye surgeon. He was a scholarly doctor who had interest in liberal arts too. Therefore, he published books on archaeology, and folklore. He also wrote a book about the satirist Jonathan Swift. Wilde's mother wrote under the name Speranza. She was a revolutionary poet and had commendable scholarship in Celtic myth and folklore. Wilde studied in Trinity College and Magdalene College with scholarships. He was deeply influenced by the teachings of John Ruskin and Walter Pater. Walter Pater's affinity with Aestheticism made Wilde to become a proponent of this movement. Britannica states:

In the early 1880s, when Aestheticism was the rage and despair of literary London, Wilde established himself in social and artistic circles by his wit and flamboyance. Soon the periodical *Punch* made him the satiric object of its antagonism to the Aesthetes for what was considered their unmasculine devotion to art. And in their comic opera *Patience*, Gilbert and Sullivan based the character Bunthorne, a "fleshly poet," partly on Wilde. Wishing to reinforce the association, Wilde published, at his own expense, *Poems* (1881), which echoed, too faithfully, his discipleship to the poets Algernon Swinburne, Dante Gabriel Rossetti, and John Keats. Eager for further acclaim, Wilde agreed to lecture in the United States and Canada in 1882, announcing on his arrival at customs in New York City that he had "nothing to declare but his genius." Despite widespread hostility in the press to his languid poses and aesthetic costume of velvet jacket, knee breeches, and black silk stockings, Wilde for 12 months exhorted the Americans

to love beauty and art; then he returned to Great Britain to lecture on his impressions of America.

Oscar Wilde's greatest literary achievements were his society comedies. Within the conventions of the French "well-made play, he used his paradoxical, epigrammatic wit to formulate a form of comedy which was new to the 19th-century English theatre. His first successful social comedy was *Lady Windermere's Fan*. This demonstrated that his wit could revitalize the crude artistry of French drama. In the same year, rehearsals of his ghastly play *Salomé*, written in French, which according to Wilde was crafted to make his audience tremor by its depiction of unnatural passion, were stopped by the censor as it had biblical characters. *Salomé* was published in 1893. Its English translation appeared in 1894 with Aubrey Beardsley's popular illustrations.

*A Woman of No Importance* (produced 1893) was an important society comedy. This convinced the critic William Archer that Wilde's plays "must be taken on the very highest plane of modern English drama." Wilde's last plays, *An Ideal Husband* and *The Importance of Being Earnest*, were produced early in 1895. According to Britannica, "in the latter, his greatest achievement, the conventional elements of farce are transformed into satiric epigrams—seemingly trivial but mercilessly exposing Victorian hypocrisies".

### 3.4 *The Importance of Being Earnest*

Let us now quickly sum up the play before we go into the detailed summary. Jack Worthing is a stylish and smart young man. He lives in the country with his ward, Cecily Cardew. He has invented his cousin named Ernest whose supposed exploits give Jack an excuse to travel to London periodically to rescue him. Jack is in love with Gwendolen Fairfax, the cousin of his friend Algernon Moncrieff. Gwendolen thinks that Jack's name is Ernest and she reciprocates his love. However, her mother, Lady Bracknell, does not approve of their marriage because Jack is an orphan. Jack was found in a handbag at Victoria Station. Jack eventually finds out that that Algernon has been impersonating Ernest in order to entice Cecily because she always has been fascinated and obsessed by the name Ernest. Finally, it is revealed that Jack is really Lady Bracknell's nephew. He is named as Ernest, and Algernon is actually his own brother. The play ends with a happy note where both couples happily united.

Now let us have a detailed summary of the play.

### Act I

The play opens in the fashionable London residence of Algernon Moncrieff. His friend Jack Worthing (who assumes the name Ernest) arrives. Jack reveals his interest in marrying Algernon's cousin Gwendolen Fairfax. While they talk, Jack states that he is the ward of a young woman named Cecily Cardew. He also confesses that he lives a double life and admits that his real name is Jack Worthing but his name is "Ernest in town and Jack in the country". When he is in the countryside, he pretends that he has a brother named Ernest who lives in London who is a troublemaker for whom Jack makes several, occasional visits to London. Algernon alias Algy asks him about the mysterious cigarette box that Jack has with him. Initially, Jack lies that the cigarette case is given by his Aunt Cecily. Algernon does not believe this and finally Jack confesses that when he was a baby, he was adopted by Mr. Thomas Cardew and who is a guardian to Cardew's granddaughter, Cecily. Cecily lives on Mr. Cardew's country estate with her governess, Miss Prism.

Algernon also explains that he pretends to have an imaginary friend named Bunbury in the countryside so that he could leave the city whenever he wanted taking the name of this imaginary friend in the countryside.

Meanwhile, Algy's aunt Lady Augusta Bracknell arrives with his cousin Gwendolen Fairfax. Algy wants to help Jack propose marriage to Gwendolen and to leave them both alone he takes his aunt with him to another room. Algy and his aunt begin to discuss the choice of music for the party. While they are engaged in this discussion, Jack confesses his love to Gwendolen and proposes marriage. Gwendolen says that she always had a crazy wish or urge to be in love with someone of the name Earnest. She also states that Jack is a name that has no music in it. However, Gwendolen accepts his proposal and Jack plans to organise a christening ceremony so that his name can be altered to Ernest to fulfil Gwendolen's wish. Lady Bracknell enters the room and finds Jack on his knees. She asks for an explanation and Jack briefs her about what has happened. Lady Bracknell does not approve his proposal and sends her daughter Gwendolen back to the carriage.

Lady Bracknell asks about Jack's family. To her shock, she realises that Jack as an infant was found abandoned in a handbag in a railway station and Mr. Thomas Cardew found him in Victoria Station after which he named

Jack “Worthing” for the destination of his train ticket! Lady Bracknell states clearly that Gwendolen cannot “marry into a cloakroom, and form an alliance with a parcel.” She asks Jack to find out his relatives. Jack begins to think about his ward Cecily who is interested in his imaginary brother Ernest. As Jack does not want Cecily to get into any troubles in pursuit of her romance towards the imaginary Ernest, Jack decides to “kill” this imaginary Ernest.

Gwendolen returns to Jack to say that her mother will never allow them to get married and to convince her Jack needs to find out his relatives. She says that they may never marry but she will love him forever. Upon her request, Jack gives her his country address so that she could write to him frequently. Algy writes this address down as he is curious about Jack’s ward Cecily.

*The Importance of Being Earnest* establishes a highly stylised society and its prejudices regarding manners and morals that are anticipated from a cultured gentleman and lady. Hypocrisy becomes the norm especially as evident in the character of Lady Bracknell. The Victorian notions of class consciousness and nuanced demeanour supposedly defining the class status of the Victorians are being satirised by Oscar Wilde. In the first act when Algy and Jack emerge as two heroes who live a double life based on their societal needs prove the double standard and hypocrisy that existed in the Victorian society especially among the upper and middle class Victorians.

The emphasis on the name Ernest is yet another point to prove the hypocritical vanity of the class at that period. More than the character of the suitor the lady prefers the name and the man is willing to change his name to win her love. The absurdity in such hollow deeds are made fun of subtly. Marriage is also seen as a social institution in which the legacy and lineage are seen as the most important attributes. Oscar Wilde in fact played with the ‘orphan plot’ that was familiar to the Victorian audience and turned it into a hilarious plot by scripting Jack’s ‘coming into being’ from an abandoned bag in a railway station. In a sense, except the fake life and pretensions that Jack carries with him, he is a gentleman who embodies the spirit of that age.

## Act II

Act II begins at Jack Worthing’s country estate where Miss Prism and Cecily Cardew are spotted in the garden. Miss Prism is teaching German



grammar to Cecily. Cecily expresses her wish to meet Jack's unruly brother, Ernest. Then Miss Prism repeats Jack's opinion that his brother is a weak character. The governess claims that she is well aware of what usually happens to people who have weak characters. Miss Prism also says that in her younger days, she wrote a three-volume novel. She states that the fiction shows how good people live happily and how unhappiness embrace the bad people.

Canon Chasuble, the local reverend, steps into the garden and he begins to flirt with Miss Prism. As they talk to each other, they decided to go for a walk around the garden and they leave Cecily alone. Then the butler, Merriman, announces Mr. Ernest Worthing has just arrived with his luggage. He reports that Ernest is waiting anxiously to talk to Miss Cardew. Algernon pretending to be Jack's brother, Ernest, steps in to the scene. During their conversation Cecily declares that Jack will come back on Monday afternoon, Algernon alias Ernest tells her that he will be leaving on Monday morning. He said that the 'brothers' will not meet. Algernon praises Cecily for her beauty, and they go inside. Then Miss Prism and Dr. Chasuble return from their stroll in the garden.

Jack as he planned to 'kill' his brother Ernest as he thinks Cecily developing sentiments towards a non-existing Ernest, decides to visit Cecily. He enters in mourning clothes to mark the death of his brother in Paris due to cold. Jack meets Dr. Chasuble and requests him to christen Jack again with the new name that afternoon around 5. Cecily then enters and states that Jack's brother Ernest is in the dining hall. Jack is puzzled as this Ernest was totally his creation. Then Algernon alias Ernest enters. Jack is utterly shocked. Algy and Jack talk and Algernon pretending as Ernest pledges that he will lead a better life hereafter.

Jack is shocked by Algernon's trick and he is angry. He orders the dogcart so that Algernon can leave in. When Jack goes inside the house, Algernon proclaims that he is in love with Cecily. He further reiterates his perpetual affection. Meanwhile, Cecily copies Algernon's words in her diary. He requests Cecily to marry him, and Cecily readily agrees. Actually, she is happy about it because she has made up an entire romantic story of their courtship and engagement. Cecily, following Prism's narrative of writing fiction when she was much younger than Cecily, has even written imaginary letters to herself from Ernest/Algernon. Cecily informs Algernon that it was always her dream to marry someone named Ernest because the

name inspires great confidence. Now both Jack and Algernon have the same storyline- and like Jack, Algernon also wants to be christened again as Ernest.

Algernon quickly goes out to plan for his christening ceremony. Cecily while writing Ernest's proposal in her personal diary, is interrupted by Merriman who announced that the Honourable Gwendolen Fairfax has arrived to meet Jack. But, Jack is at the rectory. Cecily invites Gwendolen in and they introduce themselves. Gwendolen did not know that Jack had a ward. She is jealous and wishes Cecily were older and less pretty. Both declare that they are engaged to Ernest Worthing. Confusion arises and they check their diaries. When they compare the diary entries, they decide that Gwendolen was proposed first. But Cecily says that since his proposal to Gwendolen, he has obviously changed his mind and proposed to Cecily. Merriman and a footman enter with tea and the ladies stop their arguments. They become well-behaved and begin to discuss geography and flowers in a civilized manner in the presence of the servants. However, during the tea party, Cecily purposefully gives Gwendolen sugar in her tea. Gwendolen wanted bread and butter but Cecily serves her with tea-cake. Both ladies do not like each other anymore and there is a tense situation.

When Jack arrives, Gwendolen greets by calling him Ernest. He kisses Gwendolen but she demands an explanation about the entire drama. Cecily states that it is not Ernest but her guardian, Jack Worthing. Algernon steps in, and Cecily calls him Ernest. Gwendolen clarifies that he is her cousin, Algernon Moncrieff. The ladies understand that they were tricked. They then console each other. Jack shamefacedly admits that he has no brother named Ernest and has never had a brother of any kind. Both ladies become angry and annoyed and they proclaim that they are no longer engaged to anyone. Both the women go into the house leaving the scene at once.

Like in the first act, in the second act too the Victorian hypocrisy is very visible. Shallow relationship and trivial ideals and engagements are presented clearly. In fact, Wilde is contemptuous about the Victorian attitudes toward marriage. He questions why bloodlines and wealth are placed before love and such emotions when it comes to a wedlock. He presents the hypocritical society which views marriage more as a duty than as a social institution of companionship based on love and affection. The materialistic social outlook is what Wilde satirises in this act. Lady Bracknell is an excellent example of the fake Victorian ideals. Her faith in

the importance of legacy can be compared to the notion of 'honour' that we have in India when it comes to marriage and relationships. In this act we can see that the upper class always wanted to wield power and they enjoy keeping that social power and even political power in their hands. They were scared of being challenged by questions. Education, as is evident from the dialogues of Miss Prism, is seen as an important tool in creating this power structure.

### Act III

Gwendolen and Cecily are seen in the Manor House. They look outside the window at Jack and Algernon hoping that they will come in and apologise. The ladies plan to be cold and heartless if the men come in and try talking to them. Both the men actually step in and begin to explain why they lied about their names. Contrary to their initial plans, the women accept their explanations. Still they find it difficult to accept that their potential husbands do not have the name Ernest. The men declare that they plan to be rechristened. Hearing this the ladies accept the men and both Gwendolen and Cecily forgive their suitors. The couples embrace seeing which Lady Bracknell enters the scene.

Merriman alerts the couple with a discrete cough about the entrance of Lady Bracknell but she sees the embracing couples. She demands an explanation for what she has just seen. Gwendolen declares that she is engaged to Jack. Lady Bracknell does not approve of it and she demands that they stop all communication and they are not engaged. Lady Bracknell asks about Algernon's friend Bunbury (who is an imaginary character like Ernest for Jack) and Algernon states that he killed Bunbury that afternoon. He also states that he and Cecily are engaged. Then, Lady Bracknell questions Jack about Cecily's expectations. However, because she has a fortune of 130,000 pounds, Lady Bracknell believes her to have "distinct social possibilities."

Lady Bracknell provides her consent to Algernon's engagement with Cecily. Jack at once disagrees with the proposal because he is Cecily's guardian. He argues that Algernon is a liar and goes on to list all lies he has told so far. Jack also states that Cecily does not get her fortune and lose Jack as a guardian till she turns 35 years old. Algernon is ready to wait, but Cecily says she cannot wait to get married. Jack is now ready with a pact. He tricks Lady Bracknell by stating that he will give his consent for Cecily's wedlock with Algernon only if Lady Bracknell agrees to get Gwendolen

married to Jack. Lady Bracknell hates this idea and she gets ready to leave with Gwendolen.

Dr. Chasuble makes his entry into the scene to brief Algernon and Jack about their christening ceremony. Jack informs him that there is no point in having the christening done. Chasuble states that he, in that case, is returning to the church to meet Miss Prism who is waiting for him. The turn of the events begins here as Lady Bracknell hears the name Miss Prism. Lady Bracknell is shocked. She demands then that she wants to meet Miss Prism, the governess of Jack and Cecily.

Miss Prism arrives, and as she sees Lady Bracknell, she becomes upset. Lady Bracknell then reveals that Miss Prism was the governess at Lord Bracknell's mansion 28 years ago. One day she went for a casual stroll with the baby carriage, and never came back. The baby also went missing along with her. Lady Bracknell then demands an explanation for the entire episode and asks where the baby is. Prism then narrates the events that led to her disappearance. She states that she was greatly distracted during the walk and by sheer mistake she placed the baby in her handbag. She took her three-volume fiction manuscript and placed it in the baby carriage. The handbag in which the baby was placed was accidentally left in the train station. When she found that she had made this error, she got worried and sad. Therefore, Miss Prism abandoned the baby carriage and ran away. Jack is excited now and asks her which station exactly she left the baby in the bag. Miss Prism states that is at Victoria Station, the Brighton Line, that she abandoned the bag with the baby. Hearing this, Jack goes to his room and runs back with a black leather bag. Prism identifies it as the bag in which she placed the baby and abandoned both in the Victoria station. Jack is overjoyed and he tries to embrace Miss Prism thinking that he is her son. The suspense is not over yet.

Miss Prism hesitates and states that she is unmarried. She wants Jack to ask Lady Bracknell if he wants his mother's identity to be revealed. The rest of the story unfurls then when Lady Bracknell reveals that Jack is actually the son of her sister Mrs. Moncrieff. Now everyone realises that Algernon is Jack's older brother. Jack is rejoiced to learn that he actually has a wicked brother as he imagined. He asks Lady Bracknell what his christened name was. She tells him that it is Ernest John. Jack is in unmeasurable happiness now as his imagination and all the lies he told about his alter identity become truth now and he is actually both Jack and Ernest. His name has

been Ernest always and he has been telling the truth always. Similarly, he has a brother too. So no lies have been told by Jack, he claims. Both couples embrace. Chasuble and Miss Prism hug each other too. Jack proclaims that he finally realizes the importance of being earnest. The play thus ends on a happy note.

Act III presents happy resolution to the problems of identity and marriage that generate humour in the previous acts. Wilde resumes to mock the social customs and attitudes of the aristocratic class and their hypocrisy. He satirises their values, views on marriage and respectability, sexual attitudes, and concern for establishing stability in their preferred social hierarchy. The class distinctions and snobbish attitude of the upper class are critiqued by Wilde in this play. The gap between appearance and actuality is underscored through the dialogues of the characters. Fascination for a name and the unnecessary lies that the characters tell each other are part of the snobbish aristocratic hypocritical behavioural codes.

### **3.5 The Importance of Being Earnest as a Satire**

*The Importance of Being Earnest* is a popular romantic satire play written by the Irish playwright and novelist, Oscar Wilde. The play's subtitle, *A Trivial Comedy for Serious People*, captures the mood of the play perfectly as it goes on to criticise and satirise the uptight behaviour and morals of upper-class Victorian society.

In this play, Jack and Algernon are two friends who take up false names and disguises to win the hearts of their sweethearts, but also to escape societal conventions. Jack makes up an imaginary brother, whose name ironically, is Ernest. Under this name, he leads a double life in London, and Algernon knows him only as Ernest not as Jack. When Jack comes clean to his friend and expresses his desire to marry the latter's cousin, Amid this chaos, Jack talks about his ward Cecily to Algernon and the latter gets infatuated with the idea of her. What ensues is a farcical satire that ridicules how Victorian society pays more attention to appearances than true motives or the true self.

A satire usually consists of some of the following characteristics: "irony, sarcasm, wit, hyperbole, political undertones, and a constant humorous tone". Wilde's play has many of these traits. Irony is brought out by Wilde

through the main characters who have double standards regarding what is moral and immoral behaviour.

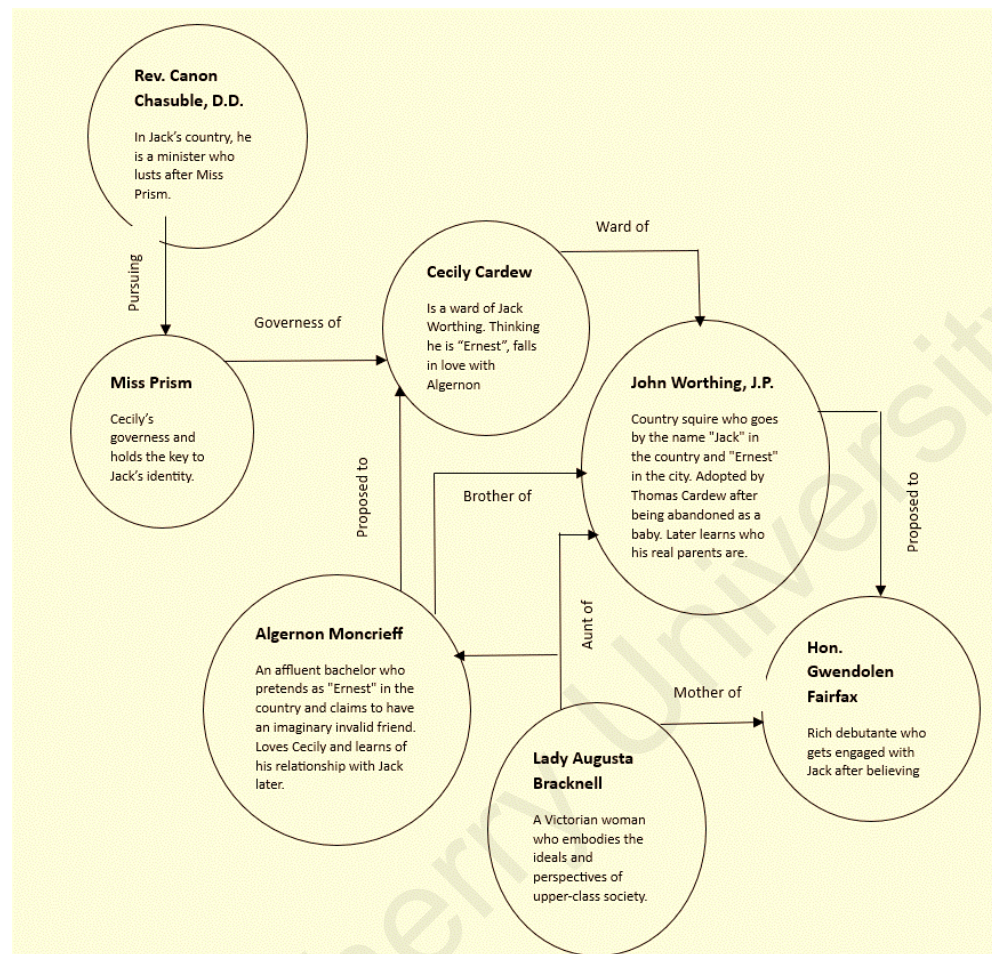
Social commentary is also an indisputable characteristic of any satire, and Wilde employs that very cleverly in this play. The play shows how aristocratic Victorians are more interested in "appearing" earnest and respectable than truly being so. Wilde also mocks society's insistence on following moral codes - he portrays throughout the play how these codes are broken but are mended by false appearances. Overall, *The Importance of Being Earnest* is a true social satire that throws light upon how the mannerisms and politeness of Victorian society were nothing but bogus.

Anyone who is inclined towards semiotics may be able to notice that this cross-section of the hypocritic Victorian society generally tends to focus more on the signifier than the signified. Both the young women are obsessed with the name 'Ernest' and they do not care if the 'signified' or the character of these men is that of a conman. They tend to believe that the name signifies the character. Thus a person named Ernest always will be earnest!

The comic sequences in the play usually comes from the ways in which many of the characters flaunt the moral structures that the Victorian society preferred to keep intact. Thus we see Algernon 'Bunburying' and Jack inventing an imaginary brother so that he could escape to the cityscape whenever he wanted. Similarly the loose morality of the clergy also is revealed through the character of Chasuble. Miss Prism pretends to have a headache as it presents her with the opportunity to walk around the garden and have some private moments with Mr. Chasuble. The more people crave for freedom from the Victorian social codes, they have to depend on the deviant means of lying and pretensions. Fake identity, lies, discreet immoral indulgences and forged forgetfulness and lack of responsibility in one's duty are all traits that the characters show.

### **A Map of the major characters**





### 3.6 Major themes

There are several themes that emerge when we close-read the play. Let us look at some of the dominant themes.

#### Duty and Respectability

For the aristocratic Victorians, duty and respectability were of prime importance. Their code of conduct had earnestness as an important attribute. Appearance and style were considered important. More than what they signified, the signifiers were important for them. Shallow substance was tolerated and sometimes appreciated if they were clothed in aristocratic fashion.

As long as the appearance of propriety was well maintained, adultery or such sinister secrecies were never a concern for them. Being trendy, fashionable and admiringly sophisticated in the appearance were coveted societal norms. Wilde problematises and satirises this tendency to be shallow in thoughts and actions by spending quality time invested in

trifles. Gwendolen is an apt example of this vanity. Her brother is also a good example of the Victorian vanity which places paramount preference on appearance rather than actuality.

The tea party presented in Act II is a comical example of Wilde's argument that manners and appearance are everything for the Victorian aristocrats. Both Cecily and Gwendolen, nearly fight a very civilised battle as they thought that they were engaged to the same person. They shamelessly engage in disputes in the presence of the guests and servants. When Gwendolen requests no sugar, Cecily adds four servings to her cup. Although she asks for bread and butter, she is given a large slice of cake. Her true feelings come out only in an aside which Cecily supposedly is not able to hear: "Detestable girl!" Gwendolen is also appalled to find that Cecily is living in Jack's home in the countryside. She wishes if Cecily was not as beautiful as she was. Jealousies and intrigues are plenty in the narrative. Gwendolen is incapable of viewing Jack as a protector or guardian of Cecily. Thoughts that cross her minds are polished by her jealous and crude perspectives. Jack's duty as a guardian is not valued here though the Victorians place duty as the highest social ideal and trait. Wilde gives ample examples for the aristocrat's fake concern for propriety. When the characters represent the aristocratic concerns, their behaviour is contrasting the ideals. Their social code of conduct is just a pretension and their actual respectability cannot be determined by their behaviour in public.

### **The Lack of Compassion**

Illness and death were not approached with kindness or compassion. When Lady Bracknell hears that Bunbury died after his doctors told him he could not live, she thinks that "he has — in dying — acted appropriately because he had the correct medical advice". "Illness of any kind is hardly a thing to be encouraged in others. Health is the primary duty of life." Lady Bracknell, like several other aristocrats, worries only about her own life. She thinks about the advantages of her daughter's marriage. She is not compassionate to Jack when initially he thinks that he is an abandoned child. In the dialogues that Lady Bracknell exchanges with Gwendolen and Jack, there is no sign of sympathy at all for an orphan. Rather, she is upset about her daughter being involved in a relationship which is not suitable for their social status.

Gwendolen is also like her mother and she emerges as a completely self-absorbed youngster who is stubborn about her needs and wants without trying to understand how it feels for others. She tells Cecily, “I never travel without my diary. One should have something sensational to read in the train.” For her, everything that is important is all about herself. The “I, Me, Myself” perspective is evident in every single behaviour of her. Oscar Wilde attacks this narrow-mindedness of the society through this play.

### 3.7 Let Us Sum Up

Oscar Wilde discusses the vanity, pride and snobbish attitudes of the Victorian aristocrats in the play *The Importance of Being Earnest*. He does not spare the important social institution called religion from his scathing attack. The Victorian morality is questioned again and again in the plot of this play. Canon Chasuble is the symbol of religious thought in this play. Or in other words he is a character symbol for the hollowness of morality of the era. Oscar Wilde uses this character to portray “how little the Victorians concerned themselves with attitudes reflecting religious faith”. Chasuble is willing to rechristen people based on their personal choices which is not permitted in the strict religious codes. He is in a sense a fake vicar who does not value the morality and piousness of his profession.

Lady Bracknell also states that christenings are a waste of time and, especially that of money. Chasuble’s pious exterior look is a camouflage for him because there are several sequences which clearly illustrates his sexual desire for Miss Prism. Their indulgence is a sin according to the doctrines but he does not seem to be bothered about it. In fact none of the characters are worried about the moral decaying that Chasuble demonstrates. His passion towards Miss Prism is evident when he states: “Were I fortunate enough to be Miss Prism’s pupil, I would hang upon her lips.” Though suddenly he rephrases it as a metaphor it is in a sense a Freudian slip which presented what is there in his mind to the audience.

### 3.8 Review Questions

1. Comment on how passion and morality are finding their expression in *The Importance of Being Earnest*

Oscar Wilde carefully weaves in his sharp criticism of Victorian morality and contrasts it with passion and worldly indulgences through the characters. The characters are never innocent or naïve. They are indulged

in worldly pleasures and materialistic gains by being self-centred. So we can see Cecily being interested in the wicked brother Jack has. It is not prudery or good manners that attract Cecily. It is the wickedness and the attributed rogue nature of Ernest that makes her attracted towards him. She says to Algernon, "I hope you have not been leading a double life, pretending to be wicked and being really good all the time." The tendency to violate the strict moral codes and rules of a society is very evident here.

Algernon pretending to be Ernest and Jack lying about his imaginary brother are all against the social codes of morality. Leading a double life and exchanging identity as and when they please are the traits of both Jack and Algernon. The secret lives are also not being questioned seriously. Two youngsters who lie and pretend that they are someone that they are not, are accepted by the women. This shows that more than character and morality or credibility the women value what fascinate them. For them the signifier is more important than the signified. Dependability and credibility that should be the traits of any partners cannot be expected from both Algernon and Jack because they have lied several times. Though metaphorically, they murdered the characters they invented, when the situations demanded it.

"Various characters in the play allude to passion, sex and moral looseness. Chasuble and Prism's flirting and coded conversations about things sexual, Algernon stuffing his face to satisfy his hungers, the diaries (which are the acceptable venues for passion), and Miss Prism's three-volume novel are all examples of an inner life covered up by suffocating rules". Chasuble is supposed to be pious clergy but his suggestive language and the way he approaches Miss Prism illustrates the loose morality within the religious institution itself. He is driven by passion towards the woman not thinking about the passion of the Christ. Worldly involvement which is seen as a corruption according to Christian ideals is palpable in all activities of Chasuble. He is passionate and he could not wait to hug Miss Prism when he saw Algernon and Jack embracing their respective brides.

Oscar Wilde critiques the Victorian moral codes and the correctness that they advocate. The underlying vanity, triviality and fake earnestness are clearly illustrated through the actions and dialogues of the major characters. The breach in appearance and actuality is clearly drawn in the play by Wilde. Pretension is the major trait of the snobbish and hypocritical aristocratic stratum of the society as evident in the play. Morality, duty,

respect and earnestness in life are all traits that the characters pretend to have but actuality is otherwise. Not even a single character is there in this play who demonstrates the virtues coded and prescribed by Victorian social codes of conduct.

2. Write a short note on the notion of courtship and marriage as can be seen in the play *The Importance of Being Earnest*

Marriage, as presented in the play was a social institution that involved scrutiny and a careful selection process. Love, affection, companionship or mutual understanding are not the basis for deciding the marriages in the given context. The careful selection process involved the meticulous assessment of the lineage as well as the inherited wealth. Education and profession are also criteria for finding suitable matches as we can see in the play. However, like Lady Bracknell who represents that aristocratic stratum of the society, the assessment of a suitor is based on the wealth and the family heritage the youngster has got. Like in the Indian context, where marriages are arranged by the elders in the family based on several criteria, here in this play we see Lady Bracknell being very careful about fixing her daughter's wedding.

When Algernon discloses his plans to get engaged to Jack's ward, Cecily, Lady Bracknell states, "I think some preliminary enquiry on my part would not be out of place." Lady Bracknell asks several questions to Jack about parents, politics, fortune, addresses, expectations, family solicitors, and legal encumbrances. His suitability is determined by the answers that Jack provides. In fact, the negotiations are more or less like a commercial negotiation. Wealth is particularly important, and when Jack and Cecily's fortunes are both appropriate, the next issue is that of his family background. As Jack does not know his parents, Lady Bracknell suggests that he finds at least one of his parents — any with the right lineage— and she states that it has to be done as early as possible.

Appearance and social status are of paramount importance. Marriage is more or less perceived as a duty. Love is not a component of it at all. Algernon states that "A man who marries without knowing Bunbury [an excuse for pleasure] has a very tedious time of it." Wilde discusses marriage as a legal contract between two families rather than an affectionate and loving relationship between two individuals. Happiness, love, affection and loyalty are not given importance but the family heritage and wealth are seen as important determinants.



### 3. Discuss 'class conflict' as evident in the play *The Importance of Being Earnest*

The rigid Victorian class system demanded the marriages being arranged between the members of the same class. This tendency ensured that there is a gulf between the upper, middle and lower classes. Snobbish and aristocratic attitudes that the upper-class nurtures maintain the class segregation intact.

In his conversation with Lady Bracknell, Jack says that he has no politics and he asserts that he considers himself as a Liberal Unionist. Lady Bracknell is happy with this response because from his words she assumes that he is a Tory or a conservative. He not being a member of Labour party has implications in her perspectives. It is not about the ideology that the lady is worried about but it is his economic background that she associates with a political ideology. If he is an aristocrat, he should be a Tory.

Jack's house in London is on the "unfashionable side" of Belgrave Square, so "that could easily be altered." When Jack inquires whether she means the "unfashionable" or the side of the street that has to be altered Lady Bracknell explains, "Both, if necessary." Social status and being positioned at the higher side of the social ladder is important for the lady.

Lady Bracknell's opinion about education is intriguing. She explains that : "The whole theory of modern education is radically unsound. Fortunately in England, at any rate, education produces no effect whatsoever. If it did, it would prove a serious danger to the upper classes, and probably lead to acts of violence in Grosvenor Square." She believes that education promotes thinking and thinking will result in discontent. Such social discontent will end up in having social resolutions. Aristocratic society does not approve of social revolutions.

The privileged segment of the society always perceives the society with their biased attitudes. They believe that their rules, norms and standards are the right ones and the others must follow that as the universal norm. Aristocratic attitudes are to be replicated by other classes is the disposition of the upper-class. Miss Prism blames the lower class for begetting many children for Chasuble to christen. She says that they are not thrifty. "I have often spoken to the poorer classes on the subject [of christenings]. But they don't seem to know what thrift is." Aristocratic segment of the society propagates their ideas, values and rules. They view everyone from their hegemonic perspective and judge the other classes. They prefer to keep the



social order as they prefer and do not want to alter it so that class mobility is never achieved. All characters in this play demonstrate these aristocratic ideals.

Oscar Wilde through his scathing attack of this aristocratic society underscores that education cultivates critical thinking ability in human minds which enables humans to question the problematic social orders. Such acts of questioning lead to a progressive society through social revolutions in various forms. Reformation of a social order is required for an equity- oriented society. But even in our familiar context, we can see that the bridge between the haves and the havenots is never established. The aristocrats' strategy is to keep the gap as it is so that the poor will remain poor forever. Therefore, the snobbish and hegemonic mentality of aristocrats always manipulate the social order in their favour and this results in an unjust social system.

### 3.9 Self-study Questions

1. Compose an essay detailing the irony in the title of the play, '*The Importance of Being Earnest*'.
2. 'Life is a comedy to those who think and a tragedy to those who feel'. Explain the given statement with reference to the characters in Wilde's play, *The Importance of Being Earnest*.
3. 'A little nonsense now and then she is relished by the wisest men'. Who made this comment in the play, *The Importance of Being Earnest*? Explain the context.
4. Compare and contrast the two social classes in *The Importance of Being Earnest*.
5. What does Algernon mean when he says, "the only good thing about modern life is that there's no harm in being earnest"? How far the statement reflects his character in the play.
6. Analyse some aspects of Wildean wit in the play, *The Importance of Being Earnest*.
7. The play, *The Importance of Being Earnest* was originally subtitled as 'A Serious Comedy for Trivial People' but later changed into 'A Trivial Comedy for Serious People'. Elucidate on the differences.
8. How does Oscar Wilde explore love through the characters of Gwendolen and Cecily in *The Importance of Being Earnest*?

**UNIT - IV****Lesson 4.1 - Murder in the Cathedral****Structure**

- 4.1: Objectives
- 4.2: Introduction
- 4.3: The Martyrdom of Thomas Beckett
- 4.4: The Rise of Fascism
- 4.5: Eliot's View on Drama
- 4.6: The background of the play
- 4.7: Murder in the Cathedral: A Quick Summary
- 4.8: Detailed Summary
- 4.9: Major Themes
- 4.10: Symbolism
- 4.11: Let Us Sum Up
- 4.12: Review Questions
- 4.13: Self-Study Questions

**4.1 Objectives:**

*Through this unit, the learners will be able to*

- Understand the sociocultural background of the play
- Familiarise with the dramatics of T.S. Eliot
- Analyse and evaluate the themes and undertones of the play
- Write critical essays on the play

**4.2 Introduction**

Thomas Stearns Eliot, popularly known as T.S. Eliot was born on September 26 in 1888 in St. Louis, Missouri, in America. He is an American-English poet, playwright, literary critic, and editor, and a great proponent of the Modernist movement in poetry. His works such as *The Waste Land* (1922) and *Four Quartets* (1943). Eliot influence on

Anglo-American culture from the 1920s is very evident and he is the modernist who defines the tenets of modernism in the literary history. He experimented with diction, style, and versification and these nuanced experiments in fact revitalized English poetry. Through a series of critical essays, he dismantled the orthodox literary conventions and constructed new ones. The publication of *Four Quartets* made him recognised as the greatest living English poet and man of letters. In 1948 he was awarded the Order of Merit and in the same year he won the Nobel Prize for Literature.

Eliot's career as a playwright began with *Sweeney Agonistes*, published in 1926 and first performed in 1934. His last play was *The Elder Statesman* which was first performed in 1958 and published in 1959. But his plays are considered inferior to his poetry except with the exception of *Murder in the Cathedral*, published and performed in 1935. Eliot is known for his lyric and meditative poetry.

According to *Britannica*:

Eliot's belief that even secular drama attracts people who unconsciously seek a religion led him to put drama above all other forms of poetry. All his plays are in a blank verse of his own invention, in which the metrical effect is not apprehended apart from the sense; thus he brought "poetic drama" back to the popular stage.

*The Family Reunion* (1939) and *Murder in the Cathedral* are Christian tragedies. *The Family Reunion* is a tragedy of revenge, and *Murder in the Cathedral* is about the sin of pride. *Murder in the Cathedral* is celebrated as a modern miracle play on the martyrdom of Thomas Becket. This is Eliot's most successful play. The most striking feature of this play is the use of a chorus in the traditional Greek pattern "to make apprehensible to common humanity the meaning of the heroic action". *The Family Reunion* (1939) was not very popular. This play contains scenes of great poignancy and some of the finest dramatic verse. However, the public found this translation of the story of Orestes into a modern domestic drama puzzling and troubling. They do not find it relevant and effective to mix psychological realism with "mythical apparitions at a drawing-room window, and a comic chorus of uncles and aunts".

After World War II, Eliot resumed writing plays and he wrote *The Cocktail Party* in 1949. The other plays he wrote during the post-war

period were *The Confidential Clerk* (1953), and *The Elder Statesman* (1958). According to Britannica

These were comedies and the plots were adapted from Greek drama. In them Eliot accepted current theatrical conventions at their most conventional, subduing his style to a conversational level and eschewing the lyrical passages that gave beauty to his earlier plays. Only *The Cocktail Party*, which is based upon the *Alcestis* of Euripides, achieved a popular success.

Despite their obvious theatrical flaws and the failure to engage the sympathies of the audience for the characters, these plays were successful in handling some complex moral and religious issues. At the same time, they entertained the spectators with farcical plots and nuanced social satire.

T.S. Eliot (1888–1965) stood as a prominent figure among modernist authors, and *Murder in the Cathedral* exemplifies modernist drama. Modernism, as an artistic movement, signalled a departure from the idealistic and contrived constructs prevalent in the Romantic era, opting instead for a more critical and realistic examination of the human psyche within the evolving backdrop of an increasingly urbanized and industrialized society. Within the realm of English literature and drama, a growing fascination with psychological realism emerged, delving into the intricate, at times neurotic and contradictory, emotions of characters who were flawed and susceptible. This shift was further fuelled by the influx of academic insights from disciplines such as anthropology, political science, psychology, and psychoanalysis, thereby establishing psychological portrayal as a pivotal feature in modernist creations. For instance, Eliot's inaugural major poem, "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" (1915), skillfully sketches the profile of an anxious and overwhelmed man, caught in a cycle of self-repetition while endeavouring to discover his inner equilibrium.

Modernist poets and playwrights rejected the established, formulaic conventions of preceding generations and aimed to capture both the natural cadences of everyday speech and, as articulated by American Modernist poet Ezra Pound (1885–1972), a rhythmic quality that precisely mirrors the intended emotion or nuance of emotion. As part of this quest for inner realism, characters in modernist dramas often grappled with the swiftly evolving world, the political currents of their era, and the estrangement

from long-standing traditions and communities that had once provided significance to prior generations. This preoccupation with an individual's connection to society transcended the thematic content of these plays, and modernist theatre frequently assumed an explicit and provocative political stance. Figures such as the German dramatist Bertolt Brecht (1898–1956) notably harnessed the power of theatre as a vehicle for disseminating leftist ideologies.

The profound and distressing impact of World War I (1914–18) prompted profound introspection among numerous modernist writers, evoking sentiments of despair and futility regarding the world they inhabited. Furthermore, while not overtly political, *Murder in the Cathedral* offers commentary on the ascent and perils of fascism, characterized by centralized dictatorial governance marked by strict regimentation and the suppression of opposition.

A significant influence on modernist literature, particularly in its early stages, was the concept of imagism, which revolved around the idea that a precise and vivid image could encapsulate an entire poetic expression. This wasn't about conveying a narrative or a specific allegory, but rather about eliciting a precise emotional response by projecting clear, concrete imagery. T.S. Eliot frequently expounded on the notion of the "objective correlative," emphasizing the directed emotional impact of tangible imagery. In his essay "Hamlet and His Problems" (1920), Eliot defines the objective correlative as "a set of objects, a situation, a chain of events which shall be the formula of that particular emotion." In essence, a specific arrangement of external elements can immediately evoke a particular emotion.

In the realm of drama, modernism was closely intertwined with the avant-garde, where theatre companies ventured into experimental territory with minimalist and symbolic stage designs, often incorporating the audience as an integral part of the performance. Nobel laureate and Belgian author Maurice Maeterlinck (1862–1949) serves as a notable example of a commitment to psychological realism juxtaposed with and elevated by increasingly abstract and symbolic staging.

Evidence of the objective correlative concept in *Murder in the Cathedral* can be observed, for instance, in the distinct and unembellished descriptions of geographical and climatic elements employed by the chorus, which contribute to the play's emotional resonance.

Technological advancements played a pivotal role in shaping the evolution of theatrical staging. In conjunction with movements such as imagism and symbolism, there emerged a concurrent trend toward naturalism, marked by a deliberate departure from the illusions that had prominently featured in the productions of preceding generations. Theatrical naturalists ushered in a new era by introducing three-dimensional sets that facilitated actor interaction, replacing the traditional painted backdrops. They also pioneered innovative electric lighting techniques aimed at minimizing the appearance of artificial shadows. Their overarching objective was to heighten the illusion for the audience, making them feel as if they were merely peering through an invisible “fourth wall” into a space that could easily be mistaken for reality.

### **4.3 The Martyrdom of Thomas Beckett**

Thomas Becket's origins trace back to approximately 1118 when he was born into a merchant family in Cheapside, London. His early career encompassed roles as a clerk and accountant. However, it was his entry into the employ of Archbishop Theobald (1090–1161) that would prove to be a turning point. Impressed by Becket's exceptional performance, Archbishop Theobald dispatched him to pursue studies in canon and civil law, a venture that took him to Italy and France.

In recognition of Becket's unwavering dedication, Archbishop Theobald rewarded him in 1154 by appointing him as the archdeacon of Canterbury. Additionally, the archbishop recommended to King Henry II (1133–1189) that Becket be elevated to the esteemed position of chancellor, thus cementing his trajectory into significant political and ecclesiastical roles.

In his capacity as chancellor, Thomas Becket exhibited exceptional managerial prowess, particularly in matters pertaining to the military and finances. He played a significant role in the renovation of the Tower of London and enjoyed a close and trusted friendship with King Henry II. During this period, Becket earned recognition for his unwavering loyalty and obedience to the king. However, his lifestyle was characterized by extravagant luxury, drawing criticism from contemporary sources.

Interestingly, despite his secular role as chancellor, Becket continued to hold his position as archdeacon, even though he had largely neglected his ecclesiastical duties. It's worth noting that during this phase, when King



Henry II sought to exert greater control over the appointment of clerical offices, Becket, in his role as chancellor, supported the king's efforts.

However, a significant turning point occurred in 1161 when King Henry II recommended Thomas Becket for the position of archbishop of Canterbury. Following his election to this prestigious ecclesiastical office, Becket underwent a profound transformation in his political stance. He renounced his role as chancellor, embraced a more ascetic and austere way of life, and aligned himself with the interests of the Church in Rome, often at odds with the king's authority.

Becket's newfound convictions led him to oppose the king's taxation proposals, excommunicate a nobleman, and champion the rights of clergy to be tried for their transgressions exclusively in ecclesiastical (Church) courts. The watershed moment came in 1164 when King Henry II issued the Constitution of Clarendon, a document asserting his right to appoint officials, impose taxes, determine clerical appointments, and collect revenues from vacant ecclesiastical positions. Initially, Becket acquiesced to these demands, but he subsequently reversed his position, setting the stage for a profound and contentious conflict between church and state.

With legitimate concerns about being imprisoned by King Henry II, Thomas Becket chose to flee to France, an act that prompted the king to confiscate the assets of Becket's family and supporters. During the years between 1164 and 1170, Becket resided in Europe, facing hostility from English bishops and the monarch himself. Pope Alexander III (circa 1105–1181) endeavoured to mediate a peace settlement between the conflicting parties, even organizing a summit in Montmirail, France, with the aim of reconciliation, which ultimately proved unsuccessful.

The culmination of the dispute occurred in 1170 when King Henry II escalated his claims of authority over clerical appointments and departed from the established papal tradition of having the archbishop of Canterbury preside over coronations. Instead, he had his son crowned as co-king by the bishop of York. In response, both Becket and the pope took immediate action by excommunicating all individuals within the Church who were involved in these events.

Amid apprehension of further actions from the Vatican, King Henry II relented, restoring Thomas Becket's confiscated possessions and permitting his return to England, where he was greeted with enthusiastic crowds. However, Becket steadfastly refused to rescind the excommunications

he had imposed on the English bishops. Instead, he continued to excommunicate other supporters and allies of the crown.

In response to Becket's uncompromising stance, King Henry expressed his frustration, and one of his most famous remarks in this context is often paraphrased as, "Will no one rid me of this turbulent priest?" Although it wasn't a direct order, it was taken seriously by four of the king's knights. They rode to Canterbury and confronted Becket on December 29, 1170, ultimately assassinating him inside the cathedral.

Canterbury Cathedral swiftly became a revered pilgrimage site following the assassination of Thomas Becket, and in 1173, he was officially canonized as Saint Thomas Becket. For nearly four centuries, Becket's shrine stood as one of the foremost destinations for pilgrims across Europe. However, this veneration came to an abrupt end during the reign of Henry VIII (1491–1547) when he severed ties with the Catholic Church in 1532.

As part of his dissolution of monasteries and his break from the Catholic Church, Henry VIII ordered the dismantling of Thomas Becket's shrine in Canterbury. His remains were burned, scattered, and his name was expunged from the prayer books. The king declared Becket an enemy of England. Nevertheless, in contemporary times, Thomas Becket is venerated as a saint by both the Catholic Church and the Anglican Communion, illustrating his enduring significance in religious history.

#### **4.4 The Rise of Fascism**

Between 1914 and 1918, Europe was consumed by the devastating impact of World War I, resulting in an estimated 37.5 million military casualties and up to 13 million civilian deaths. The conflict also led to extensive destruction of European infrastructure. In the aftermath of the war, fascist ideologies began to gain momentum, particularly in nations that had been on the losing side of World War I. This trend was exacerbated in the 1930s by a global economic depression and a fear of the spread of communism, especially among elite groups who comprised a significant portion of early fascist supporters. These factors, coupled with the existing popularity of the eugenics movement (which advocated selective breeding practices) and a growing sentiment of backlash against liberal and secular reforms, fueled the rise of fascist movements.

Between 1922 and 1945, various fascist factions took control of governments in Germany, Italy, Austria, Greece, Croatia, and Japan. Additionally, though not in power, fascist parties wielded considerable influence in Spain, Poland, Finland, Hungary, Romania, Belgium, France, and England.

During the mid-1930s when *Murder in the Cathedral* was penned, Benito Mussolini had held power in Italy for over a decade, having helped organize paramilitary squads to violently suppress leftist movements. In Germany, Adolf Hitler was already the “führer,” having eliminated competing political factions and orchestrating the mass murder of many political opponents in the infamous “Night of the Long Knives.” Against the backdrop of Europe’s political climate, a play featuring an individual steadfastly upholding their convictions against the might of a government and the specter of death resonated profoundly. Throughout the play, there are echoes of the populist and nationalist sentiments that were commonly espoused by fascists. It’s worth noting that T.S. Eliot, the playwright, was critical of fascism, a stance that set him apart from other prominent modernist figures, such as Ezra Pound.

#### 4.5 Eliot’s View on Drama

During his lifetime, T.S. Eliot earned respect not only for his poetry but also for his critical writings, in which he delved deeply into the inner workings of art and drama. Of particular significance in understanding *Murder in the Cathedral* is his assertion that all art engages in a continuous dialogue with preceding works of art, and its comprehension relies on its relationship with the entire artistic tradition. As he articulated in his essay “Tradition and the Individual Talent” (1920), “No poet, no artist of any art, has his complete meaning alone. His significance, his appreciation is the appreciation of his relation to the dead poets and artists... what happens when a new work of art is created is something that happens simultaneously to all the works of art which preceded it. The existing monuments form an ideal order among themselves, which is modified by the introduction of the new (the really new) work of art among them.”

Eliot contended that operating within an artistic tradition obliged an artist to consciously reference earlier works and artistic forms and to incorporate elements from past works to enhance the impact of newer creations. His skillful use of references and allusions is evident in poems like “The Waste Land” (1922). *Murder in the Cathedral* itself is a modern

adaptation of a medieval miracle play and incorporates a chorus heavily influenced by ancient Greek drama.

In his later life, Eliot, who had embraced religious beliefs, concluded that the allure of secular theatre was an unconscious yearning for a spiritual encounter. He focused intensely on verse drama, employing elevated language to heighten the emotional resonance of stage productions. In “The Aims of Poetic Drama,” he expressed his desire for the characters on stage to be relatable to the audience, so that they would think, “I could talk in poetry too!” In this way, ordinary, mundane existence could be suddenly illuminated and transformed by the power of poetry. However, apart from *Murder in the Cathedral*, his plays generally failed to gain popularity and are often regarded as inferior works.

#### 4.6 The background of the play

*Murder in the Cathedral* is a historical fiction play with profound Christian themes authored by the American-born British writer T.S. Eliot. Its first performance took place in Canterbury Cathedral on June 15, 1935, as part of the annual Canterbury Festival. The play draws its inspiration from the actual murder of Thomas Becket, the Archbishop of Canterbury, which occurred on December 29, 1170.

In his earlier years, despite being an ordained priest, Becket had been a close friend of King Henry II of England and led a life filled with worldly pleasures. He was appointed as Chancellor of England, making him one of the most influential figures in the kingdom, all the while adhering to the authority of the King. However, when Henry II designated Becket as the Archbishop of Canterbury, Becket abandoned his former lifestyle. He refused to bow to the King’s secular authority, leading to mounting tensions between the two men, ultimately forcing Becket into a seven-year exile in France. The play commences with Becket’s return to Canterbury from exile, fully aware of the peril to his life.

*Murder in the Cathedral* is structured into two parts, both rendered in verse, separated by a sermon delivered by the character of Thomas Becket in prose. The play exhibits influences from Ancient Greek drama, incorporating a Chorus, as well as elements reminiscent of medieval morality plays, featuring personifications of vices as characters.

The significance of this play extends beyond the stage, as it was adapted for a BBC television performance in 1936, marking the first year

of television broadcasting in the United Kingdom. It also underwent adaptation into a black and white British film in 1951.

#### **4.7 Murder in the Cathedral: A Quick Summary**

##### **Part 1**

The play *Murder in the Cathedral* opens on December 2, 1170, as the Chorus of women from Canterbury gathers at the Cathedral. They express their grievances about the hardships they endure in their lives and share a sense of foreboding, fearing that something dreadful is on the horizon. Their concerns centre around the potential return of Thomas Becket, the Archbishop of Canterbury, from his seven-year exile in France, which could incite the wrath of King Henry II. Three priests also join in the discussion, revealing their longing for the Archbishop's return while harboring apprehensions about the consequences it might entail.

A herald arrives, bearing the news that Thomas Becket has indeed returned to England and is en route to Canterbury. Unfortunately, there has been no reconciliation between Becket and the King, and the herald fears that this may lead to violence.

Amidst growing uncertainty, the priests and the Chorus contemplate the suffering that may befall them upon Becket's return. One of the priests advises the Chorus to pretend to be joyful when Becket comes back, but Becket himself arrives unexpectedly at that very moment. He dismisses the priest's counsel and acknowledges the women's anxieties, emphasizing the unknowable nature of God's plans.

Four Tempters then appear sequentially, each attempting to sway Becket. The First Tempter suggests Becket should return to the worldly pleasures of his youth. The Second Tempter urges him to reassume the role of Chancellor of England, arguing that he can better aid the impoverished in a political position than in a purely religious one. The Third Tempter proposes that Becket form a new government consisting of the nation's barons, effectively granting him control over England. Becket easily rejects these temptations, as they mirror experiences from his past.

However, the Fourth Tempter presents a distinct proposition. He encourages Becket to seek martyrdom, asserting that in death, his cause would be deemed just, and his enemies would be condemned. His name would be immortalized, surpassing those of his assailants. Becket

recognizes this as the most insidious temptation, that of “doing the right thing for the wrong reason.” He firmly declares that he will not actively pursue martyrdom but will instead accept his fate, whatever it may be.

#### Becket's Sermon (The Interlude)

On Christmas Day in the year 1170, Thomas Becket delivers a sermon within the hallowed confines of Canterbury Cathedral. In his sermon, he imparts a profound message to the congregation, asserting that Christians ought to simultaneously mourn and celebrate the death of Jesus Christ. He elucidates that this dual sentiment is born from the recognition that Jesus' sacrifice was necessitated by the sinful world's existence. Christians should grieve the presence of a world so steeped in sin that it required such a sacrifice, while also rejoicing in the possibility of transcending this sinful realm, made possible through Jesus' selfless act.

Furthermore, Becket extends this idea to the concept of martyrdom. He contends that true martyrs, like Jesus, willingly submit entirely to the will of God, finding their ultimate freedom in this submission. Just as with Jesus' sacrifice, the sacrifices of genuine martyrs should be regarded with both mourning and celebration. They mourn the earthly circumstances that led to the martyr's sacrifice, yet they celebrate the spiritual freedom that such unwavering devotion to God imparts.

As Becket concludes his sermon, he leaves the congregation with a somber thought, suggesting that he may not have much time left to address them again, hinting at the impending events that will transpire.

## Part II

The second part of the play unfolds in the Archbishop's Hall on December 29, 1170. The priests remark that the days following Christmas have been dedicated to various saints, but December 29 seems to be an ordinary day.

Suddenly, four rough knights arrive and demand an audience with Becket. When Becket appears, they insult and accuse him of treason. Despite the threats posed by the knights, the priests rally to protect Becket. Becket, in turn, reassures the Chorus, telling them that although life will become more challenging for them after his impending murder, they will find solace in bearing witness to his martyrdom.



The knights return, and Becket refuses to flee. Initially, the doors of the Cathedral are locked and bolted, but the priests ultimately decide to open them, allowing the knights to enter. The knights insist that Becket revoke the excommunications he imposed on England's nobility. Becket staunchly refuses and is tragically slain. During his murder, the Chorus reflects on the immense difficulties they anticipate in their future lives.

Following Becket's murder, the four knights directly address the audience. Their language takes on a more straightforward and contemporary tone, contrasting with the rest of the play. The First Knight, acknowledging his limited speaking abilities, introduces the other three knights. The Second Knight asserts that they were merely following King Henry's orders when they killed Becket. The Third Knight contends that Becket was a traitor who deserved his fate. The Fourth Knight posits that Becket sought martyrdom, rendering his death not a murder but a form of self-inflicted suicide.

The three priests express their apprehension about how the world will change after Becket's demise, and the Chorus declares their intention to live up to the example Becket set. They seek mercy and forgiveness from Becket and God in the wake of this tragic event.

#### **4.8 Detailed Summary**

We need to now look at the details of each part of the play.

##### **Part I Section 1 The Chorus Exposition**

The poor women of Canterbury unite to form a chorus, drawing inspiration from the style of Greek drama. Speaking as one, they serve as both a narrative device and a means of exposition for the play. They reveal that despite the harshness of their lives, they feel compelled to gather at the cathedral, sensing some foreknowledge of an impending event they must witness.

The women describe the bleakness of winter, painting a picture of laborers denied the warmth of a fire by their master. They explain that Archbishop Thomas Becket, who had always shown kindness to them, has been absent from Canterbury for seven years. Despite their longing for his return, they are deeply concerned for his safety, fearing the wrath of the king and the barons. While they acknowledge the difficulties of their lives, they endure, even in the face of a harsh winter and a barren, scorching

summer. They wait patiently, much like the saints and martyrs, for God to act according to His divine plan. As they declare, “For us, the poor, there is no action, / But only to wait and to witness.”

Three priests enter and elaborate on the exposition. They reiterate that Archbishop Becket departed seven years ago, leaving behind a world filled with political intrigue between the English and French kings. They lament the violence and duplicity pervasive in the ruling class, where those in power are primarily concerned with maintaining their authority. A messenger arrives with news that Archbishop Becket is on his way to Canterbury, sparking discussions among the priests about the circumstances of his return. They inquire whether Becket has reconciled with the King of England or if he returns with only the backing of Rome. The messenger clarifies that Becket is beloved by the people and enjoys the support of the pope and the King of France, but not the King of England. Their last meeting ended with Becket declaring that he would never see the king again in his lifetime, leaving his meaning open to interpretation.

The messenger departs, and the priests engage in a debate about what the future holds. The first priest fears Becket’s pride, while the second is optimistic, believing that Becket returns to fulfil his divine calling. The third priest maintains a stance of uncertainty, asserting that the future will unfold as it should.

The chorus reappears, expressing their misery and suffering, and pleading with Becket to return to France, fearing the doom they believe he brings. The second priest directly addresses the chorus, urging them to put aside their concerns and welcome the archbishop with kindness. Becket arrives and advises the priest to be considerate of the women, as they possess a deeper understanding than they may realize. The priest apologizes for not having made better preparations for Becket’s arrival, but Becket explains that he could not have given prior notice without alerting his enemies, who still hover like vultures, awaiting an opportunity.

#### Commentary

Modernism as an artistic movement is characterized by its self-awareness and irony regarding the forms of previous artistic works. T.S. Eliot, a prominent figure in modernist literature, emphasized in his literary criticism that modern poetry and drama needed to be viewed in the context of all that had come before them.

In *Murder in the Cathedral*, Eliot ingeniously incorporates elements from various forms of drama throughout history. While the play is essentially a modern reinterpretation of a medieval miracle play, a form of semi-religious drama depicting a saint's life, martyrdom, and deeds, it also features a Greek drama-style chorus. This chorus, a group of actors who speak and move in unison to provide exposition and insight into the play's characters and events, is deliberately and self-consciously included. Rather than aiming for realism, the play draws attention to itself as a work of art in several ways.

Firstly, much of the dialogue is composed in verse, with most characters speaking in rhythmic meters and occasionally using rhyme. Furthermore, the chorus's dialogue resembles the image-rich, unrhymed verse found in Eliot's poetic works, employing poetic devices such as repetition, allusion, and alliteration. However, Becket's sermon and the knights' arguments in defence of their actions are written in prose, creating a distinct tone for those scenes and characters in contrast to the poetic dialogue.

Moreover, characters within the play interact with the art form itself in ways uncommon in previous theatre. In the first act, one of the priests directly addresses and scolds the chorus, engaging in a conversation about their understanding of action and its pain. Traditionally, the chorus merely comments on the play's events and is neither spoken to nor discussed. Becket also makes an ambiguous remark that "the substance of our first act / Will be shadows and the strife with shadows," alluding not only to his return as archbishop but also to the play's dramatic events. Later in the play, the knights who have murdered Becket directly appeal to the audience, using contemporary language from 1935 rather than the play's setting in 1170. This theatrical technique is known as "breaking the fourth wall," where the invisible barrier between characters and the audience is disregarded.

The chorus's dialogue serves to foreshadow the play's central theme of death and establish its primary character as one of fear and inaction. They wait and bear witness, measuring time by the seasons, living in their earthly existence. Although they endure poverty, their fear is losing Becket, who has shown them charity and spirituality. While they discuss saints, martyrs, and God's will, their main concerns are rooted in the present, and they struggle to comprehend God's plan or how Becket's death may serve a higher purpose.

The symbol of the wheel appears repeatedly in this section, representing the inexorable march of time and the concept of fate beyond the characters' control. This abstract image contrasts with the chorus's discussions of concrete seasons, months, holidays, weather, and crops.

Becket's kindness toward the chorus distinguishes him as a saintly character and reveals his deeper understanding of fate and God's will. He remarks to the priest, "They speak better than they know, and beyond your understanding." However, Becket's journey is not complete, and the priest's comment about "His pride always feeding upon his own virtues" will become significant during his temptations.

### **Part 1, Section 2 - First Tempter**

The first tempter enters the scene without any grand introduction. He claims to be an old friend of Becket's and the king's, recalling their past in London and reminiscing about the pleasures of the court and their strong friendship. He encourages Becket to consider embracing a new season of joy and happiness, reminiscent of the old times.

In response, Becket asserts that no one can predict the future, and only a fool believes they can control what lies ahead. The tempter insists that he can bring back the good times, but Becket counters by emphasizing the importance of penitence and obedience. The tempter criticizes Becket, suggesting that he had not been as stern with sinners during his tenure as chancellor. Becket retorts that it's far too late, and the tempter's argument is twenty years overdue.

As the tempter withdraws, he doesn't leave the scene entirely but remarks that Becket is now indulging in "higher vices" that will come at a greater cost. Becket reflects on how even things that are impossible to have again can still be tempting distractions that divert the mind from its present duties and responsibilities.

#### **Commentary**

The first three tempters in the play loosely parallel the temptations of Jesus in the New Testament, where Satan offers Jesus three temptations in the wilderness: to turn stones into bread to satisfy his hunger, to command angels to save him from harm, and to worship Satan in exchange for earthly power. In some Christian traditions, these corresponding temptations—

temptations of the flesh, temptations of the world, and temptations of the devil—are renounced at baptism.

The first tempter represents the temptation of worldly pleasures and the indulgence of one's own desires, even at the expense of the world's suffering. Becket initially finds it relatively easy to resist this temptation, but he acknowledges that such temptations can distract the mind from its present focus. Within Christian doctrine, impure thoughts are considered sinful even if not acted upon, emphasizing the danger of entertaining sinful ideas.

The second tempter enters the scene and invokes past events, including Becket's involvement at Clarendon and Montmirail, where he initially supported the king's decisions regarding his power over church offices and engaged in negotiations with the kings of England and France. However, the tempter suggests they move on from those uncomfortable memories and discuss Becket's return to his former position as chancellor.

The tempter argues that earthly power would enable Becket to do more good in the world than his purely spiritual role. He contends that sticking to his current spiritual path would trap him in Canterbury with no real influence, while submitting to the king's authority would allow him to outmaneuver his enemies and enact God's will on Earth. Becket rejects this proposition, emphasizing the greater significance of his spiritual office, which holds the keys to heaven and hell and allows him to spiritually condemn even the king.

### **Part 1, Section 3 – Second Tempter**

The second tempter's argument visibly disturbs Becket more than the first, and Becket reflects to himself that those who seek to enforce God's will through earthly power merely delay chaos and damnation rather than truly preventing it.

#### **Commentary**

The second tempter embodies a central theme of the play, which is the tension between the earthly and the spiritual. While the first tempter focuses on appealing to Becket's personal desires and pleasures, the second tempter urges Becket to consider the greater good of humanity and the

positive impact he could have on the world through political power rather than solely relying on spiritual authority.

Becket acknowledges the noble intention of doing good for others, but he firmly believes that earthly good, divorced from a spiritual foundation, is ultimately a shallow and unsustainable endeavor. He argues that while such efforts may temporarily mitigate chaos and disorder, they lack the deeper spiritual guidance necessary for lasting positive change. Becket's stance emphasizes the idea that humans require spiritual grounding and divine guidance to truly act in accordance with God's will.

T.S. Eliot's conversion to Anglicanism and his deep spirituality are reflected in the play's exploration of these themes. He believed that secularism and the abandonment of spiritual values were at the root of many societal problems. He saw a yearning for spirituality and religious meaning in people's lives and believed that the absence of genuine faith led to various forms of disillusionment, including the allure of pseudo-faiths like fascism. This concern with the spiritual dimension of human existence is evident in Becket's character and his unwavering commitment to his spiritual calling despite worldly temptations.

#### **Part 1, Section 4 (Third Tempter)**

The third tempter represents the temptation of political power and the possibility of aligning with the barons to overthrow the king. This temptation is grounded in the idea of using secular means to achieve a political or social end. The tempter portrays himself as a simple country lord who understands the needs of the country and believes that Becket's current path of isolation and conflict with the king can be avoided.

He suggests that Becket, as a Norman, has a natural affinity with the Normans ruling England, and by aligning with the barons and securing the blessing of the church and the pope, he could lead a movement that claims to speak for the people. The implication is that Becket could use his influence to bring about political change and challenge the monarchy's authority.

Becket's response to the third tempter reflects his unwavering commitment to his principles and his refusal to betray the king. While he acknowledges having contemplated the power he could wield, he



ultimately prioritizes his spiritual and moral integrity over political gain. His willingness to sacrifice himself underscores the central theme of martyrdom and the idea that Becket's actions are guided by a higher purpose.

This temptation raises questions about the intersection of religion and politics and the moral dilemmas faced by individuals in positions of power and influence. Becket's choice to remain loyal to his spiritual calling and principles rather than pursuing political power highlights the play's exploration of spiritual values and the consequences of such choices.

#### Commentary

The third tempter presents a sinister proposition, akin to the temptation faced by Jesus when tempted by Satan to align with him in overthrowing God. Throughout the play, Eliot's depiction of Becket underscores his allegiance to the king, asserting that he never betrayed his monarch but rather faithfully adhered to the higher authority of God. The third tempter extends an offer to Becket, one that entails siding with the barons to depose the king, all while leveraging this strategic move to bolster the influence of the church. This temptation is not merely about preserving Becket's life; it also offers him a pathway to fulfil his ecclesiastical ambitions.

The rhetoric employed by the third tempter bears a remarkable resemblance to the language often used to rationalize fascism. This tempter portrays himself as a straightforward Englishman who claims to understand "what the country needs... We are the foundation of the nation. / We, not the conniving parasites." He goes on to assert that both he and Becket share Norman heritage, emphasizing the concept of a racially homogenous homeland and invoking the brand of anti-intellectual nationalism commonly associated with fascist movements across Europe. Norman refers to the subset of Vikings who settled in present-day northern France, and from there conquered the British isles, southern Italy, and Sicily.

In his contemplation of the temptation, Becket references the biblical figure Samson from the Book of Judges. Samson was sent to Earth by God as a punishment for the Philistines, and after being betrayed by Delilah, he suffered blindness, enslavement, and was compelled to construct a pagan temple. When his divine strength was eventually restored, he brought down the temple upon himself, resulting in his own demise along with the Philistines inside. Becket admits that he has pondered his own potential

to cause destruction with the last remnants of his political power but ultimately rejects this notion.

### **Part 1, Section 5 (Fourth Tempter)**

Moving to Part 1, Section 5, the fourth tempter enters the scene, offering praise for Becket's unwavering determination. Becket is taken aback by this unexpected fourth temptation, as he had anticipated only three. The tempter reassures him not to be surprised, and Becket inquires about the tempter's identity. The tempter declines to provide a name, asserting that it is unnecessary. Despite never having met before, Becket recognizes him, and throughout their conversation, the tempter addresses Becket familiarly as "Thomas." He proceeds to align with Becket in dismissing the preceding three tempters.

Becket inquires about the counsel the tempter would offer, and the tempter responds that Becket should proceed with his planned martyrdom. He contends that all other paths are now closed to Becket, but this choice offers a potential for power and glory far greater than anything attainable in life, second only to the power of God. The tempter points out that Becket is already familiar with what he is discussing: the power, glory, and renown associated with sainthood, along with generations of devout pilgrims who would visit his adorned shrine. Becket admits that he has indeed contemplated such thoughts, and the tempter acknowledges Becket's apprehension that even this path may not yield enduring power. There is a fear that the shrine could be looted and forgotten, and, most distressingly, that in the end, Becket might be remembered not as a religious figure but solely as a historical one.

Becket asks if there is any alternative course, and the tempter advises him to humble himself to the lowest status on Earth so that he may achieve the highest status in heaven, glorifying God's majesty and witnessing the damnation of his enemies in Hell. Becket is deeply moved by this proposal and questions what the tempter is offering and at what cost. The tempter responds that he is offering what Becket desires in exchange for what Becket must relinquish. Becket asserts that this temptation leads to damnation and ponders if there is any action or inaction that would not lead to the forfeiture of his soul due to pride.

The tempter quotes Becket's own words back to him, reciting verbatim Becket's thoughts about the chorus: the notion that he simultaneously

knows and does not know what it means to act and suffer, that the wheel of existence turns with eternal action and eternal patience.

In unison, the chorus speaks ominously, proclaiming that there is no respite, reciting disjointed and foreboding imagery. The four tempters, also in unison, assert that life is filled with disappointment and a series of falsehoods. They characterize Becket as “stubborn, blind, resolute / In self-destruction... estranged from society, at odds with himself.” The three priests, in unison, implore Becket not to resist the implacable tide that is leading him toward martyrdom. They then take turns sharing lines, discussing the myriad ways in which death can occur and how it often lurks nearby. The chorus laments their misery and recounts how their hopes were briefly rekindled by the archbishop’s return, only to see that hope teetering on the brink of destruction. They fervently urge Becket to save himself.

Becket reflects that his path is now determined, and the temptations shall not reoccur. He acknowledges that the fourth temptation was the most challenging because it enticed him to choose the right course of action for the wrong motives. Becket proceeds to reveal that throughout his life, he has yielded to these temptations on various occasions: in his youth, he succumbed to the allure of sensual pleasures, later on, he was ensnared by political ambition, and subsequently, he was entangled in political maneuvering.

Turning to the audience, he recognizes that his current actions may be perceived as fanatical and self-destructive. However, he asserts that it is imperative to punish all forms of evil. In a heartfelt plea, Becket implores his guardian angel to watch over him as the impending danger approaches, symbolized by the menacing sword points.

#### Commentary

Becket, well-versed in narrative conventions and Christian doctrine, had anticipated the first three tempters, adhering to the expected pattern. However, the arrival of the fourth tempter breaks away from this traditional structure. This departure highlights the play’s modernist self-awareness, adding an extra-dramatic layer by foreshadowing the fourth tempter’s arrival. This character possesses an uncanny awareness of both Becket’s inner thoughts and the future, knowledge that is shared with the audience but remains concealed from the characters. Notably, the tempter even references historical events such as Henry VIII’s actions in creating

the Anglican church in 1534 and dissolving the monasteries. On one level, this evokes the omniscience attributed to God, but on another level, it draws attention to the artificiality of the play, which is set in 1170 but exists within the 20th century.

Becket's journey to Canterbury is driven by his desire to become a martyr and a saint, but it is also accompanied by the fear that even this sacred status and the power it confers may prove transitory. Despite acting in accordance with what he perceives as God's plan, Becket is motivated by his own desires and attempts to manipulate the wheel of fate to achieve his chosen end. In his own words, "The last temptation is the greatest treason: / To do the right deed for the wrong reason." The tempters mock his pride and ambition, invoking the imagery of the Catherine wheel, an instrument associated with torture and death and named after St. Catherine of Alexandria (c. 287–c.305), who was said to have suffered such a fate. The confrontation with this ultimate temptation, and the tempter's repetition of Becket's own words, lead Becket to recognize the imperfections in his understanding. He realizes that he must place his complete faith in God, even against the wishes of the priests and the chorus.

#### Interlude

The play's interlude features a prose sermon delivered by Thomas Becket on Christmas morning. In his sermon, Becket delves into the dual nature of celebrating Christ's birth as an infant and his subsequent passion and death during a single Mass. He also touches upon the promise of peace on Earth. Becket posits that this peace cannot be a temporal one because the world is plagued by conflict and suffering in every direction. He points out that Christ explained to his apostles that the peace he brought was not of the same nature as worldly peace; in fact, he sent them into situations of torment and imprisonment. However, Becket concludes that they did not receive an earthly peace but a spiritual one, rooted in their faith in God's divine plan and their ability to endure the temporal suffering they faced in the world.

Becket goes on to discuss the creation of a martyr, exemplified by figures like St. Stephen, whose feast falls on December 26th. He emphasizes that the emergence of a martyr is a phenomenon deserving both mourning and rejoicing, elevated by spiritual wisdom. Becket asserts that the creation of a martyr is never a happenstance event, nor is sainthood achieved through a person's own will to become a saint. It is entirely the result of God's divine

design, and only by fully surrendering oneself to be the pure instrument of God can a person attain such a status.

Becket concludes his sermon with a farewell, expressing doubt about whether he will ever have the opportunity to preach to his audience again.

#### Commentary

Becket's sermon in the play represents a crucial turning point in his character arc. Having grappled with his own pride and faced the temptations presented to him, he emerges from the experience as a wiser and more spiritually attuned figure. Becket now humbly submits himself to the will of God, recognizing that whether or not he attains sainthood is no longer within his control.

What sets this sermon apart is that it is one of two sections in the play delivered in prose, devoid of artificial rhyme or rhythm. In contrast to the knight's address to the audience, Becket's sermon to his congregation exudes an intimate and genuine quality. Both sections involve characters conveying a message with the intention of eliciting emotional responses from their listeners. In this particular instance, the listeners are an unseen and unnamed congregation, a fictional entity within the play's narrative. However, from a spatial and staging perspective, this congregation effectively encompasses the members of the actual audience in the theatre. While the audience may feel included in the sermon, Becket does not break the fourth wall; he maintains his character within the context of the historical events unfolding in the play.

#### **Part 2, Section 1 (Knights Confront Becket)**

In this section of the play, the chorus observes the turn of the year, noting the absence of hopeful signs of spring life and the birds' sombre song, which seems to rehearse themes of death. The world is depicted as being in a state of war, but the winter's death paves the way for the eventual arrival of spring.

Following this, the priests enter, marking the feast of St. Stephen on December 26th, the first Christian martyr. Their liturgy is interwoven with relevant passages. The first priest speaks of St. Stephen, highlighting how he was unjustly accused by princes. The second priest announces the arrival of December 27th, the feast of St. John the Apostle, and recites appropriate Scripture passages. The third priest then announces December

28th and the commemoration of the Holy Innocents, the children who perished by order of King Herod of Judea.

Subsequently, the first priest announces the beginning of December 29th, and collectively, the priests contemplate what the day might bring. Together, they chant about Jesus's sacrifice, emphasizing His willingness to lay down His life, and they reflect on the inexorable march of time toward God's eternal design.

At this point, four knights enter, and the banners disappear. The priests extend their welcome to the knights, who claim to have urgent business on behalf of the king. Despite the priests' invitation to dine, the knights decline, insisting on addressing their business before dinner and issuing threats to the priests.

Becket arrives and remarks on how even expected events can hold surprises. He informs the priests that his documents are in order and on his desk. However, the knights demand a private audience with Becket and dismiss the priests. Accusing Becket in unison, they label him an ungrateful parasite who has deceived and betrayed the king. They assert that he has lied, cheated, swindled, and violated his oath of loyalty to the king. The knights intimidate Becket, prompting him to chastise them for their blasphemy. They claim to be acting on the king's orders. Becket insists they make their accusations publicly so that he may refute them openly. Nevertheless, the knights move menacingly toward Becket, prompting the priests to return and intercede, positioning themselves between Becket and the knights.

In turn, the first three knights accuse Becket of inciting political unrest against the king while in France and, upon his return and the restoration of his honours, excommunicating the bishops who had crowned the prince, thereby invalidating his coronation. They accuse him of consistently working against the interests of the king's servants. Becket counters that he never intended to depose the prince and suggests that the bishops take their grievances to the pope, as he was the one who excommunicated them. The knights argue that Becket initiated the excommunication and can revoke it, but Becket refuses. They inform him of the king's command for him to leave England, but Becket staunchly refuses, citing his allegiance to a higher authority—the Church. The knights threaten him with their swords, and Becket responds that he is under the jurisdiction of Rome. However, he warns that if they kill him, he will become a martyr and plead



his case directly to God. Becket exits, with the knights in pursuit with their weapons drawn. The scene ends with tension escalating, leaving the audience in suspense.

### Commentary

The religious allusions in this section add depth and context to the play, enriching its themes and symbolism:

1. Saint Stephen: The reference to Saint Stephen as the first Christian martyr draws parallels between his martyrdom and Becket's impending sacrifice. Both figures are willing to endure suffering and death for their faith. Stephen's prayer for forgiveness of his executioners resonates with themes of forgiveness and redemption present in the play.
2. Feast of the Holy Innocents: The mention of the Feast of the Holy Innocents highlights the theme of innocent suffering and martyrdom. It commemorates the tragic event when King Herod ordered the massacre of male infants in Bethlehem in an attempt to kill the infant Jesus. This reference underscores the idea of sacrificial innocence and the consequences of power and tyranny.
3. Weeping in Rama: The allusion to the weeping in Rama, quoting both the book of Jeremiah and the Gospel of Matthew, emphasizes the theme of mourning and lamentation. In Matthew, this passage is applied to the sorrow of mothers mourning the loss of their children due to Herod's cruelty. By connecting this biblical passage to the play, Eliot underscores the theme of suffering and the human capacity for cruelty.

The use of multiple characters speaking together, whether in harmony or discord, adds a layer of complexity to the dramatic structure. It serves to highlight the collective nature of human experiences, emotions, and responses, as well as the contrast between characters' eloquence and ineloquence. In the case of the knights, their fragmented and brutish speech reflects their violent and impulsive nature, emphasizing their role as agents of conflict and chaos.

Eliot's excellent use of religious references and dramatic techniques contributes to the play's depth and resonance, inviting audiences to contemplate profound themes related to faith, martyrdom, and the human condition.

**Part 2, Section 2 (Pursuit and Murder)**

In this dramatic and climactic scene from *Murder in the Cathedral*, the chorus expresses its helplessness in the face of the impending tragedy, lamenting the presence of those who bring death to Canterbury. They plead with Becket for forgiveness, consumed by sorrow and fear. Becket, however, remains steadfast in his faith and offers words of reassurance to the chorus. He reminds them that though the present moment is filled with suffering and turmoil, God's ultimate plan will eventually become clear, and they will find solace in understanding the purpose behind these trying times.

The priests, urging Becket to seek safety within the cathedral, are concerned for his life. But Becket, with unwavering conviction, accepts the inevitability of his fate. He believes that death has been approaching him throughout his life, and when he is truly worthy, it will come to pass. Becket is prepared to fulfil God's will, even if it means facing death.

As the tension escalates, the knights enter, intoxicated and mocking. Becket's defiance shines through as he stands firm in his commitment to Christ, declaring his readiness to die for the faith. He refuses to yield to the knights' demands and demands that they spare the lives of others in the church.

The knights, driven by anger and accusations of treason, proceed to murder Becket. The chorus, once again, provides a powerful commentary on the tragic event, condemning the defilement of the world by the bloodshed and calling for a cleansing of the stain left behind by this act.

This scene encapsulates the play's central themes of martyrdom, faith, and the conflict between secular and divine authority, culminating in Becket's ultimate sacrifice for his principles and beliefs.

**Commentary**

The knights in the play address the audience directly, not only using plain language but also employing vocabulary and expressions of the time in which the audience resides, rather than those suitable for the characters within the play. Their communication lacks sophistication and precision in conveying their points, which becomes all the more noticeable when contrasted with the poetic and emotionally charged language employed by the chorus, which makes up the majority of the play. The knights' discourse

seems shallow when compared to Becket's sermon, which is also presented in prose.

Following the assassination, the knights seek to gain the audience's sympathy by highlighting the emotional turmoil they experienced during the act, by appealing to the authority of the state, and by attempting to shift the blame onto Becket himself. However, these efforts come across more as excuses than genuine remorse and, more disconcertingly, as arguments for why the audience should condone the murder. The knights essentially imply that their actions were necessary in the pursuit of a strong and orderly state, a notion that is generally favoured by society. Furthermore, they present themselves as victims of a prideful and deranged man, further justifying their actions.

It is worth noting that during the time the play was written, European politics were marked by the presence of fascist paramilitary groups that violently suppressed critics of right-wing factions and governments. The knights consistently emphasize their shared culture with the audience and assert their loyalty as Englishmen, invoking a sense of nationalism and ethnocentrism that aligns with the core principles of fascist rhetoric. T.S. Eliot, the playwright, was known for his anti-fascist stance, partly rooted in his religious beliefs. He argued that fascism emerged from a misguided yearning for a role in society that had previously been fulfilled by the church. When the second knight in the play alludes to a future in which the clergy might face execution after a trial, and later suggests that even milder measures would become unnecessary, he is addressing Eliot's concerns about both excessive secularization and authoritarianism.

#### **Part 2, Section 4 (Conclusion)**

The clergy regroup and engage in a conversation amongst themselves. The first priest is overwhelmed with sorrow over the loss of Becket. In contrast, the third priest maintains that the church invariably gains strength through the martyrdom of its members and ridicules the knights for fabricating tales, deeming them unworthy of further consideration. The priests then engage in prayer and express gratitude for the emergence of a new saint.

As the Latin hymn "Te Deum" resounds, the chorus offers their prayers to the Almighty. They thank God for His actions, which, despite their

seeming pain and difficulty at the time, are acknowledged as manifestations of His infinite wisdom. They also express gratitude for the sanctifying and redemptive power of blood. In humility, they admit to their own frailty and fearfulness, often hesitating to take action due to the apprehension of consequences. They beseech Christ for mercy upon them and implore Saint Thomas to intercede on their behalf in prayer.

#### Commentary

The renowned British philosopher and economist, John Stuart Mill (1806–1873), articulated the idea that “Bad men need nothing more to compass their ends, than that good men should look on and do nothing.” In a manner peculiar to him, T.S. Eliot echoes this sentiment through the chorus’s final stanza, commencing with the words, “Forgive us, O Lord, we acknowledge ourselves as type of the common man.” The chorus expresses deep regret for their passivity, their fear that restrains them from doing what is morally right, and the moral mediocrity that prevents them from attaining saintly qualities.

Their discourse serves as a counterpoint to both the knights’ references to fascism and state-sanctioned violence, as well as Becket’s serenity and unwavering faith. The language employed by the chorus positions them as individuals who might fall victim if they were to take action. They candidly admit their deficiency in possessing Becket’s unwavering belief in the grand design and acknowledge their capacity to find solace in a world fraught with human injustice, even when they recognize it as the less righteous path. They share culpability for the state of the world because of their failure to attain the spiritual serenity Becket expounded upon in his sermon. Consequently, they endure suffering without the soothing comfort of purpose and a connection to God’s divine plan.

In the context of traditional Greek drama, the chorus often served as an emotional surrogate for the audience, reflecting the responses of ordinary people rather than the actions of the tragic hero. In this scene, Eliot continues this theatrical tradition.

## 4.9 Major Themes

*Murder in the Cathedral* by T.S. Eliot explores several profound themes, each contributing to the complexity and depth of the play’s narrative.

#### God’s Plan

The play frequently examines the concept of divine providence and the limited control individuals have over their destinies. The wheel metaphor, symbolizing the turning of fate, suggests that human agency is often overridden by larger forces. Becket and the priests grapple with the idea that even events that initially appear malevolent can ultimately be part of God's benevolent design. The play emphasizes the Christian ideal of submitting to God's will and finding solace in the belief that every occurrence is a component of a greater divine plan, exemplifying perfect faith and acceptance.

### **Pride/Hubris**

The character of Thomas Becket is a central figure whose pride is a key source of tension. He initially takes pride in his virtues and aspires to sainthood, motivated by the honor and spiritual power it would confer. However, his pride is challenged, leading to his transformation and ultimate acceptance of God's will. The play illustrates how pride can be a stumbling block on one's spiritual journey and how genuine humility and submission to divine purpose are essential.

### **Earthly vs. Spiritual Orientation**

The play distinguishes between an earthly orientation, where joy and suffering exist independently and often in conflict, and a spiritual orientation, where they are harmoniously united through submission to God's will. Becket's evolving character exemplifies this transition from a partially earthly to a wholly spiritual orientation. The chorus, representing the common people, struggles with an earthly orientation, unable to fully embrace the peace that stems from spiritual submission. Their joys are fleeting, and their fears and comforts are inconsistent because they lack a deep connection to God's plan.

### **Conflict of Values**

The knights, in contrast to Becket and the church, demonstrate a secular, state-centred worldview. They prioritize the interests of the government over religious sanctity and blasphemy within the church. Their actions and justifications are devoid of spiritual orientation, contrasting sharply with the devout characters who find purpose and meaning in their faith. This conflict of values underscores the tension between religious and secular authority.

## Spiritual Transformation

Becket's spiritual journey from pride to humility and submission is a central theme. His initial desire for martyrdom for personal glory evolves into a profound willingness to accept God's plan without any selfish ambitions. His transformation highlights the importance of spiritual growth and the recognition that true sanctity cannot be attained through pride or self-interest.

Overall, *Murder in the Cathedral* delves into these themes with poetic depth and complexity, challenging its characters and audience to grapple with questions of faith, destiny, pride, and the interplay between the earthly and the spiritual.

### 4.10 Symbolism

T.S. Eliot employs rich symbolism to convey deeper themes and ideas:

#### The Wheel

The recurring image of the wheel, often associated with the wheel of fortune, represents the inexorable turning of fate and destiny. In medieval depictions, God stands at the centre of the wheel, comprehending its movements, while humans can only perceive the portion to which they are bound. This symbolizes the notion of events being beyond human control and part of a larger divine plan. The wheel symbolizes the cyclical nature of life, where moments of good and evil alternate, and ultimately reflects the idea that all events, whether seemingly favourable or unfavourable, are components of God's design. It underscores the themes of inevitability and fate throughout the play.

#### Seasons

The chorus frequently references seasons and the passage of time, connecting human life with the changing of the seasons. The seasons symbolize the human perception of time and the earthly orientation of the chorus. They provide concrete and specific imagery related to the natural world and the agricultural calendar, grounding the chorus in a worldly understanding of time. This earthly perspective contrasts with the spiritual orientation emphasized in the play and underscores the chorus's struggle to fully comprehend the mystery of Becket's martyrdom, despite their love for him and fear of God.



These symbols contribute to the play's thematic exploration of fate, destiny, pride, and the contrast between the earthly and the spiritual. The wheel represents the divine plan, while the seasons represent the earthly perspective on the passage of time, together highlighting the complex interplay between human agency and divine providence.

#### 4.11 Let Us Sum Up

T.S. Eliot's *Murder in the Cathedral* stands as a remarkable work not only for its poetic brilliance but also as a pivotal link between his earlier and later poetic achievements, notably the acclaimed "Four Quartets," composed between 1935 and 1942. Intriguingly, lines from an initial draft of *Murder in the Cathedral* found new life in "Burnt Norton," the first of the "Four Quartets," which Eliot completed in the same year as the premiere of the play. Eliot beautifully portrays the intricacies of martyrdom, and how Christian Martyrdom is something not men choose but is of God's will.

#### 4.12 Review Questions

Write a critique of the play *Murder in the Cathedral*

The play's premiere bears a fascinating historical backdrop. Eliot received a commission to craft *Murder in the Cathedral* for a performance within the hallowed confines of Canterbury Cathedral in Kent, the very location where Thomas Becket's martyrdom unfolded nearly eight centuries prior. The inaugural presentation took place by candlelight in the Chapter House on June 15, 1935, as part of the Canterbury Festival.

As Robin Grove perceptively notes in a chapter dedicated to Eliot's theatrical work in *The Cambridge Companion to T.S. Eliot*, *Murder in the Cathedral* can be analyzed as a dramatic composition that extols martyrdom, diverging from George Bernard Shaw's earlier medieval play, *Saint Joan* (1923), which sought to demystify Joan of Arc's martyrdom. Eliot, who embraced Anglo-Catholicism in 1927, endeavours to illustrate how Becket's submission to a higher calling represents a noble and valiant act of faith.

However, as underscored by the play's most renowned and oft-quoted line—Becket's proclamation about refusing to undertake "the right deed for the wrong reason"—Becket's martyrdom must not be pursued for personal glory but rather for God and the Church, if it is to be done at all. Nevertheless, this does not constrain us to regard *Murder in the Cathedral*

solely through the lens of Christian faith, just as Robert Bolt's *A Man for All Seasons* is not limited to the question of whether an individual should submit to Henry VIII's authority as Head of the Church in England. Both plays explore the individual's moral conscience and the various ways one can confront tyranny and immorality, whether through active resistance (even in the face of likely defeat) or through a quiet stand that entails becoming a sacrificial figure. In essence, there exists more than one mode of "opposing" a given circumstance.

While Becket occupies a prominent position, quite literally, in *Murder in the Cathedral*, it is noteworthy that his name does not feature in the play's title—a stark contrast to Alfred Lord Tennyson's earlier dramatization of the same event in "Becket" (1884) or Jean Anouilh's subsequent work, *Becket or the Honour of God* (1959), later adapted into the memorable film *Becket*, starring Richard Burton as the titular character and Peter O'Toole as Henry II. Martyrdom entails a degree of self-effacement and self-denial, rather than the glorification of the individual.

Furthermore, Eliot intentionally maintains a certain enigmatic quality around Becket, the Christian martyr. His true motivations remain concealed, shrouded in mystery and unveiled solely within his own conscience. Eliot's plays are often criticized for their perceived lack of dramatic tension and the characters' apparent lack of psychological depth. In *Murder in the Cathedral*, however, this appears to be a deliberate choice, perfectly suited to the play's ritualistic nature, which bears more resemblance to classical drama than to modern theatre, even though it employs iambic pentameter, a form favored by Elizabethan and Jacobean theatre, which Eliot greatly admired.

In this regard, we should take note not only of the use of a Chorus but also the play's adherence to the Three Dramatic Unities as delineated by Aristotle: the unity of time (spanning a few weeks in December 1170), place (Canterbury Cathedral), and action (the murder of Becket). Furthermore, it's essential to recognize that the play was conceived as a piece of theatre to be performed within the Cathedral itself, as opposed to a more conventional setting, although it did later transfer to London.

It is also worth mentioning that *Murder in the Cathedral* was not Eliot's inaugural foray into playwriting. During the 1920s and early 1930s, he made unsuccessful attempts to craft two modernist plays: *Sweeney Agonistes*, announced by its subtitle as a kind of Aristophanic melodrama,

and Coriolan. In 1934, Eliot received a commission to compose a pageant-play for the reconstruction of several London churches. This play, *The Rock*, remains among Eliot's lesser-known works and is currently out of print, but it paved the way for the ceremonial and ritualistic qualities that would come to define *Murder in the Cathedral*.

**Write an essay on *Murder in the Cathedral*, commenting on some major themes.**

*Murder in the Cathedral* by T.S. Eliot is a verse drama written and performed in 1935. This play is one of the key works that revived classical verse/poetic drama in the 20th century. The plot revolves around the infamous assassination of Thomas Becket, the then Archbishop of Canterbury, which happened in 1170. The play deals with a wide range of themes like the conflict between the Church vs the State, the Spiritual vs the Mundane, and mainly, martyrdom.

Martyrdom in the play:

Without any doubt, martyrdom takes up the main stage as the major theme in the play. Eliot beautifully portrays the intricacies of martyrdom, and how Christian Martyrdom is something not men choose but is of God's will. In the Christmas sermon he delivers, Becket foreshadows his martyrdom and says, "A Christian martyrdom is no accident." In the last part of the play, Becket welcomes his death when the knights assemble to kill him, entering his martyrdom.

Conflicts in the play:

Eliot has added many modern and historically-pervasive themes and conflicts in the play. For example, the conflict between spirituality and mundanity is one of the most debated topics around the world even today. The play showcases this conflict as it occurs in Becket - while Becket has left his life of mundanity behind for an everlasting spiritual experience, he still subconsciously yearns for all that is lost.

Another crucial conflict is the power play between the Church and the State. In Becket's time, the Church was more powerful than the State, and King Henry II was not in favour of this dynamic. Becket and the King had been good friends in the past, but the need for power and authority comes between the two and tears them apart.

Overall, Eliot's genius manages to revive a mediaeval classic story for modern audiences through his unconventional yet compelling way of storytelling.

#### 4.13 Self-study Questions

1. What are the ways in which the elements of optimism and pessimism portrayed in the play *Murder in the Cathedral*?
2. How did the use of Greek tragedy help Eliot in informing his play *Murder in the Cathedral*'s message?
3. Elucidate the function of the priests in *Murder in the Cathedral*. How do they contribute to the plot development in the play?
4. Discuss the theme of martyrdom in *Murder in the cathedral*.
5. Can *Murder in the Cathedral* be classified as a modern drama? Discuss the modern elements used in the play.
6. Analyse *Murder in the Cathedral* as a Christian play.
7. Who is more powerful in the conflict of individual versus state? Explain with reference to Eliot's play *Murder in the Cathedral*.
8. Describe the imbrications of religion and politics in *Murder in the Cathedral*.
9. How Eliot deviates from the classical mode in presentation of the Chorus in his play, *Murder in the Cathedral*.
10. *Murder in the Cathedral* explores the conflict between action and suffering. Elucidate.

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**UNIT - V****Lesson 5.1 - Look Back in Anger****Structure**

- 5.1 Objectives
- 5.2 Introduction
- 5.3 John Osborne
- 5.4 Summary of the Play
- 5.5 Major Themes
- 5.6 Let Us Sum Up
- 5.7 Review Questions
- 5.8 Self-Study Questions

**5.1 Objectives:**

*Through this unit, the learners will be able to*

- Understand the sociocultural background of the play
- Familiarise with the dramatics of John Osborne
- Analyse and evaluate the themes and undertones of the play
- Write critical essays on the play

**5.2 Introduction**

Angry Youngman is a term familiar to most of you. Either as a literary movement or as a trope in the Hindi movies of 1970s when Amitabh Bachchan was rising to stardom. The provoked and upset youngster was the protagonist in several of these films. Being a literature student, you should be familiar with a movement triggered by the British playwright John Osborne. The protagonist in Osborne's play *Look Back in Anger* established the literary type called Angry Young Man. In this unit, we will read this play and locate how it fits into the format of a kitchen sink drama of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and learn more about the Angry Young Man trope. Let us first look at the playwright's biography.



### 5.3 John Osborne

John Osborne was born in London, England, in 1929 to Thomas Osborne, who worked as an advertisement writer, and Nellie Beatrice, a barmaid from the working class. Unfortunately, his father passed away in 1941. Osborne used the money from a life insurance payout to send himself to Belmont College, a private boarding school. However, he was expelled after a short period for attacking the headmaster. While he did receive a certificate of completion for his upper school work, he did not pursue higher education at a college or university.

Upon returning home, Osborne took on various odd jobs until he discovered his passion for the theatre. He began working with Anthony Creighton's provincial touring company, where he took on multiple roles, including stagehand, actor, and writer. Osborne co-authored two plays, *The Devil Inside Him* and *Personal Enemy*, before creating *Look Back in Anger*.

*Look Back in Anger* was written in just a few weeks but initially faced rejection from agents and production companies. Eventually, George Devine decided to produce it at the struggling Royal Court Theatre, a move seen as a financial risk for both Osborne and the theatre. The play received mixed reviews upon its opening night, but some influential theatre critics praised it, propelling Osborne into the spotlight as a promising young British playwright.

In the late 1950s, Laurence Olivier, a renowned actor, approached Osborne to write and produce a play for him. This collaboration resulted in *The Entertainer*, a play that metaphorically explores the decline of the British Empire through the lens of a failing music hall. Olivier took on the lead role, and the play garnered critical acclaim. Osborne continued to write for the stage throughout the 1960s, producing both critically and commercially successful works, including *Luther*, a play based on Martin Luther's life. In 1963, Osborne won an Academy Award for adapting *Tom Jones* into a screenplay.

Throughout the 1970s and 1980s, Osborne remained active in the artistic and entertainment realms. He continued to write plays, ventured into screenwriting and television adaptations, and penned an autobiography. Additionally, he made several appearances as an actor, featuring in popular Hollywood films like *Get Carter* and *Flash Gordon*. In his later years, he

received numerous awards, including a Lifetime Achievement Award from the Writer's Guild in Britain. Sadly, Osborne passed away at the age of 65.

## 5.4 Summary of the Play

Let us now read through the summary and the ensuing critical commentary of each act.

### Act I

The play *Look Back in Anger* commences by vividly describing the setting and characters. Act I unfolds on an April evening in the Porter's attic apartment, a cramped space furnished modestly with simple, minimalistic items. The room is cluttered with miscellaneous objects like books, neckties, and worn-out stuffed animals, including a tattered toy teddy bear and a soft woolly squirrel. A large window provides some natural light, but the primary illumination comes from a skylight, creating a somewhat dim atmosphere.

As the curtain rises, the audience is introduced to Jimmy Porter and Cliff Lewis, who are seated in shabby armchairs, their upper bodies concealed by newspapers, revealing only their legs. Jimmy, donned in a tweed jacket and flannel pants, smokes a cigar.

The play's opening meticulously characterizes each person present. Jimmy, approximately 25 years old, possesses a complex personality marked by a blend of sincerity and cheerful malice, tenderness and cruelty, restlessness, and pride. This amalgamation both attracts and repels those around him, regardless of their sensitivity. In contrast, Cliff, of similar age to Jimmy, presents as laid-back and almost lethargic, emanating an easy-going demeanour. While Cliff seeks affection from others, Jimmy mostly repulses it.

Alison Porter, Jimmy's wife, also occupies the attic. She is a tall, slim, dark-haired woman, and her personality remains somewhat elusive to the audience. Her disposition differs from Jimmy and Cliff, characterized by a well-bred malaise that often gets overshadowed by the robust personalities of the other two. Alison is engrossed in ironing a pile of laundry.

Jimmy expresses frustration with the newspaper, finding that all the book reviews sound alike and offer no intellectual stimulation. He provocatively asks Cliff if the newspapers make him feel ignorant and taunts him by calling him a "peasant." It becomes evident that Cliff lacks

the same level of education as Jimmy. Jimmy then directs his antagonism toward Alison, who only partially engages with his rants. Despite Cliff's attempts to deflect some of Jimmy's anger, Jimmy continues his tirade, indicating his belief that Alison is not as brilliant as she and others think.

Jimmy is also upset that nobody pays attention when he speaks and takes the newspaper from Cliff. He complains about his hunger, while Cliff teases him for his frequent appetite. Jimmy dismisses concerns about gaining weight, claiming that they burn off everything they consume. He demands that Cliff make tea, which leads to further banter.

Cliff, displaying kindness toward Alison, invites her to leave her ironing and join them. She complies, and Cliff playfully nibbles her fingers while complimenting her beauty. Jimmy, unperturbed by this display, remarks, "That's what they all tell me." The trio then discusses articles in the newspaper, including one by the Bishop of Bromley advocating support for H-bomb production and denying class distinctions. Jimmy ridicules various other articles, including love advice for young women. When Alison suggests going to the movies, Jimmy vehemently opposes it, fearing it will ruin his evening. He launches into a diatribe about a journalist who penned a subpar article, asserting that nobody reads the paper due to their indolence.

Cliff's trousers are wrinkled, and Alison offers to iron them. Cliff expresses a desire for a pipe but decides to smoke a cigarette instead, despite Jimmy's warning about its effect on his ulcers. Jimmy reflects on the state of England, recalling the saying that the country gets its cooking from Paris, politics from Moscow, and morals from Port Said. While he acknowledges his reluctance to be overly patriotic, he ironically idealizes Alison's father's time in the British army in India. He cynically observes that living in the American Age is dreary, except for Americans themselves.

Cliff and Jimmy discuss the possibility of Alison's friend Webster visiting. Jimmy hopes Webster won't come, but Alison insists that Webster is the only one who truly understands him. Jimmy compares the exhilaration he feels with Webster to that with an old girlfriend named Madeline. Jimmy then mentions Alison's brother, Nigel, a British army soldier advancing in life. Jimmy predicts Nigel will eventually enter Parliament but believes Nigel "seeks sanctuary in his own stupidity." Jimmy continues to criticize Alison and her family, describing them as sycophantic, phlegmatic, and

pusillanimous. When Alison's face briefly contorts in anger, she returns to her ironing.

The play's radio concert begins, and Alison completes ironing Cliff's pants. As she continues ironing, Jimmy becomes irritated by the noise and abruptly turns off the radio. Alison scolds him for behaving childishly, leading to a heated argument. Jimmy raises his voice, complaining about the loudness of women, and compares Alison's clumsiness to that of "a dirty old Arab" handling lamb fat and gristle. The tolling of church bells outside further agitates Jimmy, prompting Cliff to attempt to lighten the mood by pretending to dance with him, gripping him firmly as Jimmy protests.

In a tumultuous turn of events, Cliff and Jimmy engage in a wrestling match that inadvertently results in Cliff being pushed into Alison and her ironing board. This mishap leads to Alison sustaining a burn on her arm. Jimmy attempts to apologize, but Alison's frustration boils over, and she sternly instructs him to leave the room. Respecting her wishes, he retreats to his room and starts playing his trumpet.

Meanwhile, Cliff takes a seat beside Alison and fetches some soap to tend to her wound. During this intimate moment, Alison confides in Cliff, expressing her emotional turmoil. She confides that she's not sure she can endure much more and has grown disenchanted with the concept of love.

Cliff, however, encourages Alison, asserting that she's too young to abandon hope. Alison responds by saying that she can scarcely remember what it's like to be truly carefree and young. She believes that Jimmy shares this sentiment. As Cliff continues to care for her arm, she reveals a significant secret: she's pregnant, and she hasn't told Jimmy yet. When Cliff asks if it's too late to change the situation, Alison admits she doesn't know. Cliff urges her to inform Jimmy because, despite his cruelty, he genuinely loves her. Alison, on the other hand, fears that Jimmy will perceive her disclosure as an attempt to trap him into a life with her. She explains that Jimmy has his own peculiar moral code, and he was perturbed when he discovered she was a virgin on their wedding night, as if her purity somehow tainted him.

Cliff shares that he understands Jimmy to some extent, as they both come from working-class backgrounds, and Jimmy appreciates him for his commonality. In Jimmy's words, Cliff is "common as dirt." When Jimmy re-enters the room and sees Alison and Cliff in close proximity on the

couch, he teases them but doesn't voice any objections. Instead, he settles down to read the newspaper, making light of their physical affection toward each other. Jimmy affectionately calls Cliff a "randy little mouse," and Cliff playfully mimics a mouse's behavior, even grabbing Jimmy's foot in a playful tussle. After their antics, Alison gives Cliff half a crown for cigarettes, and he leaves to go to the store.

Once Cliff departs, Jimmy's mood takes a more apologetic turn. He expresses remorse for pushing Alison earlier and confesses that he's nearly always thinking about her. He acknowledges that he sometimes takes her for granted, and Alison responds warmly to his affectionate side. Jimmy suggests that they engage in intimate relations, but Alison hesitates, reminding him that Cliff will return soon. Jimmy reflects on Cliff as possibly his only friend, despite memories of former school friends. They playfully exchange teasing nicknames, with Jimmy calling her a squirrel and she playfully dubbing him a bear. They share a tender moment with Alison making squirrel noises as they embrace.

Cliff returns and informs them that he couldn't leave the house due to their landlord, Mrs. Drury, who delayed his departure. Alison receives a call from Helena Charles, an old friend, and exits to take the call. In her absence, Jimmy vents his anger to Cliff, describing Helena as a "bitch" and one of his "natural enemies." He expresses disillusionment with women, feeling that he's had enough of the complexities they bring into his life. He believes that they all have a "cause" and that many women possess a "revolutionary fire." He perceives himself as a "right-wing deviationist" and laments that most people dislike him due to his views.

When Alison returns, she reveals that Helena will be staying with them during her visit to town. Jimmy's anger flares up, and he verbally attacks Alison, expressing his frustration. He tells her that if only she could experience the anguish of having a child, she would comprehend the harsh realities of the world. He accuses her of consuming his passion like a python devouring its prey. Alison stands trembling over the stove as Cliff watches this intense and distressing scene unfold.

### **Commentary**

The play commences with John Osborne providing meticulous stage directions, aiming to delineate each character by both their physical attributes and emotional complexities. Jimmy is a multifaceted character, exhibiting both anger and bitterness, while also revealing tenderness and

intense passion in his fervent love. Osborne attempts to portray Jimmy as a profoundly masculine figure, yet the audience is left to question how much of this persona is genuine and how much is a facade.

Alison Porter is described as a woman who has been worn down by the hardships of life. Osborne employs the term “malaise” to capture the sense that her life has not unfolded as she had hoped, leaving her in a state of disillusionment.

Cliff is depicted as an amiable individual, unremarkable in his physical characteristics. He stands in stark contrast to the kind of person Jimmy aspires to be, yet there's an underlying similarity between them that Jimmy may not fully recognize or acknowledge. Cliff seems to intuitively grasp the dynamics of their relationship, which is why he endures Jimmy's verbal abuse with good-natured patience.

The opening scene employs gender stereotypes to define the characters. Jimmy is seen smoking a pipe and reading a newspaper, while Alison is engaged in ironing. These activities symbolize the characters' attempts to conform to societal roles and expectations, despite the fact that these roles have left them feeling miserable and resentful.

The play begins in April, a reference to T.S. Eliot's line from “The Waste Land”: “April is the cruellest month.” Eliot's name recurs throughout the play, serving as a quintessential English cultural reference for Jimmy. This love-hate relationship with British culture mirrors Jimmy's struggle to maintain a fervent sense of patriotism while harbouring pessimism about the state of English society.

The apartment flat they inhabit becomes a symbol of 1950s domesticity. The staging of the play is crucial for conveying a mood of domestic turmoil. The room is cluttered with old furniture, half-read newspapers, and worn clothing, mirroring the characters and their modest lifestyles. Like discarded items or old furniture, Jimmy, Cliff, and Alison are figuratively tucked away in an attic, hidden from the upper-class culture. Their emotions and aspirations clash with the world of the upper class, causing considerable frustration for Jimmy. The cramped space serves as a microcosm of their meagre domestic existence.

Jimmy's political and social views also become apparent as he mocks a fictitious newspaper column penned by the “Bishop of Bromley.” He sees himself as unconventional and disconnected from traditional British



politics, declaring that no political party would want him. Although his beliefs often align with the Liberal party, he also harbours anarchist tendencies, opposing any form of organization, whether political or religious.

The banter between Cliff and Jimmy initially appears playful but masks the underlying tension and anger simmering beneath their relationships. This tension soon escalates, revealing one of the play's central themes. Above all else, Jimmy is preoccupied with "enthusiasm" and a passionate approach to life. He characterizes others as slothful and apathetic, including Alison and Cliff. Jimmy vividly recalls individuals from his past, such as Alison's friend Webster and his former girlfriend Madeline, who ignited his passion. He suggests that these people understood him because they recognized his yearning for a more fervent and vibrant existence. Jimmy's anger stems from his inability to inspire similar sentiments in those around him.

The play's title hints at a recurring theme: Jimmy's frustration with the waning political, military, and social dominance of the British past. His remarks about the "American age" underscore his nostalgia for the former British empire. He simultaneously antagonizes those who refuse to accept that the empire has dissolved, like Alison's father, whom he disparages as a fool, while passionately clinging to his patriotism, equating it with a genuine and meaningful life. For Jimmy, the British empire represents a historical period during which Englishmen could truly be themselves, and he views the current "American age" as dreary by comparison, except for those who are American.

**Jimmy's Trumpet Playing:** Jimmy's trumpet playing serves as a symbolic allusion to the mid-20th century British fascination with Black American jazz culture. When Jimmy plays the trumpet, it represents his admiration for a culture that he believes is truly vibrant and alive. This theme of seeking vitality and authenticity in contrast to the mundanity of domestic life is a common thread in literature and popular culture from that era. For Jimmy, Black American jazz culture symbolizes a kind of "natural" humanity that he longs for but feels disconnected from.

**Alison's Fear and Dilemma:** Alison's fear and dilemma are revealed in her private conversation with Cliff. She is reluctant to tell Jimmy about her pregnancy because she doesn't want to "trap" him. This irony lies in

the fact that Jimmy already feels trapped in a domestic, unfulfilling life. This tension highlights Alison's character, torn between conforming to the conservative familial structure of her upbringing and her deep love for Jimmy, which makes her prioritize his needs over her own.

**Affectionate Relationship Between Alison and Cliff:** The play also explores the affectionate relationship between Alison and Cliff. Their closeness is paradoxical because they have a physical connection, often touching and hugging, yet it doesn't seem to incite jealousy or strong emotions in Jimmy. Their dynamic reveals that Cliff provides Alison with the affection she desires, while also offering the masculine friendship and confidence that Jimmy seeks. It's almost as though Jimmy subconsciously understands that their relationship won't progress beyond a certain point due to the malaise he accuses them of having.

**Helena's Arrival:** Helena's arrival introduces another layer of tension. She possesses a sense of matriarchal authority that makes men anxious to please and impress her, which starkly contrasts with Jimmy's vehement opposition to her. Although Helena maintains her dignity in the face of Jimmy's attacks, the strain starts to wear on her.

**Jimmy's Anger and Frustration:** Jimmy's anger and frustration continue to be central themes. He demands allegiance from those around him, both to himself and to his beliefs and the past. His anger is portrayed as a reaction to the emasculation he perceives in a feminized society, reflecting the cultural context of the 1950s.

**Alison's Background and Early Marriage:** Alison shares details of her early marriage with Hugh Tanner, including their financial struggles and crashing parties of wealthy families. This period illustrates her isolation from her own family and the sacrifices she made to be with Jimmy. Her recollections provide insights into her complex relationship with Jimmy.

As the Act progresses, the tensions and conflicts between the characters continue to build, setting the stage for further exploration of their complex dynamics and individual struggles.

## Act II Scene I

In Act II of the play, several significant themes and character dynamics are explored:

**Helena Charles vs. Alison Porter:** Helena Charles is introduced as a character who is in many ways the opposite of Alison. While they share a common upbringing, Helena comes from the upper class and exudes self-assured sophistication, whereas Alison, who is working-class, appears tired and lacks the same level of refinement due to her relationship with Jimmy. Helena's profession as an actress leads her into a bohemian lifestyle, making her distinct from the domesticated female figure that Alison seems to have become.

**The Impact of Helena's Presence:** Alison's line, "things seem to be very different," when Helena is in the house foreshadows a pivotal conversation later in the play. It's ironic that Alison expresses this sentiment in a positive light, while Cliff later uses a similar phrase in a negative context. This underscores the idea that the men in the play find normalcy in the contentious relationship between Jimmy and Alison, while the women feel a lack of peace and contentment.

**Emotional Slothfulness:** Alison's explanation of her relationship with Cliff hints at the emotional slothfulness that exists in the lives of both Alison and Jimmy. They are comfortable in their relationship, but this comfort seems to stifle the intensity of their passion for each other. This emotional complacency is contrasted with the idea of living life with genuine enthusiasm, which is a central theme in Jimmy's character.

**Chivalry and Masculinity:** Alison's stories of meeting Jimmy and their party-crashing adventures provide insight into the concept of masculine chivalry in the 20th century. Jimmy is portrayed as both a charming suitor and a barbaric figure, reflecting the duality of his character. Alison's narrative links Jimmy to a British past, despite his constant reminders that the past has faded away.

**The Bear and Squirrel Game:** The symbolism of the bear and squirrel game is explained by Alison. In their game, Jimmy and Alison adopt the roles of these stuffed animals, allowing them to express "dumb, uncomplicated affection for each other." This game serves as an escape from the complexities and hardships of their real lives, offering a retreat into a childlike innocence and simplicity. It also reflects the shared sense of a lost childhood that both Jimmy and Alison have experienced.

Overall, Act II delves deeper into the complexities of the characters' relationships, their individual struggles, and the contrasting dynamics between Alison, Helena, and Jimmy. The themes of passion, emotional complacency, and the search for authenticity continue to be prominent in the unfolding of the narrative.

Act II of the play is marked by intense confrontations and emotional turmoil among the characters:

**Jimmy's Song and Poem:** Jimmy begins Act II by singing a song he composed titled "You can quit hanging round my counter Mildred, 'cos you'll find my position is closed." The song reflects his frustration with women and his desire for solitude. He also mentions a poem he wrote titled "The Cess Pool," which he believes Helena will appreciate for its theological and literary references.

**Helena's Confrontation:** Helena confronts Jimmy about his unpleasant demeanor and questions why he must always be so difficult to be around. Jimmy enjoys provoking her and goading her into a heated exchange.

**Alison's Church Visit:** Alison, surprising Jimmy, announces that she's going to church. This decision puzzles him, given the lengths he went to rescue her from her family's influence.

**Jimmy's Rant and Anger:** Jimmy goes on a rant about Alison's mother, expressing his disdain for her and the middle-aged "mummies" who oppose him. His anger escalates, and he directs harsh words at Helena as well. He threatens to write a book about everyone in the room, capturing their time together "in fire, and blood."

**Alison's Struggle:** Alison tries to defend herself and her choices. She suggests that Jimmy would be lost without his suffering. The argument intensifies, and Alison throws a glass in frustration.

**Jimmy's Revelation:** Jimmy shares a deeply personal story about watching his father's slow death when he was just ten years old. This traumatic experience shaped his understanding of love, betrayal, and death, and he contrasts it with Helena's seemingly sheltered life.

**Helena's Departure:** After the heated exchange, Helena decides to leave, taking Alison with her. She's arranged for Alison's father to come and take her home, as she believes it's best for Alison to leave Jimmy.

**Cliff's Perspective:** Cliff reflects on the ongoing turmoil within the group, expressing his love for both Alison and Jimmy but acknowledging that things have been challenging since Helena's arrival.

**Jimmy's Urgent News:** Jimmy informs the group that Hugh's mother is dying and that he needs Alison to come with him to visit her. Alison is torn between staying with Jimmy or leaving with Helena.

The act ends with Alison leaving with her prayer book, and Jimmy, shocked and defeated, reacting by throwing a teddy bear across the room and burying himself in the bedcovers. The act is marked by intense emotional conflicts, highlighting the strained relationships and emotional struggles of the characters.

### Commentary

Alison's announcement of her intention to attend church with Helena marks a rare moment in the play where Jimmy genuinely expresses surprise and shock at his wife's actions. Even when she leaves him and keeps her pregnancy a secret, Jimmy seems to accept these actions as they align with his perception of her. However, going to church contradicts this image he has of Alison. In Jimmy's eyes, church attendance is linked to her past, a past from which he believes he rescued her like a knight in shining armour.

Alison's decision to attend church also ties into the theme of loyalty that she discussed with Helena earlier in the act. Jimmy, she confides in Helena, expects unwavering loyalty from those in his life, whether it's concerning his political beliefs or his past relationships. Going to church, in Jimmy's view, signifies a breach of loyalty to him, providing a rationale for his further humiliating behavior toward her.

This section of Act II also offers insight into Jimmy's misogynistic views, which some believe the playwright, Osborne, shared to an extent with his character. His verbal assaults on Alison's mother exemplify this in the play. Jimmy is particularly harsh toward older, upper-class women, with Alison's mother embodying this archetype. He hurls insults at her and even paints a gruesome picture of her demise. It's revealed that Alison's mother took drastic measures, including hiring a private detective, to try to end Alison's relationship with Jimmy. This appears to be the trigger for Jimmy's intense resentment towards women like her mother.

Jimmy then redirects his hostility towards Helena, attacking her character and her values. Because she is a churchgoer and appears

respectable, Jimmy accuses her of living in a bygone era. He claims to possess a unique understanding of the world, one that Helena and most others do not share. To him, traditional morality holds no significance in the modern world. At best, he views the church as a tool of political and social power, a sentiment echoed in his earlier mockery of church figures, such as the Bishop of Bromley in Act I. At worst, he sees the church as irrelevant.

In an attempt to illustrate the irrelevance of morality, Jimmy challenges Helena to slap his face, warning her that he won't show chivalry and will retaliate if she does. Helena faces a difficult choice: either resort to violence, abandoning her moral principles, or let Jimmy attack her, relinquishing her bourgeois feminist pride. Ultimately, Jimmy prevents her from making the choice by changing the topic. He inquires whether she has experienced true suffering. By doing so, Jimmy aims to reduce Helena to a state similar to Alison's—a naive individual who has not endured hardship and, therefore, cannot grasp the essence of real life.

The audience then gains insight into Jimmy's personal suffering, including witnessing his father's death at a young age without any support from his family. This early experience of suffering haunts Jimmy, making him feel superior to others and yearning for a more authentic existence. As neither Helena nor Alison have endured such pain, Jimmy believes they haven't truly entered the real world. This irony is heightened by the fact that it's Alison who suffers most under Jimmy's cruel outbursts.

The scene's climax revolves around suffering as a pivotal point of contention between Alison and Jimmy. With Hugh's mother on her deathbed, Jimmy cannot bear the suffering alone and implores Alison to accompany him. However, Alison, aware that her father is coming to pick her up the next day to take her away, opts to go with Helena instead. It's a choice for a world that Jimmy perceives as somehow unreal, and he is profoundly devastated by her decision.

## **Act II - Scene II**

The second scene of Act Two opens on the following evening, with Alison busy at her dressing table, packing a suitcase. Seated across the room is her father, Colonel Redfern, an attractive man in his late sixties. He carries an air of kindness and gentleness, a contrast to his former role as a dedicated and stern soldier of forty years. The Colonel is deeply troubled and bewildered by the unfolding events involving his daughter.



Curious about Jimmy's whereabouts, the Colonel inquires, and Alison informs him that Jimmy has gone to visit Mrs. Tanner in London. She goes on to recount how Mrs. Tanner helped Jimmy establish the sweet stall and how he has maintained a fondness for her over the years. The Colonel questions why Jimmy, an educated young man, chose to work at a sweet stall, and Alison explains that he tried various occupations, including journalism, advertising, and even briefly selling vacuum cleaners. Surprisingly, Jimmy appeared content with this unconventional work.

As Alison and her father delve into her life with Jimmy, she reveals Jimmy's strong disdain for her family and his belief that it amounts to "high treason" for Alison to remain connected with them. The Colonel confesses to Alison that he believes her mother went too far in her condemnation of Jimmy. He shares how her mother despised Jimmy and saw him as a criminal, a sentiment he resented. He admits, "All those inquiries, the private detectives—the accusations. I hated every moment of it." Alison suggests that her mother may have been trying to protect her, but the Colonel wishes they had never meddled in their daughter's life.

The Colonel raises the notion that perhaps both he and Alison bear responsibility for the current situation. This idea shocks Alison, but her father explains that she shares his inclination to "sit on the fence because it's comfortable and more peaceful." He reminds her of how he once threatened her, yet she chose to marry Jimmy regardless.

Alison proceeds to share Jimmy's harsh remarks about her parents. She discloses that Jimmy called her mother an "overprivileged old bitch" and referred to the Colonel as a relic "from the Edwardian Wilderness that can't understand why the sun isn't shining anymore." Perplexed, the Colonel questions why Jimmy married her if he held such opinions. Alison speculates that Jimmy might have married her out of a sense of revenge. She suggests that Jimmy may have aspired to be another Shelley, with her as Mary and the Colonel as William Godwin. She reflects that when she met Jimmy, he challenged her to rise to his level, a gauntlet she felt compelled to accept. The Colonel can't comprehend why young people can't simply marry for love.

The Colonel concedes that Jimmy might be correct in labelling him an old Edwardian. He shares his story of leaving England in 1914 to command the Maharajah's army in India, a place where he found happiness. He didn't return to Britain until 1947, only to discover that the England he

left behind had changed drastically. He reminisces about the last day he felt the sun shining as he departed from India, a moment he realized that everything had irrevocably transformed. Alison draws a parallel between the two men in her life: "You're hurt because everything is changed. Jimmy is hurt because everything is the same. And neither of you can face it."

Amidst her packing, Alison briefly considers taking a squirrel figurine but ultimately decides against it. This moment signifies a critical choice for her. She goes to her father, leans against him, and weeps. The Colonel acknowledges that her decision to leave with him is a significant step. Alison finishes packing, and Helena enters the room. Alison and the Colonel prepare to depart, with the Colonel inquiring if Helena will join them. She declines, explaining she has a job interview in Birmingham the next day and will stay one more night. Cliff enters, and Alison introduces the two men. The Colonel takes Alison's bag and leaves.

Cliff asks Alison if she wants to inform Jimmy about her departure. She hands him a letter, a conventional gesture, and departs. Alone in the apartment, Cliff and Helena discuss how things will be disrupted in Jimmy's absence. Helena speculates whether Jimmy might seek out one of his old girlfriends, Madeline, but Cliff doubts it. For the first time, Cliff loses his good humor and snaps at Helena. She observes how Jimmy has exposed the vulnerabilities of those around him. Cliff decides to meet Jimmy at the train station and mentions the possibility of having drinks or even engaging a prostitute and bringing her back to the apartment. He tosses Alison's letter to Helena and instructs her to give it to Jimmy.

Helena retrieves a teddy bear from the dresser, falls onto the bed, and clutches it tightly. Unexpectedly, Jimmy storms into the room, seething with anger. He recounts how the Colonel nearly ran him down with his car and how Cliff ignored him on the street. Helena throws the letter at Jimmy, who opens it and reads the initial lines. In the letter, Alison expresses a desperate need for peace and time. She concludes by affirming her enduring love for him.

Jimmy becomes furious, accusing Alison of being insincere. He demands to know why Helena is still present in the apartment. Helena reveals that Alison is pregnant with Jimmy's child. Although initially taken aback, Jimmy confronts Helena and tells her he doesn't care. He challenges Helena to slap his face and recounts how he witnessed Hugh's mother's death over the past eleven hours. Jimmy expresses his belief that Alison

didn't take the situation seriously and, as a result, he's indifferent to her impending motherhood. He instructs Helena to leave, and she complies by slapping his face. Initially surprised, Jimmy eventually allows the raw emotions of the situation to wash over him. He emits a "muffled cry of despair," and then Helena grabs him, and they share a passionate kiss.

### **Commentary**

The second scene of Act II serves as a temporary relief from the intense emotions of previous scenes and introduces Colonel Redfern as a character who challenges Jimmy's perception of the past. At first, Colonel Redfern appears to be a sympathetic character, described as a former military man, suggesting his sternness and emotional rigidity. This portrayal implies that he might be opposed to Jimmy and Alison's relationship, as he embodies the opposite of Jimmy's emotional outbursts.

However, when the Colonel enters the scene, it becomes evident that his character is more complex than Jimmy's caricature. He is physically described as relaxed and softened, demonstrating concern for his daughter. His abrupt arrival to help Alison suggests that Jimmy's understanding of the Colonel's motivations is not entirely accurate.

Jimmy is partly correct in his assessment that the Colonel represents the past. Alison relays Jimmy's insults, in which he describes the Colonel as a relic of the "Edwardian Wilderness." The Edwardian era marked the peak of British culture in the early 20th century, but it also signalled the decline of British prominence, as later events like decolonization and World War II would demonstrate. The Colonel symbolizes the softening of British character, mirroring the collective confusion and disconnect with the present experienced by the older generation in the face of the changing world.

This scene is primarily symbolic, highlighting the contrasting views of the past held by Jimmy and the Colonel. It underscores the idea that the past has consequences for the present, with the Colonel representing resignation and bewilderment and Jimmy symbolizing stagnation and anger.

### **Act III, Scene I**

In Act III, Scene I, which takes place several months later, the atmosphere shifts. Jimmy and Cliff are reading Sunday newspapers in their armchairs, while Helena, who now resides in the apartment, is ironing in

the corner. Jimmy's pipe smoking is discouraged by Cliff, though Helena expresses a liking for it. Jimmy mentions an outrageous tabloid story about a cult, leading to playful banter about the possibility of someone using evil magic on him, invoking humour about Alison's mother performing voodoo rituals. The conversation playfully touches on themes of religion and superstition.

Jimmy reflects on the idea of sacrifice, suggesting that people often give up things they didn't want in the first place. He dismisses admiration for such sacrifices and suggests sympathy instead. The conversation then shifts to a comic routine about "nobody," and they engage in playful banter.

Jimmy's humour leads to the topic of song titles and acts, including one involving Helena. Jimmy jokingly suggests naming their act "T.S. Eliot and Pam." As they continue their comic routines, Cliff and Jimmy engage in physical play-wrestling until Cliff mentions his intention to leave.

Cliff expresses his desire to leave the sweet stall and suggests he might burden Helena less if he goes. Jimmy takes this news casually and speculates that Cliff might find a wealthy woman among Helena's affluent friends. He acknowledges their friendship but feels that Cliff can't fulfil what he's looking for from Helena, expressing frustration about relationships with women in general.

Helena offers to wash Cliff's shirt, and while she's gone, Jimmy reveals that Cliff doesn't like her much. Cliff and Jimmy engage in a discussion about their changing attitudes toward Helena.

Cliff then reveals his intention to leave, citing dissatisfaction with the sweet stall. Jimmy takes this news in stride, suggesting that Cliff might find someone better suited to him among Helena's friends. He reflects on the disillusionment he feels toward relationships with women and the lack of meaningful causes in their generation.

Helena re-enters and gives Cliff his shirt. Jimmy encourages her to cheer up and reveals that Cliff is leaving. He then shares his thoughts about Helena, acknowledging her as both a friend and an adversary. They have a tender moment, expressing their feelings for each other. Helena tells Jimmy that she loves him.

They embrace, and Jimmy proposes starting their act, "T.S. Eliot and Pam," and closing the sweet stall to begin anew. Helena agrees, and they

share their excitement about this new beginning. Jimmy exits to get Cliff, leaving Alison and Helena alone in the room.

### **Commentary**

The opening scene of Act III indeed reflects the domestic setting seen in the play's first scene. It portrays the characters in familiar positions and routines, highlighting that despite the turmoil experienced in previous scenes, some aspects of their lives remain relatively unchanged.

The theme of blood is notable in this scene, symbolizing sacrifice and violence. Jimmy's reference to a brutal ritual involving blood serves as a metaphor for the sacrifices he believes he has made by embracing domesticity with both Alison and Helena. It also alludes to the sexual tension and underlying aggression in his relationships. Jimmy continues to blame Alison's past, represented by her parents, for the sacrifices he perceives he must endure.

Jimmy's staunch opposition to Helena's religious beliefs adds a new layer of conflict to their relationship. He sees traditional religion as a relic of the past, incompatible with the modern world. This antagonism towards religion illustrates Osborne's commentary on the subjective nature of meaning and morality in contemporary society, where individual feelings and experiences take precedence.

The scene contains one of Jimmy's most famous speeches, in which he expresses his belief that there are no longer any worthy causes to die for. He contrasts his generation with previous ones, represented by Colonel Redfern, who were willing to sacrifice themselves for their country and convictions. Jimmy's view of the world as subjective and lacking in noble ideals underscores his sense of being caught between nostalgia for the past and his assessment of the present.

Jimmy's calm acceptance of Cliff's decision to leave is rooted in his nostalgia for the past. While Cliff sees the present as fundamentally changed due to Helena's presence, Jimmy seeks comfort and stability in his memories of the past. He idealizes his relationships, including his friendship with Cliff, and places great importance on loyalty from those in his life.

In essence, this scene serves to highlight the tension between Jimmy's nostalgia for a past era of ideals and his experience of a modern world characterized by subjectivity, individualism, and a lack of clear moral

foundations. It also underscores the evolving dynamics between the characters and the ongoing conflicts within their relationships.

### **Act III - Scene II**

In this poignant scene from Act III, the audience witnesses a complex interplay of emotions and relationships among the characters, particularly Jimmy, Alison, and Helena.

The scene begins with Jimmy playing his trumpet in Cliff's room, creating a sense of tension and unease. Helena is seen taking care of Alison, who is not feeling well. Alison's presence in the apartment adds a layer of discomfort and emotional complexity to the situation.

Alison expresses her feelings of unease about coming to visit, as if she couldn't believe she was making the trip. She acknowledges the strained dynamics in the apartment and worries about a breach between herself and Jimmy. Helena reassures Alison that she has every right to be there and that she should not feel like an intruder. Their conversation highlights the conflict between traditional values (represented by Alison's former marriage) and Helena's belief in personal consent and modern relationships.

The discussion between Alison and Helena also touches on the theme of right and wrong. Helena believes in clear moral distinctions and feels that her actions have been wrong. She has come to realize the moral conflict in her relationship with Jimmy and cannot continue living in that manner. This theme contrasts with Jimmy's more subjective and self-centred view of morality.

When Alison questions whether Helena was in love with Jimmy, it reveals the complexity of their relationships. Helena admits her love for Jimmy but also expresses her belief that Jimmy is out of place in the modern world, which further deepens the emotional turmoil.

Helena's decision to leave Jimmy, despite her love for him, emphasizes her commitment to her own moral values. She cannot continue to live in a way that she perceives as morally wrong. This decision creates a sense of impending loss and separation.

Jimmy's reaction to Helena's departure is marked by resignation and a sense of loss. He believes that both women are trying to escape the pain of existence and love and criticizes their attempts to remain morally pure.



His speech about love and the need to “dirty up your hands” reflects his view of love as a messy and imperfect experience.

As Helena departs, Jimmy’s emotions become more evident. He feels the weight of her departure and realizes the depth of his own feelings. His reminiscence about the night they met and his admiration for her relaxed spirit reveal a vulnerable side of him.

Alison’s emotional breakdown and her desire to be a “lost cause” show her own struggle with the complexities of life and love. Jimmy’s attempt to comfort her and their shared moment of tenderness signify a deeper connection between them, despite their tumultuous history.

Overall, this scene explores the themes of morality, love, and the messy realities of human relationships. It highlights the characters’ inner conflicts and their attempts to navigate a world that challenges their beliefs and values.

### **Commentary**

In the second scene of the Third Act, the play reaches its emotional climax and provides resolution to the complex relationships and conflicts that have unfolded throughout the narrative.

Cliff’s decision to leave serves as a turning point in the play. His departure signifies the irreparable changes in their lives and relationships. While Cliff’s exact motivations remain ambiguous, it is evident that the transformation in their dynamics and his realization that Jimmy is unlikely to change have played a significant role in his decision. His departure marks a departure from the tumultuous world of Jimmy’s emotional intensity.

Alison and Helena, in their conversation about Jimmy’s character, provide different perspectives on him. Helena sees Jimmy as a figure stuck in the turbulence of the French Revolution, symbolizing his emotional anarchy and turmoil. In contrast, Alison views him as an “Eminent Victorian,” highlighting his longing for an idealized past. These differing interpretations reflect the complexity of Jimmy’s character and the impact of his past experiences, particularly the death of his father.

Helena’s decision to leave Jimmy underscores her moral values and the moral conflict at the heart of the play. She acknowledges the wrongness of her actions and cannot continue living in a way that contradicts her

beliefs. Her departure represents a moral stance against the subjective and often amoral world portrayed in the play.

The final scene between Alison and Jimmy is a poignant moment of understanding and reconciliation. Alison's revelation about losing their unborn child elicits a powerful reaction from Jimmy, though the play does not delve into the full extent of his emotions. Their return to the game of bear and squirrel represents a coping mechanism, a way to escape the harsh realities of their lives by creating a fictional world. It reflects Osborne's assertion that fiction and fantasy can offer solace and respite from the challenges of the real world.

Overall, the conclusion of *Look Back in Anger* leaves the audience with a sense of emotional closure, though the characters' futures remain uncertain. The play explores themes of love, morality, suffering, and the human capacity to create alternative realities to cope with the complexities of modern life.

## 5.5 Major Themes

*Look Back in Anger* by John Osborne explores several major themes that reflect the social and cultural landscape of post-World War II Britain:

### The Angry Young Man

This play is often associated with the emergence of the "Angry Young Man" as a cultural and literary archetype. Jimmy Porter, the central character, embodies the anger and frustration of a generation disillusioned with the social and political structures of post-war Britain. He criticizes the establishment and directs his anger toward those around him, particularly his wife, Alison. The Angry Young Man represents the alienation and social discontent of the working class.

### Kitchen Sink Drama

*Look Back in Anger* is a quintessential example of Kitchen Sink drama, a genre that focuses on realism and domestic settings to explore social relationships. It diverged from earlier forms of theatre that often depicted the lives of the upper class. Kitchen Sink dramas aimed to bring the struggles and inequalities of working-class people to the forefront. They were characterized by their leftist ideologies and unvarnished portrayal of emotion.

**Loss of Childhood:** The theme of a lost childhood is central to the characters of Jimmy and Alison Porter. Jimmy's traumatic experience of losing his father at a young age and witnessing his decline shapes his worldview and emotional struggles. Alison's loss of childhood is evident in her premature marriage to Jimmy and the abuse she endures. The play suggests that a whole generation of British youth has experienced a loss of innocence due to the social and political changes of the time.

**Real Life vs. The Mundane:** Jimmy's quest for a more authentic and emotionally charged life is a recurring theme. He criticizes the emotional emptiness he perceives in the world around him, including newspapers and the people in his life. Jimmy's anger is his way of resisting complacency and striving for a more genuine existence. The play argues for the restoration of raw emotion and passion in a society becoming increasingly detached.

### **Sloth in British Culture**

Jimmy compares his desire for a vibrant life to the perceived slothfulness of British culture. He doesn't see a nihilistic void but rather a cultural lethargy, a failure to fully engage with life and its passions. His anger serves as an attempt to awaken those around him from this cultural slumber.

### **The Rise and Fall of the British Empire**

Colonel Redfern, Alison's father, symbolizes the decline of the British Empire and the nostalgia for a bygone era of imperial glory. The play highlights the disconnect between Britain's former power and its present status, reflecting a broader national denial about the changing global landscape.

**Masculinity in Art:** The play has been criticized for its portrayal of masculinity, with Jimmy's anger and cruelty towards women and homosexuals raising concerns. However, Osborne argues that he is attempting to restore a sense of authentic masculinity in a culture he views as increasingly feminized. His vision of masculinity emphasizes raw emotion and passionate engagement with life.

### **Kitchen Sink Drama in British Literary History**

*Look Back in Anger* is part of the broader movement of Kitchen Sink drama, which shifted the focus of British theatre from the public lives of

the upper class to the intimate settings of working-class domestic life. These plays depicted the struggles and emotions of ordinary people and challenged established theatrical conventions.

Overall, “Look Back in Anger” is a powerful exploration of the social and cultural tensions of its time, using the characters and their relationships to dissect the complexities of post-war Britain.

## 5.6 Let Us Sum Up

We have looked at the origin of drama, the development of English drama and closely studied a few important plays that are important in the English literary history. Drama because of the performance aspect has great proximity to the consumers of it. The readers at once become spectators too. The sheer power of imagination allows the reader to visualise the episodes in the play and this provides great aesthetic appeal to the written text. Thus, drama is interactive in a sense as it involves the intersemiotic aesthetic representation. The textuality is intertwined with the performative aspects. These attributes actually ensure the closeness of drama to the human experiences.

When we discuss human experiences, we see that literature represents the human miseries, happiness and angst of existence. Thus, if literature mirrors life, drama also functions as a mirror that captures the social, political and cultural upheavals that occur periodically. If we look at the plots of drama, we see a slice of society being represented there. *King Lear* is a social tragedy, *Macbeth* is a political tragedy and *Othello* is a domestic tragedy. We see the society and its functioning in each of these examples. In *Macbeth* we see how pride and power corrupt humans and lead to catastrophic ends. Similarly, in each of the plays we discussed here, we could see life being represented or reflected.

Not only the major individual traits of human life but the collective social traits get represented in drama. A society's collective attitudes, affirmations, taboos and values are reflected in the drama that is produced during the time. So, we have the kitchen sink drama as we see in Osborne's play. We also have the Victorian hypocrisy being evident in *The Importance of Being Earnest*. Owing to its organic and interactive nature, drama even when it appears as the written text influences the readers/audience's mind.

## 5.7 Review Questions

**How do you evaluate *Look Back in Anger* as a play that established a particular cult in English drama?**

*Look Back in Anger* is a modern play written by John Osborne in 1956. The play features the life of a young working-class couple who try to work through their personal and marital issues. The protagonist of the play, Jimmy Porter, soon became a representative figure of the post-war generation men of Britain - Jimmy is an angry young man who is frustrated with his life and carries the trauma of war. He is not satisfied with the mediocre and is always in search of something extraordinary in his life. Adding to this, Jimmy is also psychotic and oedipal.

The “Angry Young Man” movement had been brewing in Britain for a while, and this play became the crowning moment of the movement. Although the movement was not an organised one, the works of many writers reflected some similar themes that were characteristic of the movement.

### **Discuss the “Angry Young Man” Movement**

One of the most famous cults in post-war Britain was the “Angry Young Men” - the movement solidified in the 1950s. The name is supposedly derived from Leslie Paul’s autobiography *Angry Young Man*, released in 1951. The group consisted of novelists and playwrights who came from middle or working-class families and were fed up with the post-war “sociopolitical order” of Britain. (Source: Britannica)

Some of the common themes found in the works that belonged to this movement are:

- Hatred towards the upper class
- Sardonic humour
- Frustration and rebellion against authority
- Pride in working-class mannerisms

(Source: *Angry Young Men*, British Literary Group, Britannica, 2021)

Other notable writers of this group include Kingsley Amis (author of *Lucky Jim*, 1954), Alan Sillitoe (author of *Saturday Night and Sunday Morning*, 1951), and John Wain (author of *Hurry on Down*, 1953).

## 5.8 Self-study questions

1. Explore the elements of misogyny present in the play *Look Back in Anger*.
2. How does the characterization of cliff in the play *Look Back in Anger* contribute to the growth of the protagonist?
3. **Why does Jimmy see suffering as a crucial event for living a “real” life in the play *Look Back in Anger*?**
4. **Osborne’s play *Look Back in Anger* is an important play under Angry Young Man Movement. Explain.**
5. **Explore the root causes of Jimmy Porter’s anger in *Look Back in Anger*.**
6. Do Jimmy and Helena have an affair in *Look Back in Anger*? Explore the relationship between Jimmy Porter and his wife in the play.
7. How is Jimmy Porter’s hatred of the Establishment associated with Alison?
8. “You are hurt because everything is changed, Jimmy is hurt because everything is same”. Who made this comment in the play *Look Back in Anger*? Why?
9. Comment on John Osborne’s use of humour in his play *Look Back in Anger*.
10. Explain about the use of flashback technique in the play *Look Back in Anger*.

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