

**Institute of Distance and Open Learning
GAUHATI UNIVERSITY**

**MA in English
Semester 3**

**Paper XII
Drama II - Modern Drama**

**Block 1
Modern Drama**



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August, 2011

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Acknowledgement

The Institute of Distance and Open Learning, Gauhati University duly acknowledges the financial assistance from the Distance Education Council, IGNOU, New Delhi, for preparation of this material.

Block Introduction:

This is the first block of Paper 12 on modern drama. Here, our attempt is to discuss as well as analyze the meaning of the 'modern' in modern European and British drama. The first unit is designed to explore the idea of the 'modern' in drama with special reference to the great innovators of modern drama. Since the term 'modern' resists any definitive categorization, modern drama, too remains more of a fluid category. Eric Bentley in *The Theory of the Modern Stage*, traces the 'modern' trends in European to the mid – eighteenth century. Changes appear on the stage with the work of dramatists like Richard Wagner, W. B Yeats, Emile Zola and Bernard Shaw. Bentley lists ten great innovators of world drama who introduced theories and techniques that departed from convention and which are rightfully to be considered as being modern. Before the work of pioneers like Henrik Ibsen of Norway, August Strindberg of Sweden, and George Bernard Shaw of Ireland, it is difficult to describe or to define what drama look like in the modern period. Of course, you must understand that drama is not 'modern' simply because it is created in the modern period. The pioneers we have mentioned began with breaking away from the kind of theatre that characterised much of 19th century dramatic works. Instead of continuing with the earlier realism of the 'well-made' plays which resulted in too much moralising, sensationalism, and farcical melodrama modern dramatists encouraged the audience to participate in a kind of 'open- endedness'. What this amounted to was what Shaw called in his book *The Quintessence of Ibsenism* (1891), a 'socially conscious drama'. In that sense modern drama has always emphasised experimentation, where rather than the plot it is the open-ended discussion which invited the spectator to participate in the discourse rather than remaining a passive audience. Modern drama, in the hands of such pioneers, was highly influenced by the ideas surrounding realism, expressionism, surrealism, absurdism, epic theatre, agit-prop, and meta-theatre.

Unit 2 deals with *Pygmalion* by George Bernard Shaw. This play can be read in the context of the history of drama in the modern period as Shaw is regarded as the first *modern* British dramatist. With several film versions

and musical dramas, of all of Shaw's plays, *Pygmalion* is without any doubt one of the most popularly received plays. The block, therefore, aims to make you critically equipped to explore the issues central to the discussion of the 'modern' in drama.

In this block we have the following units:

Unit 1: Introduction to Modern Drama

Unit 2: George Bernard Shaw: *Pygmalion*

Unit 1

Introduction to Modern Drama

Contents:

- 1.1 Objectives
- 1.2 Introduction
- 1.3 The Great Innovators
- 1.4 Understanding the 'modern' in English Drama
- 1.5 Understanding the 'modern' in European/American Drama
- 1.6 A New 'Tradition' of Modern Drama
- 1.7 Summing up
- 1.8 References and Suggested Readings

1.1 OBJECTIVES

After you finish reading this unit, you should be able to

- *discuss* the meaning of the 'modern' in modern drama
- *list* the names of the great innovators of modern drama from around the world
- *explain* the idea of the 'modern' in British drama
- *discuss* the idea of the 'modern' in European drama
- *analyse* 'modernism' in world drama

1.2 INTRODUCTION

Before the work of pioneers like Henrik Ibsen of Norway, August Strindberg of Sweden, and George Bernard Shaw of Ireland, it is difficult to describe or to define what drama look like in the modern period. Of course, you must understand that drama is not 'modern' simply because it is created in the modern period. The pioneers we have mentioned began with breaking away from the kind of theatre that characterised much of 19th century dramatic works. Instead of continuing with the earlier realism of the 'well-made' plays which resulted in too much moralising, sensationalism, and farcical melodrama modern dramatists encouraged the audience to participate in a

kind of ‘open-endedness’. What this amounted to was what Shaw called in his book, *The Quintessence of Ibsenism* (1891) a ‘socially conscious drama’. In that sense modern drama has always made important a sense of experimentation, where rather than the plot it is the open-ended discussion which invited the spectator to participate in and not remain a passive audience. Modern drama, in the hands of such pioneers made use of, besides realism, expressionism, surrealism, absurdism, epic theatre, agit-prop, and meta-theatre.

1.3 THE GREAT INNOVATORS

(Some ideas and information on these great innovators are adapted from Wikipedia)

Eric Bentley in *The Theory of the Modern Stage*, traces the ‘modern’ in drama to the mid – eighteenth century. Changes appear on the stage with the work of dramatists like Richard Wagner, W. B Yeats, Emile Zola and Bernard Shaw. Bentley lists ten great innovators of world drama who introduced theories and techniques that departed from convention and which are rightfully to be considered as being modern.

Subsequently, he makes a list of ten all time great innovators of world drama. These innovators are called modern because the theories and techniques of drama which they formulated are not to be found in conventional drama. In this section, I have tried to focus on some of these great innovators and their innovative contributions.

Adolphe Appia: (1862-1928):

The Swiss architect and theorist of stage-lighting and décor, Appia was born in Geneva. Best known for his scenic designs for Wagner’s Operas, Appia rejected painted ‘two-dimensional sets’ for ‘three-dimensional living sets’ as he believed that shade was as necessary as light to form a connection between the actor and the setting of the performance. Thus, he made himself the pioneer of modern staging in general. In the subsequent periods, theatre directors and designers have both taken great inspiration from the works of Adolphe Appia, whose design theories and conceptualizations of Wagner’s Operas have helped to shape modern perceptions of the relationship between

the function of space and lighting. The significance of Appia's works and theories lies also in the fact that he was working at a time when electrical lighting was just evolving.

Antonin Artaud: (1896-1948):

The French playwright, poet, actor and theatre director, Antonin Artaud was a significant member of the French theatrical avant-garde between the two World Wars. Artaud believed that theatre should affect the audience as much as possible. So, he used a mixture of strange and disturbing forms of lighting, sound, and other performance elements. In his book *The Theatre and Its Double* (1938), which contained the first and second manifesto for a "Theatre of Cruelty", Artaud expressed his admiration for Eastern forms of theatre, particularly the Balinese. He admired Eastern theatre because of the codified, highly ritualized and precise physicality of Balinese dance performance, and advocated what he called a "Theatre of Cruelty". At one point, he stated that by 'cruelty' he meant not exclusively sadism or causing pain, but often a violent, physical determination to shatter false reality. He believed that the idea of a dramatic 'text' had been a tyrant over meaning, and advocated, instead, for a theatre made up of a unique language, halfway between thought and gesture.

Stop to Consider:

Antonin Artaud, surrealism and modernism

Artaud emphasised the role of surrealism in the theatre in his search for the total liberty that he thought would make drama the adequate art form capable of projecting the catastrophic conditions that the modern world seemed to promise. Realising that old values could no longer offer meaning to modern civilisation, he declared realism and all its traditional forms of representation, declaring traditional "master pieces" to be irrelevant.

However, the most significant and influential development of Surrealism in the theatre came with Antonin Artaud, who rejected everything ethereal in pursuit of "the truthful precipitate of dreams . . . imprinted with terror and cruelty." Artaud's principles are essentially modernist - his aim being specifically "to return to the theatre that total liberty which exists in contemporary music, poetry, or painting, and of which it has been curiously bereft up till now." Like many of

his contemporaries in the 1920s and earlier, Artaud was sensitive to the destabilizing effect of modern conditions, of being faced with a period “when the world . . . sees its old values crumble.” He attacked realism, and all traditional European forms of representation by proclaiming all “masterpieces” as irrelevant. He worked for direct communication and explored irrationality. As Eric Bentley writes Artaud’s manifestos shed lights on the phenomenon which Mr. Martin Esslin has called ‘Theatre of the Absurd.’

Bertolt Brecht: (1898-1956):

The German poet, playwright, and theatre director, Bertolt Brecht worked with Piscator, another German Theater director, and developed his concept of an “epic theatre”, which broke down characterization by emphasizing the act of acting. Since his first plays were ‘expressionist’, his work effectively moved towards the major streams of theatrical Modernism. Brecht dismissed both the “Aristotelian” dramatic forms and “culinary” commercial entertainment, and in 1929 posed a question that remains the fundamental challenge for contemporary theatre too: “Can we speak of money in iambs? . . . Even to dramatize a simple newspaper report one needs something much more than the dramatic technique of a Hebbel or an Ibsen.” It is a typically modernist question; and for Brecht the only solution was to represent the world “as being capable of transformation.” That formed the thesis of *Man is Man* in 1926, which demonstrates that personality is completely changeable, indeed interchangeable, being the product of social conditioning.

Brecht’s actors were also trained to present their roles objectively: for instance, through rehearsing speeches replacing the first-person “I” with “s/he said . . .” Frequently masked, his actors were required to demonstrate the act of acting instead of pretending to “be” the characters, an approach derived partly from Chinese theatre. The aim was to prevent empathy, although the effect was a precise theatrical rendering of the fragmented and dissociated personality that preoccupied the modernist poets and painters. This is what formed his notions of ‘epic theatre’.

Stop to Consider:

Epic Theatre

Epic theatre was a theatrical movement arising in the early to mid-20th century from the theories and practice of a number of theatre practitioners like – Erwin

Piscator, Vladimir Mayakovsky, Vsevolod Meyerhold and, most significantly, Bertolt Brecht. Epic theatre incorporates a mode of acting that utilises what he calls 'gestus'. The epic form describes both a type of written drama and a methodological approach to the production of plays: "Its qualities of clear description and reporting and its use of choruses and projections as a means of commentary earned it the name 'epic'." Brecht however, preferred another term "dialectical theatre" to it. One of the goals of epic theatre is for the audience to always be aware that it is watching a play: "It is most important that one of the main features of the ordinary theatre should be excluded from [epic theatre]: the engendering of illusion."

Gordon Craig: (1872-1966):

Edward Henry Gordon Craig, commonly known as Gordon Craig, was an English modernist theatre practitioner. He worked as an actor, director and scenic designer. Craig is famous for a number of innovations like the use of neutral, mobile, non-representational screens as a staging device. In 1910, Craig filed a patent which described in considerable technical detail a system of hinged and fixed flats that could be quickly arranged to cater for both internal and external scenes. He presented a set to William Butler Yeats for use at the Abbey Theatre in Ireland, who shared his symbolist aesthetic. Craig's second innovation can be located in stage lighting. Doing away with traditional footlights, Craig lit the stage from above, placing lights in the ceiling of the theatre. Colour and light also became central to Craig's stage conceptualisations. The third remarkable aspect of Craig's experiments in theatrical form was his attempts to integrate design elements with his work with actors. He promoted a theatre focused on the craft of the director – a theatre where action, words, colour and rhythm combine in dynamic dramatic form.

Stop to Consider:

Gordon Craig wrote *On the Art of the Theatre* (1911) as a dialogue between a playgoer and a stage director, who examine the problems of the nature of stage directing. Craig argues that it was not dramatists, but rather performers who made the first works of drama, using action, words, line, colour and rhythm. Craig goes on to contend that only the director who seeks to interpret drama truly, and commits to training in all aspects of dramatic art, can restore the "Art of the

Theatre.” Maintaining that the director should seek a faithful interpretation of the text, Craig argues that audiences go to the theatre to see, rather than to hear, plays. The design elements may transcend reality and function as symbols, he thought, thereby communicating a deeper meaning, rather than simply reflecting the real world.

Luigi Pirandello: (1867-1936):

Luigi Pirandello was an Italian dramatist, novelist, and short story writer who won Nobel for Literature in 1934 for his “bold and brilliant renovation of the drama and the stage.” Pirandello’s tragic farces are often seen as forerunners for the ‘Theatre of the Absurd.’ About Pirandello’s, *Six Characters In Search of an Author*, Bernard Shaw wrote: “I have never come across a play *so original*.” To this day, *Six Characters in Search of an Author* is considered a watershed in modern drama. Subsequently, the success of Pirandello’s *Henry IV* consolidated his reputation as one of Italy’s foremost playwrights. During the early decades of the twentieth century, the theatre in Italy was undergoing a radical transformation. In the late 1800s, naturalistic dramas (like those of Henrik Ibsen and Gerhart Hauptman), Sentimental melodramas (like the plays of the younger Alexandre Dumas), and elaborate spectacles had dominated the stage. These trends continued to be performed in the early 1900s. However, another generation of Italian dramatists was emerging to give theatre a bold new voice - many were influenced by the *commedia dell’arte*, a tradition of masked Improvisational comedy that originated in Tuscany during the sixteenth century, then spread throughout Europe, enjoying popular appeal into the early eighteenth century. Pirandello emerged as the best exponent of such drama in Italy during the early part of the 20th century.

Konstantin Stanislavsky: (1863-1938):

Konstantin Sergeyevich Stanislavski was a Russian actor and theatre director. Stanislavski organized his realistic techniques into a coherent and usable ‘system.’ Stanislavski’s ‘system’ acquired an unprecedented ability to cross cultural boundaries and developed an international reach, dominating debates about acting in the West. Stanislavski treated theatre-making as a serious activity that requires dedication, discipline and integrity. Throughout

his life, he subjected his own acting to a process of rigorous artistic self-analysis and reflection. His 'system' resulted from a persistent struggle to remove the problems he encountered. Stanislavski's work was important to the development of Socialist Realism in the USSR and to the development of Psychological Realism in the United States. Stanislavski's work draws on a wide range of influences and ideas, including his study of the modernist and avant-garde developments of his time (Naturalism, Symbolism and Meyerhold's constructivism), Russian formalism, Yoga, Pavlovian Behaviourist Psychology, James-Lange's Psychophysiology and the Aesthetics of Pushkin, Gogol, and Tolstoy. He described his approach as 'Spiritual Realism'. Stanislavski wrote several works. Those notable in English translation include *An Actor's Work*, *An Actor's Work on a Role*, and his autobiography *My Life in Art*.

1.4 UNDERSTANDING THE 'MODERN' IN ENGLISH DRAMA

The name of Wyndham Lewis comes first to mind in our survey of modern English drama. His close association with James Joyce, T.S.Eliot, and Ezra Pound puts him at the vanguard of the English modernist movement. Significantly his conception of the 'modern' was transposed from his 'Vorticist' painting into dramatic form, *The Enemy of the Stars*, published in the first issue of the Vorticist journal, *Blast*. The thematic structure of the play foreshadows Samuel Beckett's play, *Waiting for Godot*.

Stop to Consider:

Percy Wyndham Lewis (18 November 1882 – 7 March 1957) was an English painter and author (he dropped the name 'Percy', which he disliked). He was a co-founder of the Vorticist movement in art, and edited the literary magazine of the Vorticists, *BLAST*. His novels include his pre-World War I-era novel *Tarr* (set in Paris), and *The Human Age*, a trilogy comprising *The Childermass* (1928), *Monstre Gai* and *Malign Fiesta* (both 1955), set in the afterworld. A fourth volume of *The Human Age*, *The Trial of Man*, was begun by Lewis but left in a fragmentary state at the time of his death. He also wrote two autobiographical volumes, *Blasting and Bombardiering* (1937) and *Rude Assignment: A Narrative of my Career up-to-date* (1950).

Mainly residing in England from 1908, Lewis published his first work (accounts of his travels in Brittany) in Ford Madox Ford's *The English Review* in 1909. He

was an unlikely founder-member of the Camden Town Group in 1911. In 1912 he exhibited his Cubo-Futurist illustrations to *Timon of Athens* (later issued as a portfolio, the proposed edition of Shakespeare's play never materialising) and three major oil-paintings at the second Post-Impressionist exhibition. This brought him into close contact with the Bloomsbury Group, particularly Roger Fry and Clive Bell, with whom he soon fell out. In 1912 he was commissioned to produce a decorative mural, a drop curtain, and more designs ^[1] for The Cave of the Golden Calf, an avant- garde cabaret and nightclub on London's Heddon Street. In the years 1913–15 that he developed the style of geometric abstraction for which he is best known today, a style which his friend Ezra Pound dubbed "Vorticism." Lewis found the strong structure of Cubist painting appealing, but said it did not seem "alive" compared to Futurist art, which, conversely, lacked structure. Vorticism combined the two movements in a strikingly dramatic critique of modernity. In his early visual works, particularly versions of village life in Brittany showing dancers (ca. 1910–12), Lewis may have been influenced by the process philosophy of Henri Bergson, whose lectures he attended in Paris. Though he was later savagely critical of Bergson, he admitted in a letter to Theodore Weiss (19 April 1949) that he "began by embracing his evolutionary system." Nietzsche was an equally important influence.

(The passage above has been downloaded from the Wikipedia)

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

The following passage will help you to understand the diversity within the movement that finally becomes for us 'modern drama' – "drama in the twentieth century has been highly international, with English-speaking playwrights and directors responding to innovations from Europe, and having their experiments picked up in turn. It is also true that theatrical developments over the century do not fit the same chronological frame as that for poetry or the novel, where the two decades from 1910 to 1930 are generally held to mark the boundaries of the movement. By comparison, drama had already staked out a distinctively modernist territory by the turn of the century with a work like August Strindberg's *A Dream Play* (1902). But perhaps the main explanation for the omission of drama from the history of Modernism up to this point is that, for various reasons connected with the nature of theatre itself, on the stage the movement has produced extremely diverse work. Directors and dramatists, several of whom were primarily poets and made significant contributions to Modernism in their poetry, may have had the same artistic aims and been responding to the same perception of

twentieth-century realities. But their plays and productions use a wide range of stylistic solutions to express this. So any discussion of dramatic Modernism must take a wide focus in following a multifaceted development.” [The Cambridge Companion to Modernism, p.130]

The entry of modernist principles on the stage is, in most ways, easier to identify than it would be to trace what happens in the case of the novel. It was clear to the artists and modernist innovators that projecting the modernist vision within the parameters of stage performance and stage requirements would mean adaptations of modernist qualities. The alternative vision which underlay the whole modernist understanding of the world and civilization could not be achieved through the application of known techniques or familiar dramaturgy. In the experiences of modernist writers like Marcel Proust and Virginia Woolf, the effort to project inner, subjective experience as reality, led them to use impressionist techniques in the depiction of the “stream of consciousness”. In drama, however, expressionist techniques came to the fore in the projection of the interior unconscious.

<p>SAQ: Attempt to distinguish between Expressionism and Impressionism with examples. (70 words)</p> <p>.....</p> <p>.....</p> <p>.....</p> <p>.....</p> <p>.....</p>
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Modernist writers, especially in poetry, rejected the Victorian preference for a stable, logical narrative structure reflective of their belief in a logically explicable universe. For the modernist writer this was an untenable philosophy since the nature of ‘reality’ itself was available to human understanding only through the individual, subjective apprehension of a so-called ‘objective’ reality. In the work of August Strindberg which really set the mode, as well as that of the Expressionists’, we see the rejection of Western civilization’s faith in rationalism and materialism. The Expressionists too showed their awareness of a decaying culture that denied integrated personalities or consciousness.

“The rejection of Victorian orthodoxies, along with the logical and chronological structures of traditional narrative, may be standard for modernist poets. The theatre took this to an extreme, following Strindberg in denying the whole of Western civilization, with its emphasis on rationalism and its materialism. The Expressionists reflected the same sense of a disintegrating culture, dissociated personalities and fragmented consciousness, but went further in working for spiritual transcendence. Their themes also tended to be more extreme, intensified by the physicality of performance. A good example of this is Kokoschka’s *Murder Hope of Women*.”[*The Cambridge Companion to Modernism*, p.140]

Stop to Consider:

Theatre and abstraction

Christopher Innes points out for us the elements that limit experimentation in the theatre: the actor-audience relationship, the physical reality of stage performance, amongst others. “Any stage has a pre-set architectural frame, which conditions the dramatic material and is inherently resistant to change. Even an alternative space outside the format of mainstream theatre establishes specific actor-audience relationships that automatically become interpreted in conventional terms, as the example of the Dadaists indicates. By contrast with other forms of authorship, playwrights cannot communicate directly with those being addressed, and so retain only a limited control over their creation. Their work becomes literally interpreted by actors whose techniques are normally already established, and therefore liable to mould the final product in traditional ways. Indeed, this problem was recognized as so crucial that several of the leading modernist theatre-artists either trained actors in their own theatre companies, like Artaud and Brecht, or used untrained amateurs, like Gordon Craig who ended up by rejecting actors altogether.”

The work of W. B. Yeats and Gordon Craig claim our attention in the development of modernist principles on the stage. For Yeats, writing for the theatre was a natural outgrowth of his practice in verse. We see his writing for the theatre in two phases: between 1902 and 1908 which showed its fullest expression in the play of 1916, *At the Hawk’s Well*, while the second phase is to be seen as achieving its fullest form in his last work, *The Death of Cuchulain*. Yeats attempted to resolve the dilemma which he encountered in his work in creating a nationalist symbolism for his Irish themes while

retaining the modern creed of abstract symbolism signifying a radically new perspective on contemporary civilization. He borrowed from the Japanese Noh drama to emphasize a Brechtian ‘strangeness’. While borrowing from an ancient Oriental tradition can seem least ‘modern’, yet “Even so, borrowing from Oriental models in fact becomes a standard characteristic for the dramatic side of the movement. Craig and (more indirectly) Brecht draw on Chinese theatre; Artaud took Balinese trance drama as his ideal; and, like Yeats, Stravinsky’s *Les Noces* copies the Japanese Noh model.” In his search for anti-realistic drama, which would clearly reflect a modernist perspective, “in the Noh Yeats found his model for a style of theatre close to pure music . . . that would free [the stage] from imitation, and ally [dramatic] art to decoration and the dance.” [C.Innes in *The Cambridge Companion to Modernism*, p.135]

In 1912, Yeats joined effort with Ezra Pound to sponsor the work of Gordon Craig whose dramatic productions he declared to be “not drama but the ritual of a lost faith”. Craig’s real strength lay in his paintings and designs even though he had come to be known as an actor in the 1890s in England. What is striking for us is that his designs for the stage avoided any realistic references. We are referred back to Yeats who sought to perfect a least representational mode of stage performance, the dance.

SAQ:

Why did Yeats choose to move beyond representation? How does this clarify one of the basic tenets of modernism? (60 + 70 words)

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The work of Yeats and Craig show the difficulties inherent in giving to the stage its modernist shape. “Eliot recognized drama as the logical development of his poetic aims, since in his view “The most useful poetry, socially, would be one which could cut across all the present stratifications of public taste - stratifications which are perhaps a sign of social disintegration.

The ideal medium for poetry . . . and the most direct means of social “usefulness’ for poetry, is the theatre.” And the continuum between his poetry and his plays is nowhere clearer than in *Sweeney Agonistes*.” This is commentary by Christopher Innes reminding us of the undoubted importance of the name of T. S. Eliot in the Anglo-American modernist movement. *Sweeney Agonistes* can be seen as Eliot coming closest to the Surrealists. With the powerful figure of Sweeney who recurs through Eliot’s works, this play is considered to be Eliot’s most viable modernist drama. It was written in the mid-1920s but finally being staged in 1933 in America. The play incorporates elements popular music-hall culture, some elements of Noh drama (following Yeats) like the use of masks and rejection of a familiar narrative structure.

“Compromises had to be made if viable work was to be produced for the stage; and in drama the most influential practitioners of Modernism are defined by the infusion of a modernist spirit into standard theatrical forms.” This is Innes pointing out what we have already noted above: the limitations of a living theatre in receiving innovative principles like modernism. This should strike us as being of particular importance in the case of hugely successful dramatists like Bernard Shaw who was finally able to achieve a combination of the demands of both modernism and standard dramaturgy. ‘Inversion’ and ‘paradox’ are strategies used by him to give the structure of ‘long operatic solos’ to the speeches of his characters – most clearly visible in *Man and Superman*. In effect, the naturalist surface of his plays is imbued with an element of the irrational, and the abstract. Finally, Shaw ruled over the British stage with the sheer volume of his work and its naturalistic appeal till his end in 1950.

SAQ:

Attempt to analyse Shaw’s appeal as a popular dramatist within the context of the modernist movement in the early years of the twentieth century. (90 words)

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1.5 UNDERSTANDING THE ‘MODERN’ EUROPEAN/ AMERICAN DRAMA

The idea of the ‘modern’ in European and American drama provide yet another enriching experience to both readers and critics. You will find it interesting to read the European and American playwrights who were heavily influenced by the various intellectual and artistic movements that gained tremendous popularity in the early part of the 20th century. Modernist plays during this period prepared both the readers and the theatregoers to undergo many shocking experiences while watching a play in the theatre hall. Another way to consider the idea of the ‘modern’ in European and American drama is the emergence of very well-organized theories of theatricality and performance at a time when every genre of literature was undergoing changes following the modernist zeal for experimentations. You must note the fact that the great German playwright Bertolt Brecht was not only famous as a dramatist but was also a renowned theorist of the ‘Epic Theatre’ that altered the ways one receives a play. For your convenience of reading and understanding, the discussion of the ‘modern’ in this section has been done keeping in view the various intellectual and artistic movements in the late 19th century and the early 20th century that finally shaped the tradition of modernist world drama. You should also note that many of the theatrical and technical renderings in modern European drama emerged through an ‘anti realistic’ approach to dramaturgy.

To start with, Realism in Theatre perhaps provides the first elements of the ‘modern’ in European drama. Realism as a theatrical movement of the 19th century emerged out of the portrayal of real life in dramatic texts and performances. In fact, Realism rendered the most pervasive and long lived effect in modernist theatre. Many playwrights even conceived Realism as the laboratory in which societal ills, familial problems and human relationships could be ‘objectively’ represented to be judged by unbiased readers and observers. Beginning in the 19th century Russia, and then in Europe, Realism gave Modernism a unique status of its own. Through the works of Russian Ivan Turgenev, Aleksandr Ostrovsky, Aleksey Pisemsky, there emerged a tradition of Russian Realist drama which later culminated in the establishment of the “Moscow Art Theatre” by Constantin Stanislavsky. While Anton Chekhov stylized the realist plays in which the minor and ordinary characters were abundantly used and in which, plot and theme developed

simultaneously, Stanislavsky developed a unique ‘form’ of acting to train actors to represent Psychological Realism. Such developments were to influence play writing in the other parts of the world as well. As the drama critic Martin Harrison explains that the Realist trend in modernist drama was more effectively used by the Norwegian playwright Henric Ibsen whose plays focused on contemporary everyday life of the lower classes that skilfully revealed psychological conflicts. So, Realism has a rich history of its own if seen in the context of world theatre and you will do well if you make it a point to study some of the Realist playwrights as mentioned above in course of time.

Naturalism is another independent, but concurrent movement, which dramatized human reality in its most extreme form. While the Realist plays would address social issues, the Naturalist plays offered to represent simple ‘slice of life’ free from dramatic conventions. Although developed in the 19th century, as a movement in modern European drama, it actually flourished in the 20th century. In order to create the illusion of reality through technical innovations like three dimensional settings, dialogues borrowed from everyday speech and rejection of divine influence on human action, Naturalist drama tried to portray reality of a ‘given circumstance’. The Darwinian belief that one’s heredity and social environment determines one’s character could have influenced the French writer Emile Zola to pen down in 1881 an essay entitled “**Naturalism in the Theatre**”. Subsequent Naturalist playwrights came to conceive human beings as a mere biological phenomenon, whose behaviour was mostly determined by heredity and environment. Even in the works of the famous Realist Henric Ibsen, we find traces of Naturalism. For example, we can consider his play *The Wild Duck* in which heredity plays a significant part.

Stop to Consider:

Moscow Art Theatre

MAT is a theatre company in Moscow that the renowned Russian theatre practitioners Constantin Stanislavski and Vladimir Nemirovich founded in 1898. First staging naturalistic dramas it regularly put on shows plays that implemented Stanislavski’s system which later proved hugely influential in the acting world and in the development of modern American theatre.

Psychological Realism:

Psychological Realism is that mode of writing which places more emphasis on experiences in its interior form. In this type of writing, character and characterisation are more than usually important and an attempt has been made to delve deeper into the mind of a character. In some cases, the stream of consciousness technique, interior monologues have also been employed to better illustrate the inner workings of the human mind at work, as has been best reflected in the novels of James Joyce and Virginia Woolf.

As a counterforce to Realism and Naturalism, Symbolism emerged. Symbolism initiated the trends of modern antirealistic theatre in the late 19th century France. The main objective was to explore the inner realities of human experience through images and metaphors. Symbolism called for the use of suggestion instead of direct presentation, and the actor was conceived as a 'depersonalized symbol' suggesting meaning beyond immediate consumption. This movement spread quickly and gradually affected every aspect of theatrical productions in Europe. The French Symbolist writers even used the plays of Ibsen and Strinberg as the point of departure. The Danish director Herman Bang talked about the staging and acting of Ibsen's *Rosmersholm* by the French director Aurelien Lunge Poe like this: "The actors wander restlessly over the stage, resembling shadows, drifting continuously on the wall. They like to move with their arms spread out...like the apostles of old painting who looks as if they've been surprised during worship." Auguste Villiers of France (His play *Axel*), Maurice Maeterlinck of Belgium (His plays *The Blind*, *The Intruder*, *The Interior*), the later Chekhov and Stanislavsky of Russia are some of the playwrights who experimented with the symbolist mode of playwriting and staging. Subsequently, the emphasis on dreams and fantasies further made Symbolist drama reconcile with more radical dramatic trends like Surrealism and Expressionism. These movements consciously stylized new dramatic formats. This 'antirealist' theatre did not all together discard reality but enhanced it with specific symbols and metaphors, parable and allegory, lighting and aspects of theatricality. From the emotional and irrational perspectives of Andre Breton's "Theatre of Cruelty" to the rational and thought-provoking intellectual comedy, the Wartime Expressionist and French Avant Garde Theatre challenged and extended the limits of theatrical art. This information necessitates our delving deeper into the ideas of Expressionism and Surrealism in theatre.

Expressionism as a theatrical movement began in the 20th century German theatre with the works of playwrights like Georg Kaiser and Ernst Toller. They, in fact, accepted Strinberg and Frank Wedekind, the German actor, as their precursors. Gradually, expressionism helped in the production of an artistically very rich dramatic culture. The famous German theatre director Leopold Gessner soon became renowned for his expressionist productions often unfolding on “stark, steeply raked flights of stairs” which soon became a trademark. During the 1920s Expressionism became popular in America through the plays of Eugene O’Neil (His plays *The Hairy Ape*, *The Emperor Jones* and *The Great God Brown* etc.), and Elmer Rice (His play *The Adding Machine*). O’Neill’s play *The Emperor Jones* (1920) depicts a journey into the subconscious while in *The Hairy Ape* (1921) he extends the same theme into a condemnation of urban industrial civilization which has deformed and destroyed humanity. Though in O’Neill’s other plays such Expressionist elements became increasingly disguised, the distorted worldviews of the universalized characters he introduced, reflected the depiction of dreams and the symbolic representation of reality. Such dramaturgies continued to appear on the American stage up to the end of the 1930s in the work of Elmer Rice, Thornton Wilder, Arthur Miller and Tennessee Williams, particularly in Williams’ autobiographical plays *After the Fall* (1964) or *The Glass Menagerie* (1945). Expressionism transferred to England and Ireland through the political verse drama of W. H. Auden, Christopher Isherwood and Sean O’Casey (His play *The Silver Tassie*). Subsequently, their move to depict collective unconscious was sought to be replaced by the Surrealist ‘free flow of imagination’ that liberated the deepest levels of the psyche.

The term Surrealism, following its first use in France by Guillaume Apollinaire in a 1917 play *The Breasts of Tiresias*, came to be adopted for operas by Francis Poulene, the French composer. An early Surrealist Antonin Artaud thought that the rational discourse comprised “falsehood and illusion.” The belief that imagination could liberate the deepest level of the psyche led to experimentations like ‘automatic writing’ which is a type of writing produced directly from the unconscious. Also known as psychography it is a type of writing written without conscious awareness of the content. Andre Breton’s concept of ‘psychic automatism’ is another example of the Surrealist technique. The other major theatre practitioners to have experimented with

Surrealism in the theatre, is the Spanish playwright and director Federico García Lorca (His plays *The Public* (1930), *When Five Years Pass* (1931), and *Play Without a Title* (1935)). Other famous Surrealist plays include Louis Aragon's *Backs to the Wall* (1925) and Roger Vitrac's *The Mysteries of Love* (1927) and *The Children Take Over* (1928). Gertrude Stein's opera *Doctor Faustus Lights the Lights* (1938) has been described as an example of "American Surrealism", though it is also related to a theatrical form of Cubism.

Stop to Consider:

Psychic Automatism:

Andre Breton defined Surrealism as 'Pure psychic automatism'. So, the idea of automatism is of serious importance in this movement. In 1919, Breton and Philippe Soupault claims to have written the first automatic book, *Les Champs Magnétiques*, while *The Automatic Message* (1933) was one of Breton's significant theoretical works about automatism.

Cubism :

Cubism is a 20th century avant-garde art movement, initiated mainly by Pablo Picasso and Georges Braque. Cubism revolutionised the traditions of European painting and sculpture, and inspired similar movements in music, literature and architecture. The first branch of cubism, known as 'Analytic Cubism', was both radical and influential as a short but highly significant art movement between 1907 and 1911 in France. While its second phase, 'Synthetic Cubism' spread and remained alive until 1919, when the Surrealist movement gradually gained popularity.

Another modernist movement in theatre can be located in the ideals of Futurism that flourished during the 1920s. To blur the distinction between art and life, the Futurists believed to have reached below the surface reality. Furthermore, heavy use of machinery attracted the Futurists a lot. However, their theatrical ideas sought to discredit great works of theatre. Vsevolod Meyerhold of Russia and Erwin Piscator of Germany represented the Futurist principles to a considerable extent. Meyerhold, through his system of biomechanics, applied industrial technology directly to stage performance. He presented each episode of the drama as a independent 'turn' that

produced highly exciting performances and emphasized 'theatricality'. On the other hand, in Germany, Piscator's 'documentary drama' sought to dramatise how modern technology and mechanization could control contemporary existence. For instance, in his 1927 production of plays like *Rasputin, the Romanoffs, the War, and the People who Rose Up Against Them*, Piscator gave the outline of an era by integrating "Capitalism" or "class struggle" with acted scenes and a mechanized stage construct.

However, the emergence of the "Epic Theatre" during early to Mid-20th century is significant. It emerged through the theories and practices of a number of renowned figures like Piscator, Mayakovsky, Meyerhold and most importantly, Bertolt Brecht. Epic Theatre often incorporated a mode of writing that utilizes what can be called *gestus*. Whether, the theatrical movements of the 20th century influenced Brecht is a matter of serious critical discussion. Yet, he prescribed a methodological shift to the production of plays. As a contrast to the linear plot construction, Brecht used techniques to present events as narrative, hence his label of "Epic Theatre" and tried to create discontinuous action from a montage of scenes. For example, each half of his play *The Caucasian Chalk Circle* starts at the same point, and covers the same time-frame from completely opposed perspectives. The double action is then fused together in the final scene to provide a solution to the problem raised in the preface. With the exception of his first play, *Baal* which is an Expressionistic exploration of a poet's vision, Brecht's approach is the opposite of the "Stream of Consciousness" technique. Yet, his 'Epic' play-construction echoes the curvilinear forms of modernist painting, as well as the technique of discontinuity and montage of the modernist literature. In addition to the fragmentation of traditional plot structures and characterization, Brecht tried to separate speech from gesture, voice from music. All such techniques established Brecht as one of the most powerful modern playwright of the century. Moreover, his overt theatricality highlights the form of presentation purely as a means of communication. But, despite the avoidance of conventional techniques through his alienation effect, Brechtian theatre is by no means purely rational. Perhaps, this is what makes Brecht the only modern dramatist of the early 20th century to translate the principles of Modernism to the stage and create strikingly successful theatre. His plays almost immediately attained the status of modern classics, and unlike most modernist experiments, have become as much a part of the theatrical mainstream as those of Bernard Shaw. In Brecht we

also find traces of Marxism yet his contributions can be called modern in that he marked a significant departure from all conventional norms of dramatic presentations.

So, you have by now understood that through redefining the function of language, extending characters to represent abstract forces or archetypes, reconstructing stage imagery through lighting and exploring themes often tinged with anxiety, the various movements in theatre have stylized and created much of the theatrical forms and language used in today's theatre. You will do well if you read the idea of the 'modern' against such a background and inculcate your own ways to deal with the plays prescribed for you in this course.

SAQ:

1. Name the major artistic and intellectual movements that influenced theatre in the early 20th century? (50 words)

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2. Trace the great examples of American Modernist Drama? (50 words)

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3. What type of innovations exemplifies the idea of the modern in European drama? (100 words)

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4. What makes Bertolt Brecht the most prominent playwright of the 20th century? (60 words)

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1.6 A NEW 'TRADITION' OF MODERN DRAMA

You must note that the modern period and its drama were shaped by world-changing forces, such as industrial revolution, democratic revolutions, and

an intellectual revolution that would disrupt earlier conceptions of time, space, the divine, human psychology, and social order. Consequently, a theatre of challenge and experimentation emerged. Following World War II, “Theatre of Alienation” would introduce new theatre practices and reawaken the sense of social responsibility, while the “Theatre of the Absurd” would express the futility of all action and pointlessness of all direction. Philosophical Melodrama accepted the Absurdist notion that human being is alone in a silent universe, but takes it as a challenge to creating an effective life.

Although the main creative period of the modernist drama is occupied by the first thirty years of the 20th century, arguably it has not yet been completely superseded by postmodernism in drama. In a sense, you must know that Samuel Beckett’s plays represent a decisive new breakthrough, as does Robert Wilson’s work. Yet, it was Bertolt Brecht’s theatre which gained fresh influence in the late fifties and through the 1960s, Similarly, Antonin Artaud became the ideal of American radicals in the late sixties and 70s. An example of the way in which Modernism continues to inform contemporary developments can be seen in the work of Harold Pinter, who is usually seen as a follower of Beckett. Pinter not only subverts realistic sets but through his “memory plays” of the 1970s, he creates a drama of the mind, which directly corresponds with Walter Pater’s principle in aspiring to the condition of music through the emotionally evocative, rhythmic patterning of the dialogue and the associative repetition of images. Pinter has become a standard feature on the commercial stage as well as in the National Theatre and his examples demonstrate the degree to which Modernism has become the norm for drama. The inherently conservative nature of the stage may have meant that the adoption of the modernist principles is delayed in mainstream drama. However, these are now diffused everywhere, even if the modernist enterprise is no longer clearly identifiable, and in the theatrical Modernism has become merged with other interdisciplinary approaches.

SAQ:

Can we say that the ‘new tradition’ of modern drama is best reflected in the ‘Absurdist Drama’?

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1.7 SUMMING UP

From the above discussions you have found that for understanding the idea of the 'modern' in modern drama, you must make a survey of the whole of Europe during the early part of the twentieth century. You have seen how through the works and experimentations of different innovators, modern world drama has emerged as a new trend. You must have also noted down the fact that there is a marked difference in terms of approaches to dramaturgy in European drama. In British Drama you have seen the prevalence of Realism while in European Drama, you can see the impact of other 'isms' that resulted out of the clash between the artists and the terrible socio-political conditions of the world after the World Wars. The experience may be enriching for you as the isms like Expressionism, Surrealism, Vorticism, Futurism and Cubism have transformed the way one looks at the world. Moreover, such influences are still at work. You perhaps also noticed that along with the emergence of modernism in modern drama, there is also an idea of emerging disciplines like Performance Studies and Theatre Studies. You must have understood by now that such disciplines are the by-products of the innovative ideas, techniques and experimentations of the great theatre personalities of the world. In the following units of the block you will read in details about the works of many of the playwrights about whom you have studied in this unit.

1.8 REFERENCES AND SUGGESTED READINGS

Abbotson, Susan C. W. *Thematic Guide to Modern Drama*. Greenwood Press, 2003.

Levenson, Michael. *The Cambridge Companion to Modernism*. Cambridge University Press, 1999.

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Unit 2

Pygmalion

Contents:

- 2.1 Objectives
- 2.2 Introduction
- 2.3 Introducing the Author
- 2.4 Plot Overview
- 2.5 Reading the Play
- 2.6 Critical Reception of the Play
- 2.7 References and Suggested Readings

2.1 OBJECTIVES

In this unit, you will be introduced to a modern realist play written by George Bernard Shaw. By the end of this unit, you should be able to—

- *visualize* the social and intellectual scenario of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries,
- *identify* the modern dramatic techniques using which Shaw depicts social problems
- *read* each act for its development of themes
- *identify* the patterns of Shaw's major preoccupations
- *follow* the development of the characters.

2.2 INTRODUCTION

Pygmalion by George Bernard Shaw can be read in the context of the history of drama in the modern period. Shaw may be regarded as the first *modern* British dramatist.

Of all of Shaw's plays, *Pygmalion* is without any doubt one of the most popularly received plays. Several film versions and musical dramas have also been made on it. When Shaw wrote the part of Eliza in *Pygmalion*, he

had in mind the famous actor Mrs. Patrick Campbell, with whom he was having an affair that had set all of London abuzz.

Shaw claimed that *Pygmalion*, first performed in 1913 and later adapted for film, was a didactic play about phonetics, and its antiheroic hero, Henry Higgins, is a phonetician, but the play can also be seen as a humane comedy about love and the English class system. The play is about the training Higgins gives to a Cockney flower girl to enable her to pass as a lady and is also about the repercussions of the experiment's success. The scene, in which Eliza Doolittle appears in, when she has acquired a correct accent but with no notion of "polite" conversation, stands as one of the funniest in English drama.

A.C.Ward, in his introduction to *Pygmalion*, notes the importance given to education in the play as the means to social development. Eliza finds herself in such a situation after her transformation by Higgins. Through the question of language in the play and the comedy built up around pronunciation, Shaw satirizes the superciliousness of the upper classes and those who would imitate them. He succeeds in showing up the superficial grounds on which the English class-system was based.

You can ask as to how far Shaw is speaking for his age or his society considering the fact that Shaw has also been known for his iconoclasm. This will bring you to the several problems regarding the background against which we must view Shaw's work: the intellectual trends in his time, and the ideas against which his iconoclasm worked. Let us also remember that any writer is assessed differently at different points of time and that the success of *Pygmalion* when staged in 1913 may not match its success in our times. You should wonder why we appreciate it as we do in our own time.

SAQ:

What are the elements in *Pygmalion* that make it so adaptable to film and musical versions? Give your opinion briefly. (60 words)

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Shaw's early career shows us the difficulties to be overcome by dramatists in his time especially given the fact that Shaw was a great deal more 'intellectual' than could be expected of a follower of theatrical 'realism'. As John Gassner, the critic, in 1961, says it, even though the Fabian in Shaw probably diluted his political radicalism, "Shaw's rhetoric was often, fortunately, unbridled."

Fabianism and Victorian values:

The account given by John Gassner is invaluable. The Fabian Society was founded in 1884, being named after Fabius Cuncator or "the Delayer" who recaptured Tarentum from Hannibal in 209 B.C. (you will have to read up on the history of Rome and Carthage for this). Gassner points out that "At the height of its prestige the Fabian Society scarcely reached a membership of 1,500 and its policy was wisely one of permeation of established political parties." This group was reformist rather than revolutionary.

As Gassner further points out, "this account of the Fabian Society hardly accords with our impression of Shaw . . . The Fabian picture is one thing; the Shaw who upset the applecart of middle-class society and recommended all sorts of public upheavals is another."

As a discerning student of literature, you must see that setting Shaw in his time gives you an insight into how a writer relates to his time as well as to the milieu of the reader/spectator.

Continuing with Gassner's assessment: "What to make of Shaw became a problem as early as the 1890's when he distinguished himself as a dynamitard among music and drama critics and as a volatile and incalculable heretic among playwrights. He acquired a formidable reputation for irresponsibility while actually leading an exemplary life as the late-blooming husband of an Irish millionairess and as hard-driving businessman in his dealings with publishers and stage producers." Gassner is trying to find here a description which will convey a full picture of the dramatist in the sense that real-life political values are bound to be reflected in artistic techniques and also, that Shaw did not see his art to be divorced from the problems of life. So we are bound to return to Shaw's milieu in order to explain some of his concerns.

Gassner explains the dichotomy between Shaw in real life and Shaw in his plays with saying that "Shaw the thinker or maker of the modern mind is actually Shaw the *artist*. He is Shaw the essayist whose imaginative and satirical prose is the best in English after the prose of Jonathan Swift, and Shaw the playwright, for whom no peer can be found in English unless we return to the spacious stage of Queen Elizabeth and James I."

We have to recall that realism was the overriding convention in English theatre (as well as in prose) when Shaw began his literary career. By the end of the nineteenth century, about 1898, Shaw was well known as an art and drama critic, signing as “G.B.S.” in *The Saturday Review*, *The Star* and *The World*. The realism of Arthur Wing Pinero was highly regarded in English theatre at this time but as Gassner tells us, Shaw had “the astuteness to observe how easy it was to make a show of superficial reality and yet *evade* reality, to make accuracy of detail a substitute for essential truth, to feign boldness by presenting an unconventional subject but scrupulously refrain from examining it.” Shaw’s contemporaries looked to the “well-made” play by Pinero as the model to go by but Shaw the critic attacked this because he felt that “an interesting play cannot in the nature of things mean anything but a play in which problems of conduct and character of personal importance to the audience are raised and suggestively discussed.” (From Gassner’s essay)

If we describe the features of Victorian society in which Shaw did his work we take into account the qualities of the bourgeoisie which was content with a drawing-room variety of realism. In the 1880’s Shaw strongly advocated Ibsen’s kind of realism which Gassner calls “dialectical”, while in many ways he also anticipated the imaginative devices of twentieth-century stage practices. Some of Shaw’s best arguments regarding the status of modern art are to be found in essays like “The Quintessence of Ibsenism”, “The Perfect Wagnerite” and “The Sanity of Art”.

We can also include in our view of late Victorian society the role played by aestheticism which provided the forum to challenge bourgeois materialism and industrialism. We must go back to the role played by the Pre-Raphaelite movement, the arguments forwarded by John Ruskin and William Morris which opened up prevailing bourgeois values of “individualism, social irresponsibility, and unbridled competition” to challenge, and also remember that Shaw stood by both artistic endeavour and sociology.

The nineteenth century is often remembered for the thoughts of Darwin, Godwin, Marx, Nietzsche and Schopenhauer. To what extent can Shaw’s plays be explained by referring to these thinkers?

SAQ:

Identify the various philosophical influences in Shaw’s work. (60 words)

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A question that you must try to answer when studying Shaw’s work is what his brand of realism consisted of and to what extent he adopted innovative methods of achieving his aim of social criticism and analysis. Shaw admired William Morris, the socialist thinker and artist, and Marx. Some critics are even inclined to say that “Shaw the philosopher dominates Shaw the dramatist.” Considering the strongly philosophical strain in him, it may be interesting to explore how realism, which would ask for greater objectivity of presentation, is drawn upon by Shaw, for a “realism of content or idea”.

Realism and Avant-gardism:

Again, from Gassner, regarding Shaw’s plays: “If they belong to the genre of realism it is by virtue of their engagement to reality, chiefly by comprising a conflict of ideas, principles, ways of thinking, and ways of living. For the sake of reality, Shaw was always prepared to violate realistic structure and verisimilitude, to turn somersaults of the most farcical or fantastic kind, and to be arbitrary with his plot or to discard plot altogether.”

To what extent do we find these elements in *Pygmalion*?

Shaw’s avant-gardism did not consist of the art-for-art’s-sake principle. Stanley Weintraub explains this issue by analysing how far Shaw rejected representational means of conveying ‘reality’. When we consider Shaw as a ‘modern’ dramatist we can observe the methods he adopts to convey a sense of anti-illusion. Weintraub quotes from Shaw: that he “was always in the classic tradition, recognizing that stage characters must be endowed by the author with a conscious self-knowledge and power of expression, and . . . a freedom of inhibitions, which in real life would make them monsters. It is the power to do this that differentiates me (or Shakespeare) from a gramophone and a camera. The representational part of the business is mere costume and scenery”.

Weintraub compares Shaw with Brecht and Camus and is of the view that the dramatic principles which characterized their plays (“an engagement of the

audience as well as the actor and the playwright. The removed observation of the naturalist's theatre is completely abandoned . . . The play is a dialogue in which the audience must participate... the audience must not be a group of people to whom something is being done". The audience must change so that the world may be changed.") were the same as the ones adopted by Shaw from the 1890's onwards.

Shaw's *Quintessence of Ibsenism* was brought out in 1891 when English theatre began, with the efforts of Edmund Gosse, the critic, and William Archer who translated Ibsen's *The Pillars of Society*, to adopt Ibsenism, thus creating a storm. Till that time, it had been the 'well-made play' or *pièce bien faite* (in French) with its "exposition; situation; "great scene"; disentanglement" which had dominated theatrical productions. The successful Henry Arthur Jones and Sir Arthur Wing Pinero, both used the *pièce bien faite* having learnt it from Eugene Scribe and Sardou. But Shaw's *Quintessence* had been begun even before he wrote his first complete play which means that he considered Ibsen to provide the model of a theatre which was more suitable to the 'problem' play and contemporary issues of sociology. We should be aware that Shaw never subscribed to the prevailing belief in the "survival of the fittest" and that he was committed to deep sociological speculation as proved by his joining many heretical societies active in London then.

Stop to Consider:

Shaw and Ibsen

How would you relate Shaw to Ibsen? Does Shaw simply take over what Ibsen supplied in terms of dramatic technique? How important was Ibsen for Shaw?

In writing about Shaw's Ibsenism, Raymond Williams tells us "Shaw's work in the drama began with his lively theatre reviews, and with his programmatic book, *The Quintessence of Ibsenism*, which was published in 1891. The book has to do with Ibsen only in the sense that it seriously misrepresents him; but it was one of the forces which produced in England what was known at the time as the 'new drama'".

John Gassner underlines the misrepresentation of Ibsen by Shaw by noting the fact that Ibsen's "outward and rather provincial realism" (which should have been noted) was in fact ignored by Shaw.

This means that if Shaw had paid more attention to Ibsen’s dramaturgy, he could not have espoused Ibsenism with conviction. However, what is finally important is that Ibsen became a point of no return for English drama. For Shaw, Ibsen brought into being the “play of ideas”.

Gassner quotes Shaw, “Formerly . . . You had in what was called a well-made play an exposition in the first act, a situation in the second, and unraveling in the third. Now you have exposition, situation, and discussion; and the discussion is the best of the playwright.” Gassner goes on: “For Shaw modern drama and true realism started in 1879 when Ibsen’s *Doll House* heroine Nora made her husband sit down and discuss the nature of her marriage to him.”

As you read and think about *Pygmalion*, you should consider whether the play carries forward any of Shaw’s ideas regarding “sociological speculation”. Some critics note that the play is not convincing even though its satirical attack upon social snobbery fits into Shaw’s programme of social critique. We may not agree with this line of thought but we should explore the target of Shavian satire in it.

SAQ:

How would you distinguish between ‘social reality’ and ‘realism’ in your analysis of *Pygmalion*? (70 words)

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2.3 INTRODUCING THE AUTHOR

George Bernard Shaw (July 26, 1856 - Nov. 2, 1950), Irish dramatist, literary critic, winner of the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1925, was the third and youngest child (and only son) of George Carr Shaw and Lucinda Elizabeth Gurly Shaw.

At first tutored by a clerical uncle, Shaw rejected the schools he then attended, and by the age of sixteen, he became a clerk and cashier in a land agent’s office in Dublin until April 1876. Shaw developed a wide knowledge

of music, art, and literature because of his mother's influence and his visits to the National Gallery of Ireland.

In 1872, his mother having understood that her husband was a drunkard and incapable of supporting his family, left him and took her two daughters to London. In 1876, Shaw resolved to become a writer, and he joined his mother in London where she supported herself and her daughters by giving music lessons and singing at concerts. Shaw in his 20s suffered continuous frustration and poverty. He spent his afternoons in the British Museum reading room, writing novels and reading what he had missed at school, and his evenings in search of additional self-education in the lectures and debates that characterized contemporary middle-class London intellectual activities.

He began his writing career as a novelist but his fiction failed utterly. Every publisher in London refused his semi autobiographical work, *Immaturity* (published 1880), as well as his next four novels. Despite his failure as a novelist in the 1880s, Shaw found himself during this decade. He became a vegetarian, a Socialist, a spellbinding orator, a polemicist, and tentatively a playwright. He became the force behind the newly founded (1884) Fabian Society, a middle-class Socialist group that aimed at the transformation of English society not through revolution but through "permeation" (in Sidney Webb's term) of the country's intellectual and political life. Shaw involved himself in every aspect of its activities, most visibly as editor of one of the classics of British Socialism, *Fabian Essays in Socialism* (1889).

Eventually, in 1885 Shaw began his career in journalism, which ranged from book reviews in the *Pall Mall Gazette* (1885–88) and art criticism in the *World* (1886–89) to brilliant musical columns in the *Star*, a London evening newspaper. Shaw had a good understanding of music, particularly opera, and he supplemented his knowledge with a brilliance of digression that gives many of his notices a permanent appeal. But he truly began to make his mark when he was recruited by Frank Harris to the *Saturday Review* a weekly periodical as theatre critic (1895–98) and, in that position he addressed the artificialities and hypocrisies of the Victorian stage thereby attempting to replace it with a theatre of vital ideas. He also began writing his own plays. As a playwright, he heard with the ear of a musician the words that he set down to be spoken by the actors, and his sentences consequently run with a rhythmical ease that makes them easy and pleasant to speak and hear.

As we study Shaw we can take the opportunity to observe nineteenth-century modern England and Europe. You would have understood by now that Shaw's contribution to the theatre has to be judged in terms of his context; in fact, we often, surprisingly, seem to forget that he lived well through the latter half of the nineteenth century and deep into the twentieth. His "engagement with reality" took the form of debate and discussion in the plays. As a critic says, a play by him could be referred to by the problem it took up for discussion. He is noted as saying "In all my plays, my economic studies have played as important a part as a knowledge of anatomy does in the works of Michelangelo."

If this is properly taken up then Shaw's plays relate to his times at the most intellectually obvious level. Thus we can perhaps identify the 'problems' around which the plays are constructed: war, religion, slum landlordism, and so on. In order to understand, therefore, these arguments we have to remember the social environment within which he wrote his plays.

The Writer and His Age:

In order to understand the period within which Shaw wrote his plays, you can turn to Vol.7 of *The New Pelican Guide to English Literature*. A notable feature of this period is the apprehension of doom and disaster ensuing from the visible changes in society.

"A world war and a consequent accelerated degree of social change had produced profound alterations from even the nineteenth-century ethos, which we now know to have been less stable and free from doubt than was once imagined.

Nor has the serious artist in the end been able to remain aloof from social movements. Gradually, the extreme concern for the individual consciousness characteristic of writers like James has succumbed to subtle collective pressures. For all the comparative indifference they received, writers less and less felt able to retreat into private worlds; instead they became increasingly committed to social, political, and therefore public comment." [p.14]

The new conception of social relationships is explained two pages later in these words:

"The twentieth century has seen the breakdown of the old familiar authoritarian pattern in private and social, as opposed to political, life. A similar type of moral questioning to that which, in the later eighteenth and nineteenth centuries,

undermined the old hierarchic political order, affected many of the assumptions of family and social life. By way of compensation, private dilemma provoked, or at least went along with, a growth of public concern, particularly a developing guilt over wealth. Divorce in the 1930s carried no moral stigma comparable to that of exploiting the poor, or of ill-treating a child. To some extent, indeed, the realm of the public expanded at the expense of the private, almost as if the pressure of uncertainty had been resolved by a transfer of responsibility. The individual and the social came to seem inter-dependent to a degree which would have appeared strange to a Victorian, to the detriment of that individual atomization inherent in Victorian economic arrangements, and that sense of individual self-responsibility which characterized the morally earnest Victorian ethos. As Lord Annan has pointed out:

“Nothing marks the break with Victorian thought more decisively than modern sociology - that revolution at the beginning of this century which we associate with the names of Weber, Durkheim, and Pareto. They no longer started with the individual as the central concept in terms of which society must be explained. They saw society as a nexus of groups; and the pattern of behaviour which these groups unwittingly established primarily determined men’s actions.”

The notion, inherited from the Enlightenment, that man was the product of his circumstances rather than an autonomous moral agent, gained ground; it was used to justify collectivist intervention which was increasingly advocated - by the Fabians, for instance. They pointed to a profound moral perplexity concerning - among other things - the boundaries of the public and private worlds.” [pp. 17 - 18]

Any historical period can be partly explained through the events by which it is sought to be remembered. In order to ‘contextualize’ Shaw we can, in this sense, list the events through which he lived: the breakdown of the rural English community; the upheavals caused by industrialization; the increased belief in ‘scientific’ principles accompanied by the challenges to it in the shape of Freudian theories, Darwinian notions and Marxist explanations, all of which undermined ideas of ‘reason’; the loss of privileges for the aristocracy especially through the Parliament Act of 1911. This was also the period when the British Empire was, even at the height of its rule, receiving its challenges in the shape of the Boer War in the 1880s and the resentment following the Jallianwala Bagh massacre in 1919. The industrialization and the commercialism of the nineteenth century had been criticized by writers like Cobbett, Matthew Arnold, John Ruskin, Robert Owen, William Morris while, as you would remember, the Imperial Mission declared in 1883,

went through great transformations till the end of the Second World War in 1945. The Empire itself dissolved into the constituent units of the Commonwealth in this period.

SAQ:

1. What kind of connections can be made between *Pygmalion* and the period of its writing? (50 words)

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2. How typical are Higgins and Pickering of late-Victorian/Edwardian society? (50 words)

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As you have already read, Shaw's early life was marked by struggle and hardship. Even his literary activities were initially unsuccessful. Success came to him only after 1904 with an association with Harley Granville-Barker and J.E. Vedrenne. *Major Barbara* belongs to this period of success. Shaw plunged into controversy during the First World War by publishing his pamphlet in which he blamed Great Britain, equally with Germany, for the war.

Widowers' Houses, finally performed on 9 December 1892 in London, was his first play dealing with slum landlordism and was originally the result of collaboration with William Archer. It was not a success but its Ibsenite inspiration was something new. Real human problems, such as prostitution in *Mrs. Warren's Profession*, written in 1893 but performed in 1902, again showed Shaw's predilections. *Arms and the Man* (1894) found some favour among the intellectual circles but did not reach out to the wider audience.

Plays Pleasant and Unpleasant (1898) contains *Candida* (performed in 1897), *Arms and the Man*, *The Man of Destiny* and *You Never Can Tell* besides the earlier *Widowers' Houses*, *The Philanderer*, and *Mrs. Warren's*

Profession. St. John Ervine observes that “He [Shaw] realized that no one would read a prompt copy of a play unless he had to . . . *Plays Pleasant and Unpleasant* , was, therefore, issued in a form which was a mixture of novel and play. . . the emotions of the characters at a particular point were described.” *Candida* is one of Shaw’s most memorable heroines. It is woven around the theme of the contrast between “the large, unpractical vision of a poet and the narrow but boldly benevolent opinions of a Christian Socialist clergyman”. This is a theme preoccupying Shaw as we encounter it again in a famous later play, *Man and Superman*. The conflict between man as spiritual creator and woman as guardian of the biological continuity of the human race provides the theme that is basic to some of Shaw’s ideas regarding “current morality as to economic and sexual relations”.

In *Heartbreak House* of 1917, Shaw attacked the spiritual bankruptcy of the ruling classes whom he perceived to be responsible for the fall of civilization. He considered this play to be “the most extraordinary” of all his plays. The cycle of five plays under the collective title *Back to Methuselah* (1922) develops his philosophy of Creative Evolution.

Saint Joan as modern tragedy

This play is one of Shaw’s most popular and has even been called “the one modern tragedy”. In his Preface to the play, Shaw states:

“The romance of her rise, the tragedy of her execution, and the comedy of the attempts of posterity to make amends for that execution, belong to my play and not to my preface, which must be confined to a sober essay on the facts.”

Joan, the heroine of the play, belongs to the same kind of characterization as we see of his Superman, or of Marchbanks and Bluntschli. “She shows up the French Court as Bluntschli showed up the Balkan army”. . . Joan is Shaw’s conception of a Saint (the conventional name for a Superman). With her common sense about politics and fighting she is merely a sensible country girl, uncorrupted by the romantic Court. But the positive qualities of her inspiration, as Shaw sees them, are her singleness of purpose and her sexless ness. . . For Shaw, Joan is a saint because she has subordinated the facts of her person in order to become an uncomplicated instrument of the Life Force, of ‘Creative Evolution’. She represents the ideal of the rejection of those tiresome facts of human behaviour which complicate the conception of Progress. She represents, that is to say, a fantasy.”

Raymond Williams in *Drama from Ibsen to Brecht*.

The evaluation of Shaw's last plays, after *Saint Joan* (1923), is a matter of debate. The critic Katherine Haynes Gatch, in her essay (on *Too True to Be Good*), "'The Last Plays of Bernard Shaw: Dialectic and Despair'" remarks: "The low esteem in which Shaw's last plays are held when they are compared with those of his prime may in the long view be justified, but their reputation is in some measure the result of a failure to establish the critical bases on which these plays may be assessed as Shaw's peculiar contribution to English stage comedy in the second quarter of this century." *The Apple Cart* (1929) belongs to this late stage as do *Too True to Be Good* (1932) and *Geneva* (1938). The same critic sums up later in her essay: "In all Shaw's late plays the ironic relationship between the magnitude of the themes and the triviality of the treatment is calculated; the political extravaganzas are tragicomedies, concerned with the grotesque disproportion between the gigantic problems and the pygmies who deal with them. Thomas Mann has said: "The striking feature of modern art is that it has ceased to recognize the categories of tragic and comic, or the dramatic classifications, tragedy and comedy. It sees life as tragicomedy, with the result that the grotesque is its most genuine style — to the extent, indeed, that today that it is the only guise in which the sublime may appear... The grotesque is the genuine anti-bourgeois style."

Check Your Progress:

1. Comment on the combination of 'realism' and 'intellectualism' in Shaw's drama with specific examples.
2. Make a brief assessment of Shaw's contribution to modern drama in the use of techniques comparable to the ones used by Brecht and Beckett.
3. How far would you agree with the comment that Shaw displays a willingness to violate "realistic structure and verisimilitude"? Give examples.
4. "Shaw is never in doubt that drama is a matter of illusion and that, far from mirroring nature, reality and life were outside the theatre"- Explain with reference to *Pygmalion*.

2.4 PLOT OVERVIEW

Two old gentlemen meet in the rain one night at Covent Garden. **Professor Higgins** is a scientist of phonetics whose enthusiasm for the study masks his human qualities, and **Colonel Pickering** is a linguist of Indian dialects. The first bets the other that he can, with his knowledge of phonetics, convince high London society that, in a matter of months, he will be able to transform the cockney speaking Covent Garden flower girl, **Eliza Doolittle**, into a woman as poised and well spoken as a duchess. The next morning, the girl appears at his laboratory on Wimpole Street to ask for speech lessons, offering to pay a shilling, so that she may speak properly enough to work in a flower shop. Higgins makes merciless fun of her, but at the same time is seduced by the idea of working his magic on her. Pickering goads him on by agreeing to cover the costs of the experiment if Higgins can pass Eliza off as a duchess at an ambassador's garden party. The challenge is taken, and Higgins starts by having his housekeeper bathe Eliza and give her new clothes.

Phonetics is the study of speech sounds and their physiological production and acoustic qualities. It deals with the configurations of the vocal tract used to produce speech sounds (articulatory phonetics), the acoustic properties of speech sounds (acoustic phonetics), and the manner of combining sounds so as to make syllables, words, and sentences (linguistic phonetics).

Then Eliza's father Alfred Doolittle "an elderly but vigorous dustman" who describes himself as "the undeserving poor," comes to demand the return of his daughter, though his real intention is to extract some money from Higgins. The professor, amused by Doolittle's unusual rhetoric, gives him five pounds. On his way out, the dustman fails to recognize the now clean, pretty flower girl as his daughter. For a number of months, Higgins trains Eliza to speak properly. Pickering becomes the caring, compassionate voice in Henry Higgins's scientific experiment. He views Eliza Doolittle as a person worthy of respect.

Two trials for Eliza follow. The first occurs at **Mrs. Higgins'** home, where Eliza is introduced to **Mrs. Eynsford Hills**, her daughter **Clara**, and son **Freddy**, who had met Eliza in Covent Garden. However, they fail to

recognize her as the same troublesome flower girl. The son Freddy is very attracted to her. Mrs. Higgins worries that the experiment will lead to problems once it is ended, but Higgins and Pickering are too absorbed in their game to take heed. A second trial, which takes place some months later at an ambassador's party (and which is not actually staged), is a resounding success as Eliza passes off as a princess. The bet is definitely won, but Higgins and Pickering are now bored with the project, which causes Eliza to be hurt. She throws Higgins' slippers at him in a rage because she does not know what is to become of her, thereby bewildering him. He suggests she marry somebody, a proposal that she rejects immediately. She returns him the hired jewelry after which she leaves Higgins' home with a resolution never to return.

The following morning, Higgins rushes to his mother, in a panic because Eliza has gone away without informing them. On his tail is Eliza's father, now unhappily rich from the trust of a deceased millionaire who took to heart Higgins' recommendation that Doolittle was England's "most original moralist." Mrs. Higgins, who has been hiding Eliza upstairs all along, chides the two of them for playing with the girl's affections. When she enters, Eliza thanks Pickering for always treating her like a lady, but threatens Higgins that she will go work with his rival phonetician, **Nepommuck**. As Eliza leaves for her father's wedding, Higgins shouts out a few errands for her to run, assuming that she will return to him at Wimpole Street. Eliza, who has a lovelorn sweetheart in Freddy, and the wherewithal to pass as a duchess, never makes it clear whether she will or not.

Pygmalion derives its name from the famous story in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*. Myths such as this are fine enough when studied through the lens of centuries and the buffer of translations and editions, but what happens when one tries to translate such an allegory into Victorian England? That is just what George Bernard Shaw does in his version of the Pygmalion myth.

In using the myth, Shaw, he exposes the inadequacy of myth and of romance in several ways. For one, he deliberately twists the myth so that the play does not conclude as euphorically or conveniently, hanging instead in unconventional ambiguity an element which is to be found. One important characteristic of a Shavian play is its ambiguity. *Candida*, *Mrs. Warren's Profession* and even *Pygmalion* are plays in which Shaw raises crucial problems but is not able to provide ultimate resolutions.

SAQ:

Would you say that Shaw’s method here is meant to merely debunk old myths? (70 words)

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2.5 READING THE PLAY

In *Pygmalion*, Eliza Dolittle’s social transformation from a cockney flower-girl into a duchess draws attention to the issues like class and society, individual worth, social equality and inequality, social mobility and acceptance, relation between creator and creation, middle class morality, nurture and language as the major determiner of identity and social mobility. Tracing the metamorphosis of Eliza, Shaw here clarifies his aim of stressing the social meanings inherent within spoken language. The preface starts with the description of the deplorable state of English language and Shaw points out ‘English have no respect for their language, and will not teach their children to speak it’ and ‘It is impossible for an Englishman to open his mouth without making some other Englishman hate or despise him’.

Eliza Doolittle’s metamorphosis draws attention to the myth of re-creation and the play points out that linguistic infelicities are the reasons for which Eliza lost opportunities upward social mobility. Her ‘Kerbstone’ English determines her fate and she remains a poor Lisson Grove flower girl unless Higgins moulds her into the socially acceptable form of a lady speaking standardized form of English. As David Crystal noted in 1987, ‘We . . . only have to speak, to provide . . . innumerable clues about our personal history and social identity’. The role of accent is therefore, appears as a determiner of one’s social status and acceptability and we can refer to the synonyms like ‘a squashed cabbage leaf’, ‘a draggle-tailed guttersnipe’, ‘a baggage’, ‘deliciously low’ used by Higgins which indirectly confirm the fact that access to the standard form of language is a social privilege. Shaw’s social critique in *Pygmalion* rests on this idea of social stratification based on linguistic equality; Pronunciation is therefore the ‘deepest gulf that

separates class from class and soul from soul'. Eliza's inability to forge a graceful tongue determines her social identity and here we may recall the first meeting in Act I where she repeatedly tries to stress her innate worth by saying 'I'm a respectable girl' but the deviation from the standardized form of language confirms her social status as a flower girl. Lynda Mugglestone says "Eliza's social identity, and attendant social ostracism, is hence determined by the linguistic shibboleths of /h/ dropping and double negation, by her realizations of *paying* as *pyin* and of *flowers* as *flahrz*, and by the connotative values which had come to attend such usages." Eliza's humanity is not recognized and Higgins opines "a woman who utters such depressing and disgusting sounds has no right to be anywhere – no right to live. Remember that you are a human being with a soul and the divine gift of articulate speech; that your native language is the language is the language of Shakespeare and Milton and The Bible; and don't sit there crooning like a bilious pigeon's."

SAQ:

Do you think Shaw satirizes Eliza? Or do you think he targets Higgins as an object of satire? Give your views about *Pygmalion* as a satire. (40+ 50 words)

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The Shavian theme of the importance of social equality reflecting Shaw's Fabian social conscience is important in the play and Mugglestone sums up 'Fabianism and phonetics thus achieve parallel aims in *Pygmalion*, the solution of such linguistic, and attendant social, determinism being shown to rest in the possibilities of linguistic, and hence social, transformation as worked by Higgins upon Eliza by means of her education in the nuances of phonemic propriety. Shaw's point here, however, is less a recommendation of remedial phonetics for the problems of a class-based society than a consideration of the nature of equality in itself, and of the superficial issues which may obscure such knowledge.'

Through Eliza's regeneration Shaw also highlights the fact that individual accomplishment often results from innate qualities, and refinement and transformation depend on the conditioning effect of nurture. Eliza Doolittle possesses the qualities necessary for the desired transformation planned by Higgins and Shaw's thesis is that language is never ideologically neutral and accessing the standard language means being close to the structure of power. In this context Lynda Mugglestone rightly comments 'The *Pygmalion* myth in Shaw's hands, predictably endowed with social meaning, becomes therefore not only a paradigm of social mobility, but also a paean to inherent equality'. R.A. Hudson in his book *Sociolinguistics* points out that linguistic inequality can be seen as a cause of social inequality, as well as a consequence of it. *Pygmalion* seems to highlight this idea of subjective inequality of language and traces the effect of linguistic prejudice on the formation of one's identity.

Check Your Progress:

1. How does the play reflect Shaw's opinion of achieving social equality?
2. Comment on the way ideology inflects Shaw's 'naturalism' in the portrayal of the Higgins – Eliza relationship.
3. Shaw's characterization of Eliza is influenced by ideas of the 'New Woman'. Do you agree? Give justifications for your answer.

Social origin and status can also be traced from the habit of cleanliness and dressing. Higgins perceives Eliza's individual worth and 'pedantic correctness of pronunciation' only after she dressed like a lady. The 'horribly dirty' flower girl is raised from her lowly social position only when she fits into the standards of the polite society. Dress operates as social markers and Eliza's entry into the higher strata of society is symbolized by the new set of garments she gets. In the same way Alfred Doolittle becomes a gentleman only when he gains access to riches and is dressed like a gentleman. The failure of the parlour- maid to recognize the dustman when transformed draws attention to the idea of role playing and social location. Language and money are therefore, the causes of class division and the consequent social deprivation. Like his daughter Alfred Doolittle, the dustman is as clean as he can afford to be but both lack the taste and artificial grace

necessary for social acceptance. Higgins, the creator furnishes Eliza with all the artificial equipments required for her successful performance as a duchess. But Eliza grows though planted in an alien environment and Shaw is here critical of the superficial barriers separating one class from another. Individual growth is as important as the training in phonetics is and Shaw draws attention to the wider context of education. She appears to be strong enough to shed the artificial glamour and learns to think independently of her creator Representative of Shavian vitality, Eliza thwarts the prospect of marriage and security and her independence of spirit is striking. She is changed physically but Higgins fails to change her spiritually. In one sense she embodies the spirit of the New Woman depicted in Shaw's other plays. In the same way the dustman, Alfred Doolittle becomes a gentleman and relocated in the fabric of society with his money. Such parallel transformations occur when the daughter climbs the social ladders with the help of modifications of speech and the father gains acceptability in terms of riches. Both shed their middle class morality and are 'disclassed' in real sense of the term. But Eliza's transformation leads her nowhere and makes her position problematic as she cannot return to the gutter and at the same time she does not actually belong to the upper strata of society. Higgins' experimentation comes to an end with Eliza's acceptance at the ambassador's garden party. Her role as an object of public admiration is the reason for her trouble. Once raised from the gutter, she can neither go back to her previous existence nor can belong to the polite society. We can refer to the lines illustrating Eliza's frustration and helplessness when she fails to belong "What am I fit for? What have you left me fit for? Where am I to go? What am I to do? What is to become of me? When a child is brought to a foreign country, it picks up the language in a few weeks and forgets its own. Well, I am child in your country, I have forgotten my own language, and can speak nothing but yours."

The Pygmalion Myth:

Shaw's play is based on Ovid's *Metamorphosis*. In Greek mythology Pygmalion, a king of Cyprus fell in love with a statue of Aphrodite. But Ovid, the Roman poet [43 B.C.-17(?) A.D.], offers a more sophisticated version in his *Metamorphoses*. In his version Pygmalion was a sculptor who falls in love with his own creation in his attempt to transcend the demands of practical life.

The legend of Pygmalion draws attention to the incarnation of male love for the female form. The Myth of Pygmalion proclaims the theme of transformation artistic perfection and the question of personal identity and a desire to escape from the harsh realities of life. Pygmalion's quest for artistic perfection results in the creation of Galatea, the ivory statue of a perfect woman. His effort is rewarded by the goddess Venus and the statue becomes a real girl of flesh and blood, the inanimate becomes animate. Concentrating on the ideas of wish-fulfillment and self-love, illusion and reality Pygmalion's effort to transcend the limitations of the ordinary world into a world of art of sculpture is an effort to come to terms with life. Shaw's *Pygmalion* also explores similar themes. In Praising the singularly elegant structure of Pygmalion, Eric Bentley traces the connection that here Galatea's metamorphosis occurs twice. According to him 'If again we call Act I the prologue, the play falls into two parts of two Acts apiece. Both parts are Pygmalion myths. In the first a duchess is made out of a flower girl. In the second a woman is made out of a duchess. Since these two parts are the main, inner action the omission of the climax of the outer action- the ambassador's reception- will seem particularly discrete, economical, and dramatic.'

Pygmalion also uses the structure of standard fairy tales and combines elements of romance, myth, didacticism, spiritual quest to delineate the perils involved in language usage.

Social Welfare System and Pygmalion

'What started out a simple system to help the poor based on income transfer now resembles Henry Higgins's attempts to reform Eliza Doolittle in George Bernard Shaw's *Pygmalion*. The donors try to modify the behaviour of the welfare recipient so that he or she may behave as if he or she had the preference orderings of the donor. Welfare systems that do this balance the welfare of the recipients against the welfare of the donee recipients—a virtually impossible task given the subjective nature of economic welfare.'

(About Public Welfare Systems: *Pygmalion* Revisited)

The famous ending of *Pygmalion* with its ambiguity about the relationship between Professor Higgins and Eliza frustrates the conventional prospect of marriage and the consequent emotional satisfaction expected by the audience. Higgins cannot marry Eliza as she was too sensible and his arrogance and self-centered nature is also another impediment. Pygmalion

creates Galatea but he is also a victim of his own creation as he depends on her for self-realization. Being ignorant about himself and Eliza, Higgins is bound to face the reality the moment Eliza walks out to start life anew without him. The idea of romance expressed in the title is questioned and Shaw problematises the romantic nature of the play's ending.

2.6 CRITICAL RECEPTION OF THE PLAY

The successful English production of the play, *Pygmalion*, at His Majesty's Theatre secured Shaw's reputation as a popular playwright. But still, English critics continued to look at the play *Pygmalion* with contempt. An anonymous critic in his review in the *Westminster Gazette*, later reprinted in *Shaw: The Critical Heritage*, criticised various aspects of that production claiming that the play was 'a puzzling work'. Although he was aware of the fact that Shaw never used the drama as a vehicle of telling stories, he further claimed that in the midst of myriad ideas, a predominant one was totally missing. But in the same period, Alex M. Thomson wrote another review in the *Clarion* saying that at last Britain's most famous playwright had won his place on the English stage. In 1929, there came out Edward Wagenknecht's *A Guide to Bernard Shaw* which tried to explain how Shaw had finally succeeded, despite his being an iconoclast, breaking away from the deeply-held ideas of literature and many established conventions of dramatic presentation.

Hence, it can be said that critical opinions on Shaw bore mixed and somewhat prejudiced responses. However, it was Eric Bentley who finally revived much of Bernard Shaw's talent. He found in this play a 'singularly elegant structure' and the instances of a good play 'needing no theory to defend it.' In his analysis of the play, Bentley avoided the contemporary tendency to distinguish the various aspects of Shaw's works instead of establishing an internal connection amongst them. He boldly claimed that the play was 'Shavian' not because of its political or philosophical discussions, but because of the conflict based on vitality and system, on the battle of wills and words, of psychological inhibitions and its outward expressions. Finally, Bentley's assessment of Shaw's dramatic methods and political thought established the foundation of much Shavian criticism of the recent years.

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**Institute of Distance and Open Learning
GAUHATI UNIVERSITY**

MA in English

Semester 3

Paper XII

Drama II - Modern Drama

Block 2

The Modern and the Absurd



Contents:

Block Introduction:

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Unit 2 : Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*

Unit 3 : Harold Pinter's *The Birthday Party*

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August, 2011

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Acknowledgement

The Institute of Distance and Open Learning, Gauhati University duly acknowledges the financial assistance from the Distance Education Council, IGNOU, New Delhi, for preparation of this material.

Block Introduction:

This is the second block of the twelfth paper called 'Modern Drama'. This block is designed in a way to make you aware of the Modern drama with special reference to the Absurd theatre. The title of the block 'The Modern and the Absurd' clearly refers to the context of drama during the Modern period with special focus on the theatre of the Absurd. In this block, you will be studying two highly interesting and praiseworthy dramatists namely - Samuel Beckett and Harold Pinter.

Absurd theatre did not develop as a formal movement. It was basically a post-war development in Europe around the 1950s that was initially centred in Paris and then spread across Europe following the success of Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*. Literally, 'absurd' means 'out of harmony'. Albert Camus used the term to designate the condition of the modern man who has turned into a stranger in his society and the universe. Martin Esslin observed that the plays of the Absurd sought to present man's metaphysical absurdity in an 'aberrant' dramatic style which was reflective of modern man's condition. However the plays of the Absurd are also characterised by their representation of life as outrageously comic and nonsense. But despite this nonsense, they have appeared as serious social commentators.

There are various well known dramatists like Samuel Beckett, Eugene Ionesco, Arthur Adamov, Jean Genet, Harold Pinter who have been categorised as absurdists in modern European drama. But as it will not be convenient for you to study all these dramatists in this examination oriented format of studies, we have prescribed only two plays of two dramatists – Beckett and Pinter. But it is expected that you will give more ground to your understanding of the plays by studying the other dramatists. The first unit of this block is entitled as "Modern Drama and the Absurd" to give you a complete picture of the broader context of modern drama which needs much critical attention. Unit-2 will discuss Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* and unit-3 will deal with Pinter's *The Birthday Party*.

A drama is mainly a performance text. When it is performed, it is not just the dialogues that you read on the pages but the entire space of the stage with its different props, lightings and shades, sounds, actors and their activities contribute to the production of meaning. As you go on reading the written words of the plays, what you can gather is just a slice of the experience that

is due from a complete theatrical performance of the play. Hence it would be advisable for you to concentrate on the directions for stage setting and the actors' movement given in the literary text and imagine a probable stage production following these directions. It will be an interesting experience for you to make sense of the plays discussed in this block, specially because of the fact that the stage-space and props play major signficatory roles in Absurd theatre. We can assure that it will be a rewarding experience to read the original texts of the plays discussed here.

This block contains the following units -

Unit-1: Modern Drama and the Absurd

Unit-2: Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*

Unit-3: Harold Pinter's *The Birthday Party*

Unit 1

Modern Drama and the Absurd

Contents:

- 1.1 Objectives
- 1.2 Introduction
- 1.3 Context and Background
- 1.4 Theatre History (Philosophical Ideas)
- 1.5 Theatre Specifics/Theatrical Conventions
- 1.6 References and Suggested Readings

1.1 OBJECTIVES

In this unit you will be provided with a general introduction to the modern period that should help you to understand and appreciate the plays in the particular context in which they were written and staged. Here we will discuss how the Absurd emerges a potential dramatic form, bringing the social, political, cultural and philosophical issues of the time to both disturb and rejuvenate the modern stage. By the end of this unit you will be able to–

- *appreciate* the intellectual climate in which the plays were written and staged
- *develop* a sense of Modern theatrical convention
- *relate* Existentialism with the theatre and the Absurd
- *use* the information to read the plays prescribed for you more productively and creatively
- *note* the ramifications of the ‘Absurd’.

1.2 INTRODUCTION

This unit will introduce you to the meaning, history of evolution, philosophical basis and theatrical conventions of the Theatre of the Absurd. This section will make you appreciate the prescribed texts better. The literary meaning of the term ‘absurd’ is ‘out of harmony’. It was Albert Camus’ designation

for the situation of modern man who has turned into a stranger in the universe. Recognising such strangers in stage characters in 1950s, critic Martin Esslin in 1961 published his influential book *Theatre of the Absurd*. He defined plays of the absurd as those that shared a presentation of man's metaphysical absurdity in an 'aberrant' dramatic style that mirrored the situation.

It had never been a formal movement. The playwrights of the absurd were centred in post-war Paris, but they soared to international acclaim with the unexpected success of Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*. Journalists soon seized upon Esslin's phrase, confusing it with the everyday meaning of the absurd as outrageously comic. Esslin's main absurdists of the theatre were Samuel Beckett, Eugene Ionesco, Arthur Adamov, Jean Genet and Harold Pinter.

The 'Absurd'

In music, the term 'absurd' meant 'out of harmony'. However in the context of modern theatre the 'absurd' suggests a kind of unconventional mode of representation. These plays are sure to frustrate the desire of watching a well organized play expected by the conventional playgoers. However there are critics who club some of these theatrical variations with other labels like 'theatre of revolt', 'theatre of derision', 'anti-theatre', or 'Meta theatre'. However these labels can be seen as attempts to understand what is common between the plays because they appear to share a certain theatrical moment and movement.

A shared recognition of the incongruity of human life is insufficient to create a distinct group of writers, which is to say that, the theatre of the absurd remains, however it may be employed - a critical invention. If we look at the history (we will discuss that comprehensively in the next section) we will find that naturalistic drama leaves us with a problematic view of human experience. Human psychology, social and economic circumstances contribute to the problematic situations of its characters.

In some contemporary plays the problematic situation is produced by the conditions that transcend naturalistic explanations. In these plays we sense the presence of the profound situation that afflicts the characters but is in the end indefinable. In Beckett's *Endgame*, for example, we find the principal characters existing in a world where all the elements of nature seem to be on the verge of extinction; yet the cause of the condition remains a mystery.

In another play *Krapp's Last Tape*, we are faced with a single character, namely, Krapp, whose existence is defined almost exclusively by an insatiable appetite for bananas, an unquenchable thirst for soda water and an obsessive fixation on his tape-recorder diary. These mysterious, even ridiculous, circumstances lead us to wonder whether there is any ultimate source of meaning at all in the world of those plays, or of that matter whether there is any rational source of explanation at all for the experience of the characters. For these reasons, among others, such plays are known as absurdist drama.

Some of the techniques used by the absurdist writers have nevertheless established themselves in the contemporary theatre, and it is in this formal sense, rather than any philosophical one, that the idea of a 'theatre of the absurd' has maintained critical currency. The carrying of 'logic ad absurdum', the dissolution of language, the bizarre relationship of stage properties to dramatic situation, the diminution of sense by repetition or unexplained intensification, the rejection of narrative continuity and the refusal to allow characters or even scenery to be self defining have become acceptable stage conventions. The techniques are of the disruptive kind, associated with farce but there is no presiding context of harmony to give reassurance to an audience. Instead there are the stage images of extraordinary concreteness dissociated from the milieu normally that defines them.

Read this development in the art of theatre in connection with the realistic drama that seeks to create an illusion of the reality on the stage. Absurd theatre is clubbed under the non-realistic group and read as a subversion of its conventional perception. But if we accept the post-modern stance of the presence of various levels of reality then the absurdist can be said to represent one kind of 'reality' which, in its mode of operation, stands opposite to "essentialist realism". You can understand all of the above by considering whether Absurd drama merely seeks to go against conventional ideas of reality and the stage or whether it is a valid but different notion of reality.

1.3 CONTEXT AND BACKGROUND

Antonin Artaud's essay "No More Masterpiece" best reflects the spirit of the time when the absurd dramatists were enjoying their prominent days. Negating the validity of past masterpieces in the modern context he says

“Sophocles may speak nobly, but in a manner that no longer suits the times. His speeches are too refined for today, as if he were speaking beside the point.” Perhaps he is right when he says that the time has come when we must do away with the idea of masterpieces as they are fit only to the past but not to the present.

Such assertions are seen as not unnatural to an age which has witnessed the devastating effects of two consecutive world-wars. The social unrest, political upheavals and economic depression along with the changing intellectual climate was making the literary scenario very complex. Surrealism and existentialism captured the attention of the sensitive artists and scholars of the time. It was nothing but a preparation to break down all the conventions of the so called ‘canonical’ art.

Existentialism vs convention:

Existentialism refers to a new understanding of the hermeneutics, whose origin lies in Martin Heidegger’s *Being and Time* (1927), and George Gadamer’s *Truth and Method*. One basic premise of such a philosophy is that the process of understanding involves an act of interpretation of the past, present and the future. This new mode of interpretation of ‘reality’ was taken to a new plane by thinkers like Jean Paul Sartre and Albert Camus.

Andre Breton’s “Manifesto on Surrealism” (1924) launched surrealism as a unified movement in France. The chief issue of this movement was to overthrow logical reasoning, standard morality and social and artistic conventions in order to liberate art from the restraints of free creativity. For that purpose they advocated ‘automatic writing’.

Art as mimesis is a platonic concept. The final outcome of such a concept is that theatre has been regarded as an inferior art, an outlet of our worst instincts. It is because we have for long been told that theatre is all lies and illusion. After the five hundred years of renaissance we have become accustomed to purely descriptive, narrative theatre, narrating psychology. To a greater extent Shakespeare is responsible for bringing in a kind of isolationist concept to theatre, to instil an idea of art for art’s sake in us; art on the one hand and life on the other, modern theatre was perhaps preparing to break their concept attached to the art of theatre. The Second World

War ended in 1945 with a changed geo-political order, crisis of conscience. In the last stage of the war in Europe, the fate of Jewish and other prisoners held in examination camps. The result was that six million Jews had perished in holocaust. Then in the last days of the war against Japan in the Pacific, America dropped atom bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki, and the 'nuclear age', with its potential for global annihilation, began. By October, some fifty countries combined to found the United Nations with the aim of bringing peace, security, democracy and prosperity to the world. The unease, horror and anxiety were not allayed. The United States and Russia emerged as the two dominant super powers, effectively dividing the world influence between them, in confronting each other with nuclear weapons in the 45-year long cold war that followed. For writers, the crisis of war and its bitter ideological aftermath recast the modern tradition and sometimes made writing seem almost impossible. Post-war literature took on a very different character from the modern movement that went before.

Theatre as commentary:

Theatre of the 50s was a global phenomenon in the sense that the happenings in one corner of the world affected the thought processes of the rest of the world. The First World War and its consequential second world war along with the Nazi aggression put the world in a tumultuous state. Understanding of the theatre of that period is incomplete without the reference to such happenings in and around the world. Therefore the developments of Paris theatre must be read as a reflection of the global intellectual crisis. Reference to modern world history, at this point, will be helpful to us.

Theatre since the World War II has been characterised by a belief that 'realism' alone cannot adequately represent the drama of modern life. The seeming lack of cause and effect in the wider world is translated into an unconnectedness between the people on the stage and the events in which they participate, most notably in what has come to be known as the theatre of the Absurd. Here the motivation of the characters is mysterious, if not unknowable, yet out of such unpromising material many plays of great dramatic impact, not to mention humour, have been written.

Two definite trends are visible in the post-war theatre. Theatre was the platform for the entertainment and articulation of angst in post-war England. While the disillusionment following the failure of the government in keeping its promises after the Second World War led to angst ridden performances like John Osborne's *Look Back in Anger* (1956), it was also the time that saw a change in the theatrical idiom. There were striking differences in both vocabulary and dramatic orientation as a response to the developments of contemporary society. Samuel Beckett, Harold Pinter and John Osborne belong to the first post-war generation; playwrights who wrote innovatively in a society that demanded a change in dramatic orientation. *Look Back in Anger* can be placed at the beginning of a series of politically nuanced dramatic productions. Osborne's play prepared the theatre management to encourage productions that highlighted the lower and lower middle class perspectives. It successfully brought about and popularized the concept of 'the angry young man'. Some important playwrights and their works that can be clubbed in this group are- George **Orwell** [*The Entertainer* (1957), *Luther* (1961), *Inadmissible Evidence* (1965)], Edward Bond [*The Pope's Wedding* (1962), *Early Morning* (1968), *Lear* (1971), *Restoration* (1981)], John Arden [*All Fall Down* (1955)], Arnold Wesker [*Shylock* (1980)]

The mood of the 1950s was very different from that of 1920. After the Second World War both Europe and America were entering a period of unprecedented prosperity, which led to increased leisure and a climate of experimentation, which focused more on ideas and philosophies than on new literary forms.

The second important trend which arrived dramatically on the English theatrical scene after the Second World War was the absurdist experiment initiated by Samuel Beckett. 'The existentialist thesis found in Beckett's theatre a suitable agency; at least in dealing with the language on stage Beckett showed how the absurd negotiates the medium of communication for its lack / or functionality'. Beckett's function for language that struck a chord with the English audience was the one that has remained a consistent feature of his plays. Harold Pinter's plays move along a similar plane where the absurdity of life is a leitmotif. The wordplay in Pinter is astonishingly striking even though a given social matrix is assumed whenever a character seeks to articulate the self. His *The Birthday Party* (1957) is a play of

questioning self doubt and distrust of values. It is interesting to get rooms to function as a site of self-enquiry in *The Caretaker* (1960) and *The Homecoming* (1964). The persistence with Beckett and Pinter which drove the absurdist experiment forward however did not have many takers. Tom Stoppard, John Mortimer and Alan Ayckbourn who emerged on the English post-war dramatic scene in the 1960s did not reveal in the type of possibilities the absurd seemed to offer them. These dramatists seemed to follow materialistic route and Stoppard's *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead* (1967) was its best example.

SAQ:

1. How were the two consecutive World Wars responsible for bringing the mood of introspection to the literature of the time? (80 words)

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2. Will it be appropriate to call the theatre of the period 'anti-foundationalist'? (50 words)

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3. What were the two distinct tendencies of the theatre of that period? (50 words)

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4. How was the 'angry young generation' different from the absurdist? (40 words)

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1.4 THEATRE HISTORY (PHILOSOPHICAL IDEAS)

When the New Theatre emerged in Paris, it took the theatre world by surprise. Paris had staged many European playwrights and made their reputations. Paris was ready to appreciate the New Theatre and the rest of the world was ready to embrace any developments in Parisian theatre. Ionesco, Adamov and Beckett were the pioneers of this new theatre. Interestingly, none of them were what one might term as 'young'. When *Waiting for Godot* was first performed in 1953 in French, Beckett was 47; Adamov was 45 and Ionesco was the youngest at 44. They had already made their reputations in the field of drama. Another interesting thing is that they were writing separately and cannot be said to be upholding a common agenda. However, they were to revolutionize theatre forever and would be associated with one another in theatrical history for all time.

If we search for the roots of absurd drama then both in mood and dramaturgy of absurdity, Alfred Jarry's French play *Ubu Roi* (*Ubu the King*) can be said to anticipate some elements of it. Jarry's play as published in 1896. In literature the absurd movement is heavily dependent on Existentialism and Surrealism. Moreover, the fiction of Franz Kafka written around the 1920s bore the seeds of absurd art. The absurd experiment was radically new for the possibilities it promised. Interrogating the very question of existence, the themes of the absurd plays seemed to go beyond the dramatic rhetoric of contemporary theatre; it offered a system that accommodated philosophy through, among other procedures, silence. Disjointedness was a condition that offered playwrights sufficient scope to manoeuvre the subject.

The Absurd movement in drama was a post World War II affair. It emerged as a rebellion against the essentialist philosophy regarding human culture and art. The essentialists believed that human beings were fairly rational creatures who lived in at least a partially intelligible universe. It stressed on the essential belief that human beings were an integral part of an ordered social structure and hence capable of heroism and dignity even in most terrible situations.

Try to find a connection between the existentialist projection of the human being and the Renaissance essential humanist positioning. A very important difference that comes out is that while one believes in a 'thrown-ness into

being' kind of existence the other sees the human being as a historical entity and a reservoir of unlimited potentiality. Read this section with reference to your previous reading of the Renaissance plays.

The existentialist philosophy came as a challenge to such an essentialist positioning. It was the writings of Jean-Paul Sartre and Albert Camus that pitted the essentialist humanist beliefs. They viewed human life as an isolated existent that was cast into an alien universe. They viewed the universe as possessing no universal truth and meaning. Human beings, according to them were moving from nothingness to nothingness. They conceived human life as both anguished and absurd. Camus in *The Myth of Sisyphus* (1942), perhaps, best captures the absurdity of modern civilization, "In a universe that is suddenly deprived of illusions and of light man feels a stranger. His is an irremediable exile. The divorce between man and his life, the actor and the setting, truly constitutes the feeling of absurdity".

Uncertainty about the nature of human existence is a fundamental source of the tragicomic quality we find in many modern contemporary plays. In some, that quality is produced by a naturalistic view of the human psychological, social, and economic forces so complex that their character and behaviour cannot be easily judged or explained. That view of human nature led Strindberg , for example, to create characters whom he describes in his preface to *Miss Julie* as being "somewhat 'characterless'" characters, that is who are influenced by "a whole series of motives" rather than by any single, or simple, purpose. Like other naturalistic dramatists, Strindberg is unwilling to offer us simple explanations to account for human behaviour.

The Form of the Absurd:

Though the absurd dramatists draw from the basic formulations of existentialist philosophy, there remains a very subtle difference between them. While the existentialists explored the absurdity and illogic of human life they did it within a very logical framework. Thus there was always a gap between the 'content' and the 'form'. But in case of the absurd dramatists the form and the content merged together; thus while presenting the irrationality of human life they adhered to a very irrational medium.

Critics influenced by the form of contemporary literary theory known as 'deconstruction' tend to be sceptical of this argument about the immediacy of the plays. Deconstruction, deriving principally from the work of Jacques Derrida, is characterized by its suspicion of 'presence', the idea that anything, a meaning or an experience, can ever be experienced in itself, all at once and immediately. This is an apprehension that is verified by thinking about the experience of the present tense. If there is a sense in which it is true to say that we live only in the present, since the past and the future do not exist, then in another sense this is a profound error. The present tense can never be grasped in itself, because its 'present ness' is always either anticipated in the future, or has already slipped into the past. The purest, and most palpable characteristic of the present is precisely that it is never there, is never pure. The absurd theatre had already worked on this thesis of 'presence' before the deconstructionists were to make an impact and Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* is the best example of this.

Like Beckett, Eugene Ionesco and Adamov's plays project the irrationalism, helplessness and absurdity of life, in dramatic forms that reject conventional realism. In his most important play *The Chairs* (1952), Ionesco projects the human condition thus, "cut off from his religious, metaphysical and transcendental roots, man is lost: all his actions become senseless, absurd, useless".

SAQ:

1. Discuss the socio-political causes leading to the outbreak of World War II. (50 words)

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2. Discuss the philosophical basis of the 'Absurd'. (40 words)

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3. Bring out the differences between naturalistic drama and absurd drama. (80 words)

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4. Make a list of the important playwrights and their works of the Existentialist theatre and that of the Absurd theatre. (50 words)

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1.5 THEATRE SPECIFICS/ THEATRICAL CONVENTIONS

Drama in the twentieth century has been highly globalized, with playwrights and directors responding to innovations from Europe and having their experiments picked up in turn. It is also true that theatrical developments over the century do not fit the same chronological frame as that for poetry or the novel, where the two decades from 1910 to 1930 are generally held to mark the boundaries of the movement. By comparison, drama has already staked out a distinctively modernist territory by the turn of the century with a work like August Strindberg's *A Dream Play* (1902).

The search for a third space beyond the pre-set architectural frame that conditions the dramatic material had already been started on the stage, and art could neither assert itself as an autonomous activity, independent of external experience nor aspire to pure form. Therefore, both the Dadaists and the Futurists attempt to distort or disguise the human element by using sharply focused lighting to fragment the performer's figure and geometrical costumes to reduce bodily shapes to cones, globes, cylinders or straight lines.

As we know, several leading modernist poets like T.S. Eliot and W.B. Yeats turned to the theatre, therefore without discussing their contribution to the structural development of theatre our discussion will be incomplete. In plays like *At the Hawk's Well* (1916) and *The Death of Cuchulain* we find quite different applications of the stage that affected a radical break with the tradition. Yeats's idea of 'Noh Stylisation', from a European perspective, incorporated the quality of internal unity and antirealism. The

influence of the expressionist dramatists like Strindberg brought a new vigour to the European stage with fragmentary projections.

Dadaism and Futurism refers to two very important modernist cults of thinking. In negating the conventional representations of reality they maintained a close association with the surrealists. Consult any glossary of literary terms for making a connection among these movements in the field of art and literature.

The Existentialists and the absurd theatre share certain common traits. Let us discuss a few of them. The first, of course, is a self-consciously critical approach to theatre. Perhaps, the noted French writer and philosopher Jean-Paul Sartre was the one closest to the mark when he said in a lecture entitled “*Mythe et realite du theatre!*” (*Myth and Reality in the Theatre*) delivered in 1966, that these playwrights were attempting ‘un theatre critique’, whereby their plays were in reality dramatizing and holding up to inquiry the dramatic process itself. They abandoned the ideas of plot and character. This lack of plot and impossibility of character, according to Sartre, constituted the subject matter of their plays. Here the idea of ‘zero degree’ formulation of Roland Barthes will be helpful. This formulation explores the potentiality of verbal and non-verbal action. We can find many evidences of this in the play *Waiting for Godot*.

Beckett rejected the stage conventions of the Naturalistic theatre quite emphatically in his book on *Proust*. The cluttered stage of naturalistic drama was replaced by the empty stage of *Waiting For Godot*, a stage that in the words of Peter Hall, was an image of life passing – its hopes, despair, companionship and loneliness. The absurd drama in the long run tremendously influenced the development of the silent cinema.

If analysed carefully, a very interesting point comes out regarding the Setting of the absurd theatre. With their symbolic and flexible stage settings the absurd theatres resemble the expressionist theatre. They in turn were influenced by the settings of Ibsenian realistic theatre which, for the first time, broke the hangover of the European audience from the elaborated and exaggerated settings of the Renaissance theatre. In fact making a drawing room or kitchen the confined world of the characters is a very important aspect of these plays. Here we can remember Eliot’s “terror of the city blocks”. The same is true to costume and make up of the characters which altogether made the ‘**zero degree**’ formulation functional. This formulation explores the potentiality of verbal and non-verbal action.

If we observe carefully, we will notice that the use of incoherent language is a favourite technique of the absurdist playwrights. This is not an ornamental device, but an inherent structural necessity. Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* draws on the resources of popular entertainments and most of its comic effects are worked through ironic and witty situations as well as dialogue. The short, crisp, supposedly inconsequential words celebrate play, a condition that uses the condition of the lucid to great purpose. The lucid but eddying and pointless dialogues are often funny, and other modes of slapstick are used to project metaphysical alienation. But if we look at the early works of Genet, Pinter and Albee we will find that they have exploited the devices of the absurd more for comic than for philosophical ends. Their absurdity is usually evident not only in plot but also in the dialogue. The characters use a very uncommunicative language. In much the same way we may be puzzled by the resolution of such a play - wondering whether the characters' situation at the end is in any significant respect different from what it was at the beginning. We wonder whether the play is a tragedy or a comedy. Another very important aspect of absurd drama is the use of simple stage settings. Ionesco's *The Chairs* is the best example of such a monotonously simple setting where the stage is finally filled up with a number of chairs and nothing else. There are also affinities with the movement in the numerous recent works which exploit black comedy: baleful, naïve, or inept characters in a nightmarish modern world play out their roles in what Ionesco called a 'tragic farce', in which the events are often simultaneously comic, horrifying and absurd. Joseph Heller's *Catch-22* (1961), John Irving's *The World According to Garp* (1978) are the best examples of the ramifications of the absurd theatre.

Check Your Progress:

1. What do you understand by the term 'absurd'? Discuss the history of the evolution of the term.
2. Bring out and discuss the differences of the existentialist theatre the theatre of the absurd.
3. Discuss the idea of Aristotelian *mimesis* in the context of the theatre of the absurd.
4. Looking at the social-political and economic context of the emergence of the absurd theatre is it appropriate to call it the theatre of 'anguish'? Discuss.

5. Discuss how the absurd theatre minimizes the gap between the 'form' and the 'content' which is apparent in the naturalistic and the existentialist theatre.

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Unit 2

Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*

Contents:

- 2.1 Objectives
- 2.2 Introduction
- 2.3 Introducing the author
- 2.4 Plot Overview
- 2.5 Reading the Play
 - 2.5.1 Major Characters
- 2.6 Critical Reception of the Play
- 2.7 References and Suggested Readings

2.1 OBJECTIVES

In this unit, you will be introduced to one of the most influential and powerful absurd plays *Waiting for Godot* by Samuel Beckett. However, after reading this unit you will be able to–

- *relate* Beckett's ideas with the unique intellectual and socio-political climate of the time
- *identify* the various movements and innovations in the field of drama
- *see* Beckett's unique way of dramatic representation in modernist drama
- *appreciate* the various philosophical issues raised in the play

2.2 INTRODUCTION

Waiting for Godot by Samuel Beckett is considered to be one of the significant attempts at writing absurd dramas in the 20th century. It was first published in French as *En Attendant Godot* in 1952 and was staged in Paris in 1953. It was first staged in English at the Arts theatre, London,

1955 and shocked English audience. This unit will make you understand how the post-war disillusionment and scepticism that influenced the contemporary intellectuals, were sought to be expressed in bizarre terms by a number of European playwrights. Although they did not consider themselves belonging to a formal movement they shared certain common themes in their writings like the futility of human. They felt that human condition was entering into a state of 'absurdity' - a term coined by the French existentialist philosopher and novelist Albert Camus. Eugene Ionesco's *The Bald Soprano*, Arthur Adamov's *Invasion* both produced in 1950, and Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* first produced in 1953 in French, were some of the first significant plays of the "Theatre of the Absurd". However, the spirit of absurdism can be traced back to Alfred Jarry's *Ubu Roi*, produced in 1896. In order to create a world of uncertainty, logic and rationalism were abandoned by the absurdist writers. Later absurdist writers included Harold Pinter of England and Edward Albee from the United States.

What Beckett, through his various characters and landscapes, presents in this play is a vision of the collapse and decay of western philosophy, culture and society. This vision, no doubt, has its origins in the contemporary war-ridden western world, but it belongs also to a tradition of dramatic representation. In Beckett's world everything has been reduced to an object of laughter. Beckett called this play a tragicomedy and therefore we can perhaps, translate the term 'absurd' as both 'comic' as well as 'tragic'.

2.3 INTRODUCING THE AUTHOR

A novelist, critic, and playwright, winner of the Nobel Prize for literature in 1969, Samuel Barclay Beckett was born on 13th April, 1906 in the suburb of Dublin. He belonged to a Protestant, Anglo-Irish family and was sent at the age of 14 to Portora Royal School which catered to the needs of the Anglo-Irish middle class people. He received his B.A. degree from Trinity College, Dublin. After spending some time as a teacher in Belfast, Beckett became a reader in English at the Ecole Normale Superieure in Paris in 1928. In 1937, he decided to settle in Paris but played neutral part during the World War II. In 1945, he returned to Ireland just to volunteer for the Irish Red Cross.

Beckett's early publication included two essays on James Joyce whom he met in Paris in 1928 and the French novelist Marcel Proust. In 1930, he wrote his slim volume of poetry *Whoroscope*; in 1934, he wrote *More Pricks than Kicks*, and in 1938, he published his *Murphy*. But his return to Paris proved to be really fruitful as in-between 1946 and 1949 he produced his major prose narratives- *Molly*, *Malone Dies*, *The Unnameable* and his ground-breaking *Waiting for Godot*.

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

Beckett's works are shaped by the early experience of a society made of violent contradictions and layers of oppression and repression. The harsh realities of life resulting out of the declining British Empire were only thinly hidden by the gloss of Anglo-Irish culture. Censorious, authoritarian churches stifled independent thought. Even Beckett freely expressed his dislike for Ireland. He could apprehend the presence of contradictory forces of nationalism and internationalism, growing religious intolerance between the Catholic and the Protestant.

In spite of his courageous handling of the ultimate mystery and despair of human existence, he was essentially a comic writer. Beckett believed that recognition of the triviality, senselessness, and the ultimate meaninglessness of life must be able to free and liberate human beings from their concern with senselessness and futile objectives. The laughter will ultimately arise from a self-imposed preoccupation with illusory ambitions and futile desires. Consequently, far from being gloomy and depressing, the ultimate effect of watching or reading a play like the *Waiting for Godot* is one of cathartic relief. Samuel Beckett died on December 22nd, 1989 in Paris, France.

2.4 PLOT OVERVIEW

Waiting for Godot comprises of two Acts. It has no plot in the Aristotelian sense. There is no point of climax or anticlimax. What we have in the play is just the loitering around of two men under a tree, near a mound, and passing of time in vain. It has no structure and the action does not lead to any logical sequence. There is no rule to follow for the exit and the entry of the characters. There are hardly any things/properties on the sets. Dialogue is also enigmatic and leads nowhere.

Act I:

The play opens with Estragon struggling to remove his boot. He gives up for the moment as “Nothing to be done.” Vladimir takes up the thought and muses on it identifying himself immediately as the more thoughtful of the pair. Estragon tells Vladimir that he has spent the night in a ditch where he was beaten but he shows no signs of being assaulted. When Estragon finally succeeds in removing his boot he looks inside but finds nothing. Just prior to this, Vladimir has also checked inside his hat. They discuss the plight of the two thieves crucified alongside Jesus and the fact that only one of the Gospel writers mentioned that one of them had been saved. Vladimir quickly expresses his frustration with Estragon’s limited conversational skills: “Come on, Gogo, return the ball, can’t you, once in a way?”.

Estragon peers out at the audience and comments on the bleakness of their surroundings. Estragon wants to leave but he is told they can’t because they have to wait for Godot. The problem is they cannot agree that they are in the right place or on the right day. The only thing they are fairly sure of is that they were to meet by a tree. Estragon dozes off but Vladimir is not interested in hearing about his dream when he wakes him. Estragon wants to hear an old joke about a brothel (one of the play’s very few allusions to women) which Vladimir starts to tell but he has to cut his story short to rush off and urinate and does not even bother to finish it when he comes back. He asks Estragon what else they might do to pass the time. Should they hang themselves as doing so might give them erections but they quickly abandon the idea when it seems they might not both be able to successfully kill themselves; the notion of being left alone is intolerable. They decide to do nothing. For once, it is Vladimir who struggles to remember: “Oh ... nothing very definite,” is the best he can come up with.

Estragon says he is hungry and Vladimir provides a carrot which he eats without much relish. This section ends, as it began, with Estragon concluding that they still have nothing to do. Each day their waiting is interrupted by the passing of a master and his slave Pozzo and Lucky who may, according to Beckett, “shatter the space of the play” but they also provide much needed distraction and entertainment.

“A terrible cry,” heralds the entry of Lucky who crosses half the stage before his master appears holding one end of a long rope, the other of which is tied around Lucky’s neck. Pozzo treats Lucky as a slave but is civil to the other two. They mistake him at first for Godot and clearly do not recognise him. He condescends to rest a while and enjoy a meal of chicken and wine. When finished he casts the bones aside and Estragon jumps at them arousing Vladimir’s embarrassment. They want to know why Lucky does not put down his load. Pozzo explains that Lucky is trying to mollify him so, he won’t be sold. At this, Lucky begins to cry. Pozzo provides the handkerchief but it is Estragon who gets kicked in the shins, for trying to wipe away his tears. Before leaving Pozzo asks if he can do anything for the pair. Estragon tries to ask for some money but Vladimir cuts him short saying that they are not beggars. They nevertheless accept an offer for Lucky to dance and think. The dance turns out to be a clumsy shuffling; everyone is disappointed. Then begins Lucky’s soliloquy relatively coherently, but quickly dissolves into cacophony. Broadly speaking, Lucky’s speech falls into four parts; “the first describes an impersonal and callous God, the second asserts that man ‘wastes and pines’, the third mourns an inhospitable earth and the last attempts to draw the threads of the speech together by claiming that man diminishes in a world that does not nurture him.” It can be summarized however as follows:

[A]cknowledging the existence of a personal God, one who exists outside time and who loves us dearly and who suffers with those who are plunged into torment, it is established beyond all doubt that man for reasons unknown, has left his labours, abandoned, unfinished.

The presentation becomes increasingly garbled, frenetic, unintelligible and only ends when Vladimir rips his hat – which he cannot think without – from his head. Once Lucky has been revived, Pozzo has him pack up his things and they leave.

At the end of the day a boy arrives, purporting to be a messenger sent from Mr Godot, to tell the pair that he will not be coming that “evening but surely tomorrow.” During Vladimir’s interrogation of the boy he asks him if he came the day before, giving us an impression that they have been waiting for an indefinite period and will likely keep on waiting *ad infinitum*. They decide to leave but remain still.

When Beckett brings in the reference to ‘*the thieves*’ he is actually pointing to one of the chief tenets of Christianity - that human beings are essentially sinful, and that it was Jesus Christ who came to the earth to obliterate sin from us. Thus, the depiction of Christ as a saviour is central idea of this speech. In this line, Vladimir ruminates about the thief who was saved by Jesus Christ when they were both being crucified. The reference here to the Bible seems to be deliberate in order to create some kind of hope among the characters as well as the audience. It is a hope of deliverance from this absurd world. The root of this hope is an unquestioning faith. It is only this faith which can provide them the hope of salvation. Beckett’s deliberate use of the Bible’s reference no doubt generates humour.

SAQ:

1. How do you feel that the play is different from the other plays you have watched or read?

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2. What ideas do you get about the absurd dramas from this first act of *Waiting for Godot*?

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Act II:

Act II opens with Vladimir singing on a dog which serves to illustrate the cyclical nature of the play’s universe. This is only one of the references and allusions in the play. Vladimir is trying to understand the world they are

trapped in, and although there is a notional evidence of linear progression, it seems that he is living the same day over and over again.

Once again Estragon mentions his night-stay in a ditch and beating by “ten of them,” this time too, without any sign of injury. Vladimir tries to talk to him about the change in the tree (the sprouting of leaves) and the proceedings of the day before, but he has only a vague recollection, as his memory deceives him. Vladimir tries hard to make Estragon remember Pozzo and Lucky but all he can remember are the bones of chicken and memories of getting kicked. With some difficulty he gets Estragon to show him his leg. There is a wound which is beginning to fester. It is then Vladimir notices that Estragon is not wearing any boots.

Vladimir discovers the pair of boots which Estragon insists are not his. Nevertheless, when he tries them on they fit. There being no carrots left, Vladimir offers Estragon the choice between a turnip and a radish. He opts for the radish but it is black and he hands it back. He decides to try and sleep again and adopts the same position as the previous day. Vladimir even sings him a lullaby. Shortly after this, Vladimir notices Lucky’s hat. He decides to try it on. This leads to a frenetic hat swapping scene. They try to imitate Pozzo and Lucky but Estragon can barely remember having met them and simply does what Vladimir asks. They fire insults at each other and then make up. Then they attempt some physical jerks which do not work out well and even an attempt at a single yoga position fails miserably.

After this, Pozzo and Lucky arrive but both of them have undergone significant changes, Pozzo is now blind and he insists that Lucky is dumb. The rope is now much shorter and Lucky – who has acquired a new hat – leads Pozzo, rather than being driven by, him. He has lost all notion of time but assures them that he cannot remember meeting them the day before nor can he expect to remember the current day’s events which were over now. They fall in a heap at one point. Estragon sees an opportunity to extort more food or to take revenge on Lucky for kicking him. The issue is debated at length. Pozzo offers them money but Vladimir sees more worth in their entertainment value since they are compelled to wait to see if Godot arrives anyway. Eventually though, they all find their way onto their feet.

Since Pozzo has become blind, he appears to have gained some insight. His parting words—which Vladimir elaborates later—eloquently encapsulate

the realities of human existence: “They give birth astride of a grave, the light gleams an instant, then it’s night once more.” Lucky and Pozzo depart. A boy arrives, possibly the same boy (typically played by the same actor), to inform them not to expect Godot that day but he would definitely arrive the next day. The two tramps again contemplate on committing suicide but their rope, which served as Estragon’s belt, is not up to the job. His trousers fall down but he does not notice till Vladimir tells him to pull them up. They resolve to bring a more suitable piece and hang themselves the next day, if Godot fails to arrive. Again, they agree to leave but neither of them makes any movement and thus put an end to the play.

Although the play is divided into two acts one cannot find any structural difference between them. The circularity of the pattern provides a very prominent insight to the understanding of the play. In each act , we are offered basically the same sequence: the two tramps wait, reunite, contrive ways of passing time, encounter Pozzo and Lucky , receive Godot’s disappointing message , contemplate suicide, decide to leave but do not move. Some variations like the leaves on the tree and change in the roles of the wayfaring duo do occur. But they fail to bring in the change in the essential ‘sameness’ of the situation.

SAQ:

1. What would you like to say on the structure of the play?

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2. How do you perceive the relationship between the two acts?

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2.5 READING THE PLAY

Since the time of its first production in Paris in 1953, *Waiting for Godot* has been translated into many languages and performed all over the world.

Perhaps the most striking feature of this play is its innovative formal design. Fascinated by modernist experiments in form and style, he wanted a perfect fusion of structure and content. His relentless quest for a form led him to adopt a style in his fictions which systematically eschewing all references to the external world of social and historical experiences, became increasingly interiorized and auto-referential. *Waiting for Godot* was one of Beckett's early attempts at writing drama. This play is designed in such a way that, on the one hand, there is a certain emptiness in terms of plot, character, dialogue and setting ; on the other, the emphasis moves from an immediate dramatic interest to some philosophical contemplations beyond history and society.

Like Henric Ibsen and Bertolt Brecht before him, Beckett too drastically changed our expectations for what can happen on a stage. Till Beckett's arrival, people still expected the 'well made plays' although they were already familiar with Ibsen's 'Problem Plays' and Brecht's 'Alienation Effect.' Contemporary audience expected a well crafted, clever plot with intrigues and side-stories that amplify the main narrative. They wanted to empathize with the characters and expected a scenery designed to evoke an illusion of reality. The expected verbal inventiveness, dialogues that 'reveal character' and 'provides exposition' But Beckett withholds all such expectations. Instead *Waiting for Godot* is famously stripped of everything that might provide a sense of 'reality'. There is no character 'development'. There is no fictional 'story'. There is no linearity in terms of action or dialogue that leads anywhere. As an audience we too are trapped in the in the web of their meaningless conversations and activities. But towards the end we actually realize the essential absurdity of the condition we are witnessing.

Stop to Consider:

Although Beckett's works are comic, his characters often antiheroic, and his themes evocative of the absurdity and meaninglessness of human existence, he is not generally considered a nihilistic writer. Instead, he is widely recognized by his followers as having a keen sense of the condition of modern life, especially the impotence and ignorance of a world that has purportedly reached an advanced stage of technological and intellectual sophistication.

The history of the '*New Theatre*' can be an interesting starting point before reading *Waiting for Godot*. Almost all Post-war European dramas

respond to a world that seemed to be falling apart and becoming increasingly meaningless in the wake of capitalism, rampant individualism and the consequent loss of community feelings, large scale devastations of the world wars, threats of nuclear holocaust, and the destruction of the liberal tradition of hope and faith in man's innate goodness, rationality and progress. Its ideological influence is reflected in the feelings of angst, boredom, alienation, meaninglessness that prevailed over the whole literary tradition of Proust, Musil, Kafka, Camus, Sartre and of course , Beckett.

Existentialism and the Absurd are so closely related that discussion of any one is impossible without the other. Moreover, the absurd is also regarded as a kind of culmination of the existentialist movement. Martin Esslin, in his book *The Theatre of Absurd* writes that the existentialists use a definite form to inform the formless. They assert the absurdity very meaningfully. Therefore, the gap between the form and the content is evident in the plays of the existentialist playwrights like Kaiser or even Jean Paul Sartre. The absurdist playwrights, on the other hand, represent the illogical in an illogical way and do not use a meaningful frame to convey the meaninglessness. Thus, they successfully minimize the gap between form and content.

Connecting idea:

Noted Existentialist philosopher, Soren Kierkegaard argued that the absurd necessitated a leap of faith, i.e. since the rational could not take us far in understanding eternity or God, we need to go beyond the rational and the provable and affirm our faith in God. He takes as example the biblical story of Abraham who was called to sacrifice his son Isaac by God. Ethically, Abraham would have been committing murder, but it was God who was asking for the sacrifice. Albeit God saves Isaac at the last minute, Abraham was not certain of the outcome yet he acted according to God's wishes. This was an act of faith, an act which had no other motive but to demonstrate faith.

'Silence' plays a vital role in Absurdist drama. And if we look at the play carefully we can feel that Beckett too, has used 'silence' among the speeches a number of times. As far as the stage direction is concerned, 'silence' is an integral part of experimental drama. It helps the audience to involve themselves in a stage situation. 'Silence' is also relevant thematically. 'Silence'

means 'no speech' but can be more meaningful than spoken language. In a world where words have lost their relevance, 'silence' definitely works as a potential medium of expression. It is the visual rendering, a literal reproduction of the lack of all hope, of complete despondence in an arbitrary world.

Reading minutely we can say that the entire play is based on the notion of 'waiting' itself. The overriding importance of 'waiting' nullifies not only what we are doing but also the time in which we are doing it. It erases the 'past' and diminishes the significance of the 'present' by producing a sense of helplessness in terms of waiting. To Didi's comment, "Things have changed here since yesterday", Gogo replies "everything oozes." The idea of 'yesterday' itself is a vague one. Only the audience can remember the difference between 'yesterday' and 'today'. Because as they arrive in Act II from Act I, they are almost sure that Godot will not come 'today'. This leads us to consider 'time' as an illusive category in this play and that each character has his own way of relating to it.

When we are reading or watching the play, the sudden arrival of Lucky and Pozzo on the stage arouses confusion in the mind of the audience. The relationship between the two is ambiguous and can be interpreted in a number of ways. Lucky does not seem to have any command over the language system but he can make certain sounds when he put on the 'thinking' hat. Lucky's long speech is either full of meaning, or has no meaning at all - it leads us to rethink the systems of communication that we use as a vehicle to express our feelings and emotions. His speech is a negation of language itself and hence he uses a language that is really no language.

Stop to Consider:

Note the relationship between the two tramps - one could not possibly have an existence without the other. Thus the relationship seems to be more a structural necessity. But, as the absurdist has already denied the presence of any essential humanist value or ideology therefore will it be logical to think of any fellow feeling between the two tramps? They exist because each has made his existence a kind of dependence on the other. As Estragon says to Vladimir: 'we always find something, eh, Didi, to give us the impression that we exist'. (P-23)

Once Beckett said "I am interested in the shapes of ideas even if I do not believe in them.... It is the shape that matters" Ruby Cohn has listed the

incidence of doubling in the play. There are two Acts, two days, and two similar sets of incidents within the play. Moreover, the characters are also in pairs. They are couples of the opposite natures. This doubling is given a physical presence on the stage. If we look at the play from this perspective we will find that Beckett's *Waiting For Godot* is a carefully structured play. Here we confront an unfamiliar pattern which again and again forces us to make sense out of the nonsense. Perhaps this is the one of the most interesting ironies associated with avant-garde theatre.

SAQ:

1. What are the differences you find in your own reading of the play?
(40 words)

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2. Can you consider this play as the representation of the bizarre reality of the contemporary age? (60 words)

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2.5.1 MAJOR CHARACTERS

Godot:

The identity of Godot has been the subject of much debate. His identity indeed, the very reality of his existence is doubtful. Throughout the play he has been perceived as the saviour, God, a vindictive tyrant, a rich employer or somebody who holds the 'future' of the two tramps. In order to solve the mystery regarding Godot's identity, critics have delved deeper into Beckett's own life and history to know who Godot is. Beckett's own angry response to it is that if he knew who Godot is, he would have said so in the play. Actually Godot cannot be made to represent any one idea, ideal or person, precisely because he is believed to have represented the notion of an 'absence'.

Vladimir and Estragon:

Vladimir and Estragon, the two tramps who wait for Godot lack any fixed individual identities. Their relationship is full of contradictions and confusions. They are perceived, 'at this place, at this moment of time,' not as two distinct personalities but as two truncated and generalized images of all 'mankind'. Incapable of any meaningful action or initiative, they imply an utterly pessimistic view of man as a helpless victim of existential circumstances.

Stop to Consider:

Antihero: A 'non-hero' or the antithesis of a 'hero' who is believed to be capable of heroic deeds, who is dashing, strong, brave and resourceful. An anti-hero, as a type who is incompetent, unlucky, tactless, clumsy, stupid buffoonish, can be found, for instance Greek New Comedy. An antihero is one who is given the vocation of failure. There are various examples of fictional anti-heroes the best of which may be the eponymous knight of *Don Quixote*. With the emergence of Absurd drama, the notion of an antihero got some new impetus in the field of drama also.

When Beckett started writing this play, he perhaps, did not have an image of these two. They are never ever referred to as tramps in the text. There are no physical descriptions of either of the two characters however the text indicates that Vladimir is likely to be the heavier of the pair. They have been together for fifty years but when asked by Pozzo they do not reveal their actual ages. Vladimir stands through most of the play whereas Estragon sits down a number of times and even dozes off. Estragon's defeatist nature and sense of despair and his preoccupations with various physical needs like hunger and sleep are contrasted to Vladimir's optimism and intellectual preoccupations with philosophical questions. Throughout the play the couple refer to each other by pet names, "Didi" and "Gogo"

Pozzo and Lucky:

When Beckett was asked why Lucky was so named, his reply was, "I suppose he is lucky to have no more expectations..." Although it has been

contended that Pozzo and Lucky are simply Didi and Gogo writ large” there is a different kind of dynamics at work here. Pozzo may be mistaken for Godot by the two tramps but, as far as Lucky ‘thinks’, Pozzo is *his* Godot, which is another reason for his being lucky. Their association is not as clear cut as it first seems however, it becomes evident that Lucky always rendered more influence in the relationship, for he danced, and more importantly, thought – not as a part of his service, but in order to fill a vacant need of Pozzo. Pozzo credits Lucky with having given him all the culture, refinement, and ability to reason that he possesses.

We learn very little about Pozzo besides the fact that he is on his way to the fair to sell his slave, Lucky. He presents himself very much as a landlord, bullying and conceited. He confesses to a poor memory but it is more a result of an abiding self-absorption. Pozzo is a character who has to overcompensate. That is why he overdoes things...and his overcompensation has to do with a deep insecurity in him. Pozzo controls Lucky by means of an extremely long rope which he jerks and tugs if Lucky is the least bit slow. Lucky is the absolutely subservient slave of Pozzo and he unquestioningly does his every bidding with “dog-like devotion”. ‘Lucky’ is a dog’s name. He struggles with a heavy suitcase without ever thinking of dropping it. Lucky speaks only once in the play and it is a result of Pozzo’s order to “think” for Estragon and Vladimir. Pozzo and Lucky had been together for sixty years and, in that time, their relationship has deteriorated. Lucky has always been the intellectually superior but now, with age, he has become an object of contempt: Despite his horrid treatment at Pozzo’s hand, Lucky remains faithful and has not tried to run away; they are clearly bound together by more than a piece of rope in the same way that Didi and Gogo are “[t]ied to Godot”.

The Boys:

The boy in Act I, a local lad, assures Vladimir that this is the first time he has seen him. He says he was not there the previous day. He confirms that he works for Mr. Godot as a goat herder. His brother, who is coincidentally beaten by Godot, is a shepherd. Godot feeds both of them and allows them to sleep in his hayloft.

The boy in Act II also assures Vladimir that it was not he who called upon them the day before. He insists that this too is his first visit. When Vladimir asks what Godot does, the boy tells him; “He does nothing, sir.” We also learn he has a white beard – possibly, the boy is not certain. This boy also has a brother who it seems is sick but there is no clear evidence to suggest that his brother is the boy that came in Act I or the one who came the day before that.

SAQ:

1. How do you feel that the characters are related to each-other? (50 words)

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2. What according to you do the characters mostly represent? (50 words)

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2.6 CRITICAL RECEPTION OF THE PLAY

Though the play was received with suspicion nobody could ever imagine that this play would revolutionize theatre and theatrical history for all time. The critical reception of *Waiting for Godot*, Beckett’s first major play and his first major success as a writer met with both appraisal and intense criticism. Bewilderment best exemplified the feelings those elite theatregoing audience had experienced after watching that play. Consequently, its opening in Paris during 1953, caused immediate sensation. Gradually, later audiences started to respond immediately and sympathetically (empathically) to Didi and Gogo’s absurd paralysis as they began to think that it represented ‘our condition’. One critic memorably said that ‘nothing happens twice’ in the play. And the theatrical vitality and versatility of the play have been demonstrated by various performances throughout the world.

It was only after the 50s, it had received popular acclaim among the literary artists and filmmakers for its immense possibilities. Miodrag Bulatoviæ in 1966 in his *Godot je došao (Godot Arrived)* presents Godot as a baker who ends up being condemned to death by the four main characters. Another example was Ian McDonald's 1991 novel *King of Morning, Queen of Day* (partly written in Joycean style). Two main characters were clearly meant to be the original Vladimir and Estragon. Another unauthorized sequel was written by Daniel Curzon in the late 1990s: *Godot Arrives. Rosencrantz & Guildenstern Are Dead*, written by Tom Stoppard and first staged in 1966, contains a set of characters whose dialogue and themes seem to have been strongly influenced by the characters in *Godot*. *Waiting for Guffman* is a film co-written and directed by Christopher Guest. The plots share enough similarities. Godot here is meant to reveal things about Guffman.

The influence of this genre became more evident in the realm of silent films also. Use of excessive body gesture instead of ornamented dialogues and how it made semiotics functional on the stage were the point of focus. Moreover, such a flexible form enhanced the scope of various dramatic adaptations.

Stop to Consider:

Critical reception of these plays must be read in close connection to the silent films and filmmakers like the hilarious trig-comedies of Charlie Chaplin.

SAQ:

1. What makes the play so popular that it was adopted for so many later productions? (50 words)

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2. Can we say that the later adaptations have increased the popularity of the play? (40 words)

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2.7 REFERENCES AND SUGGESTED READINGS

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Unit 3

Harold Pinter's *The Birthday Party*

Contents:

- 3.1 Objectives
- 3.2 Introduction
- 3.3 Introducing the Author
- 3.4 Plot overview
- 3.5 Reading the Play
- 3.6 Critical Reception of the play
- 3.7 References and Suggested Readings

3.1 OBJECTIVES

This unit intends to introduce you to another very important play in the genre of the absurd, *The Birthday Party* by Harold Pinter. After going through this unit you should be able to–

- *identify* the various new trends and innovations in the field of drama.
- *relate* Pinter's craft with the prescribed text
- appreciate the dominant ideas in the play
- *note* the representation of 'character' in the aftermath of the absurd
- *appreciate* the historical and social contexts in which Pinter was writing

3.2 INTRODUCTION

The Birthday Party was presented in May 1958 by Michael Cordon at the Lyric Hammersmith, where it received very little critical attention and ran only for one week. It was revived in May 1959 by the Tavistock Repertory Company at the Tower Theatre thanks to the magazine *Encore* that wrote about the amateur production seen by a great many people who would otherwise have missed it. Consequently, contemporary audience

began to appreciate Pinter. Pinter himself pronounced the production better than the Hammersmith one. In this unit, attempt has been made to make you aware of the fact that like Thomas Beckett, Harold Pinter also presents the absurdity of human life as a *leitmotif*. Through *The Birthday Party* (1957) you will come to know how Pinter has exploited the persecution mania of Stanley to provide a glimpse of the private territory of a man, where even his own loneliness is under threat from social intercourse. Pinter's use of social spaces to intensify the self's inward chaos is without parallel in contemporary English drama.

Stop to consider:

It will be interesting to draw a parallel between the worlds of Franz Kafka and Pinter. Both deal with experiences which at first glance seem commonplace, even paltry. But all of these turn out to be battles for high stakes, for sanity, for life itself. Both share a conviction that the essential aspects of experience are ambiguous. Also, their characters are preoccupied with anxiety or fear rather than hope. Like Kafka's *The Trial*, Pinter's *The Birthday Party* begins with the hero's birthday and ends with two men taking him away.

3.3 INTRODUCING THE AUTHOR

Harold Pinter, the 2005 Nobel Laureate for Literature, was born on 10th October, 1930 in London's Hackney district. He became the English playwright who achieved international fame as one of the most complex and challenging post-war dramatists. Mostly known for their use of understatement, small talk, reticence, silence: his plays also convey the character's thought which is always in contradiction to his speech.

He was the son of a Jewish tailor and grew up in London's East End in a working class area. The family, relatively poor, lived very frugally, like the other working-class families in the area. His education at Hackney Downs Grammar School brought him into a lively-minded group of energetic and intellectually adventurous teachers and fellow-students. During his schooling period both theatre and anti-Fascism seem to have been important influences in his mind. Both the intensity of his theatrical voice and the menace that stalks and indeed characterized his early plays may owe something to this environment. After completing his schooling, Pinter went to the Royal

Academy of Dramatic Art in 1948, where he had unhappy experiences. Then he joined a repertory company as a professional actor. After that Pinter toured Ireland and parts of England with various acting companies, appearing under the name David Baron. until 1959. Then he began to write for the stage.

The Room (1957) had all the hallmarks of what would become known as 'Pinteresque', in that it had a mundane situation that gradually filled with menace and mystery through the author's deliberate omission of an explanation or motivation for the action on stage. Pinter wrote a second one-act play in *The Dumb Waiter* (1957) - an absurdist drama concerning two hit-men employed by a secret organization to kill an unknown victim. It was with this play that Pinter added an element of black comedy, mostly through his brilliant use of dialogue, which not only elucidated the killers' growing anxiety but underscored the very absurdity of their situation. His first full length play, *The Birthday party* (1958; filmed 1968), confused London audiences and lasted only for a week, but later it was televised and revived successfully on the stage.

His best known work is probably *The Caretaker*, which was first staged at the Arts Theatre, London, in 1960 and was filmed in 1963. This play ultimately established him as more than just another practitioner of the contemporary Theatre of the Absurd. His early plays were rooted in the absurdism that became the major theatrical paradigm on the European stage in the third quarter of the 20th Century, after the horrors of the war and the Holocaust. His next major play, *The Homecoming* (1965), helped in his making as an originator of a totally different idiom of presenting drama. His later plays like *Landscape* (1969), *Silence* (1969), *Night* (1969) and *Old Times* (1971) virtually did away with any kind of physical activity on the stage. Pinter's later success included *No Man's Land* (1975) and *Betrayal* (1978). From the 1970s onwards, Pinter began his career as director of his own plays and those of others. His *Poems and Prose 1941-1977* was published in 1978.

He is credited with the invention of a new dramatic style known as the comedy of menace, and his name has been adopted as descriptive of a type of theatre under the umbrella term "Pinteresque". Beginning in the 1960s, Pinter further enhanced his reputation as a writer with his screenplays, particularly his work with Joseph Losey in *The Servant* (1963) and *Accident* (1967). His plays are known for the ambivalence in terms of the

plots, presentation of characters, and endings. They typically begin with a pair of characters whose relations and role-playing are suddenly disrupted by the entry of strangers. The audiences are made to see how the nervous break down of the characters as their fears, jealousies, hatreds, sexual preoccupations, and loneliness increases, compel them to engage themselves in a bizarre yet commonplace conversation.

Dialogue is the most important dramatic convention in Pinter's plays and this is what makes his works most original. The characters' colloquial speech is another noticeable element which is further punctuated by resonant silences. The character's speech, hesitations, and pauses reveal not only the character's sense of alienation and the problems they find in communicating but also indirectly focus on the many layers of meaning that are contained in those speeches.

There is a prodigious and international Pinter critical industry but little consensus about his work, except for the acknowledgement that he is indisputably at the forefront of contemporary drama. After the great plays of his early and mid-period, Pinter became more overtly political. His later plays, which generally are shorter than the plays from the period in which he made his reputation, typically address political subjects and often are allegories on oppression. In the late 1970s, Pinter became more outspoken on political issues and is decidedly of the left. Pinter's later attempts include certain radio and television dramas and a number of successful motion-picture screen plays

SAQ:

1. What are the specific qualities of Pinter as a modern dramatist?(40 words)

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2. Do you find any common themes in the plays of Pinter? (50 words)

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3.4 PLOT OVERVIEW

The Birthday Party is composed of three acts.

Act I is set in a shabby boarding house, run by Meg and Petey, a couple in their sixties. There is only one boarder, Stanley – a scruffy, depressed-looking man in his late thirties who had been a professional pianist. There are three figures that arrive in the boarding house from the outside world: Lulu, a young woman who tries, without success, to seduce Stanley and compel him to go out with her; Goldberg, a powerful and threatening Jew in his fifties; and McCann, an Irishman in his thirties, taciturn and menacing. It becomes clear that they have come in pursuit of Stanley, to wreak vengeance upon him for a past misdemeanor, or to reclaim him for a shadowy organization that they represent. Following the arrival of Goldberg and McCann, Meg decides to put on a party for Stanley, saying that it is his birthday, a claim which Stanley denies. Meg gives Stanley a toy drum as a birthday present, which Stanley beats with increasing savagery as the curtain falls down.

In the very first act we get the idea that Pinter is trying to reflect on a common humdrum Western life with its typical day to day activities. A sense of anxiety is pervading all over, which indirectly signify the realities of the lives of the characters in the play. For example, we find Petey sitting at the breakfast table with a paper, while Meg prattles on with her suffocating mixture of motherly attentiveness and self-praise. There seems to be no charm in the married life of the old couple. Meg is having a commanding personality while Petey is moiré reticent. Meg loves talking while Petey keeps silent. Meg decides to wake Stanley for breakfast and goes to his room. Unshaven and half dressed, Stanley comes downstairs and sits at the table to eat. After Petey goes off to work, Stanley teases Meg about her “succulent” fried bread, but when she becomes affectionate, he gets irritated and complains that her tea is “muck” and the place is a “pigsty”. Meg tells Stanley about the two men who may be new tenants. At first he is worried but then shrugs the information off as a “false alarm

The congenial atmosphere of the room is threatened in the usual Pinterish way. With the prospect of the outsiders the whole aura changed. However, Stanley and Meg seem not prepared for such a situation. At first they thought the outsiders as some visitors. This is almost like a prophecy of the inevitable

doom in the Greek tragedy. Pinter has built up the environment in such a way that the audiences are aware of the fact that something nasty is going to take place.

SAQ:

1. How do you conceive the character of Stanley? (40 words)

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2. What purpose Goldberg and McCann serve in bringing the outside world to the inside of the play? Can we compare them with the messenger of the inevitable as we find in the Morality plays? (80 words)

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Act II is set in a scene of interrogation, as Goldberg and McCann irritate Stanley with troubling questions, eventually making him say nothing. This scene then moves into the eponymous party, at the beginning of which Goldberg, McCann and Stanley all resume the politely vacuous speech patterns. The party atmosphere becomes increasingly hostile. Stanley is victimised in course of a game of blind man's buff, in which he is made to lose control, as if he was trying to strangle Meg, and then to rape Lulu. Act II is the culmination of the party but simultaneously, the sense of suspense also builds up. Some events on the stage like the tearing of the newspaper, snatching of the whistle etc., though they are not menacing in themselves, help in building the intended suspense.

Act III is set in the morning after the party. Goldberg and McCann, it becomes apparent, have been working on Stanley through the night, and he

is now dressed in a suit, clean-shaven, rendered conventional in appearance and wholly inarticulate. Goldberg and McCann have achieved complete dominance over Stanley, and are taking him off in their car to be dealt with by one Monty, evidently a professional, perhaps a torturer or a psychiatrist, or both. Petey mounts a faint protest at the impending removal of Stanley, but backs down in the face of a threat to himself. Meg outwardly remains unaware that anything untoward has taken place as the play ends.

So, it is seen that Stanley has hidden himself in seaside inn from which he is forcibly removed by two visitors, Goldberg and McCann, who represent an unnamed organization. But the play is also clearly a political metaphor for the oppression of the individual by the state; and it's no accident that Pinter had himself earlier risked imprisonment for conscientious objection. Compared to the concentrated multilevel meaningfulness of Act II, Act III seems to be much simple. The long opening scene between Meg and Petey is lacking in tension, and is without any redeeming comedy. However, the arrival of the big car and the information that Stanley has a nervous breakdown hold the attention for a moment. There are some comic moments between McCann and Goldberg with McCann peering into the mouth of Goldberg. With a handsome apparel and clean shaved countenance Stanley re-appears on the stage from up-stairs. But he cannot speak now and can only make inarticulate sounds. At the end, we find Goldberg and McCann taking Stanley away in the car. Petey, the sympathetic, being on the stage tries in vain to stop them. Thus, the play ends, as it began, with Meg and Petey alone together in the room and on the stage.

Porter and Larkin, two famous actors associated with Pinter's productions presented Goldberg and McCann as a sort of pre-Stoppard Rosencrantz & Guildenstern. It is obvious that the two actors had great fun at their parts - especially Porter, whose character exhibits a vile chumminess and is stated to have tastes that run to the perverted. They played well off one another, but at some points it seemed that the lines were meant only as the writer's self-congratulatory cleverness, making it difficult for the audience to engage with what was being said. As with Stark and Heggie's earlier scene, however, Porter and Larkin did their best to liven up stale lines. Read the play in connection to Stoppard's "*Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are dead*".

SAQ:

Connect the three acts and try to explain how do they reflect on the broader themes of the play? (100 words)

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3.5 READING THE PLAY

There is no denying the fact that Chekhov is the fore-runner of Modernist drama as he broke away from the nineteenth century explicit theatre to the devices of presenting implicit drama, depending on the subject, on what was not said but implied rather than on the surface meanings of the words themselves. Perhaps, this is also true about Pinter’s drama as well. He writes of his characters. “Between my lack of biographical data about them and the ambiguity of what they say, there lies the territory which is not only worthy of exploration, but it is compulsory to explore. Most of the times, we’re inexpressive, giving little away, unrealistic, allusive, evasive, obstructive, unwilling. But it is out of these attributes that a language arises. A language I repeat, where, under what is said, another thing is being said.”

In his letter to Peter Wood, director of *The Birthday Party*, (written in April 1958), Pinter tells Peter that “the first image of this play, the first thing that about a year ago was put on paper, was a kitchen, Meg, Stanley, corn flakes and sour milk. There they were, they sat, they stood, they turned, they were incontrovertible. Not long before Goldberg and McCann turned up. They had come with a propose, a job in hand-to take Stanley away. This they did, Meg unknowing, Petey helpless, Stanley sucked in, play over. That was the pure line and I couldn’t get away from it.” Then again Pinter writes, “When the thing was well-cooked I began to form certain conclusions. The point is, however, that by that time the play was now its own world....The play is itself. It is no other. It has its own life...I believe that what happens on the stage will possess a potent dramatic image and a great deal of this will be visual- I mean one will *see* the people, which will be a great aid to the expression of the thing, the getting across....cockeyed, brutish, absurd, with no comment. Where is the comment, the slant, the

explanatory note? In the play everything to do with the play is in the play.”
(HP various voices pages 11-12)

The ambiguity of a play like *The Birthday Party* prompted comparison with the other absurdist plays. It reminds us of Eugene Ionesco's premise of absurd drama: the "Absurd is that which is devoid of purpose.... Cut off from his religious, metaphysical, and transcendental roots, man is lost; all his actions become senseless, absurd, useless." Consequently in *Birthday Party* the tragic is mixed with the comic, which ultimately liberates through recognition of the confining morality of society.

Although Pinter's theatre has often been described as belonging to the theatre of the absurd, it is more accurately considered a kind of psychological drama in which a supposedly secure space is contested by characters that may or may not be the embodiment of each other's fears, insecurities or latent sexuality. Pinter's oeuvre is heterogeneous, however, and only a minority of his own plays – almost all dating from the early part of his career, can be said to conform to the characteristics of the 'Pinteresque'.

Silence plays a vital role in the play as becomes more significant than dialogues. It also becomes the metaphor of the existence of the characters. Pinter's humour always has an underlying pathos. By mixing it with human desire and violence he has been able to give a new intensity to the idea of humour. It is self-reflexive in the sense that it has its own subversion within it. Violence, in Pinter's hand has got a new definition altogether. He has made it expressive of the innermost feelings of human mind. It is a medium to peep deeper into the unconscious realm of human mind. After Act II the audiences are compelled to think whether it is really a birthday party or a deliberate trap laid for Stanley. The passive resistance of the inmates toward the approaching danger lead the audience to re-think on the actuality of their identities. Sexual violence against woman seems to dominate the whole play. Is it a miniature representation of the oppression of the patriarchal norms or Pinter's typical attitude towards women that we must appreciate. Goldberg and McCann's abduction of Stanley analogues to Fascist atrocity. Goldberg and McCann, who represent a 'system' in this play, do not appear in the scene until the end of the act I. Their Jewish-Irish names and dialects

suggest a vaudeville skit, and it is not long before we realize that the skit is the Judeo-Christian tradition as it appears in our present civilization. Goldberg is the senior partner; he utters the clichés of family, class, and proportion. Pinter's villains are messengers from mysterious organizations. In his plays, the messengers of the system increasingly dehumanize its victims. We can expect that Goldberg and McCann, who in effect abduct Stanley, are going to exploit him in some way or the other or to murder him for their own purposes. But we are not certain about what is going to happen to Stanley. Therefore a Pinter play is almost like a Thematic Apperception Test. All of Harold Pinter's major plays end in the virtual annihilation of an individual. Stanley Webber, the hero of *The Birthday Party*, is taken from his refuge for 'special treatment'.

Pinter's preoccupation with confined spaces, small habitats with constraining circumstances and brief events provides a scope for exploring the complexities of local pictures, the instability of verbal interaction, the changing social realities, or the inability to communicate properly, as found in the play. Pinter is preoccupied with human fear and anxiety rather than with our hopes. From one point of view all the six characters of the play seem to constitute a microcosm of the society. In particular, they mirror the fundamental economic division in society, the division between the exploiter and the exploited. Goldberg and McCann are obviously the exploiters - symbols of both the anonymous forces that control life, and the managers, the operators, and decision makers who understand these forces well enough to use them to further their own ends. Most crucial to an understanding of Pinter's theatre is the symbolism of his characters. Pinter's method of characterization differs from the conventional Ibsenian method. For Ibsen, the past histories of the characters like their past lives and their social backgrounds, are the soil in which the whole plot is planted.

Another major theme is that the struggle for power, which in Pinter's view, underlies most or all human interrelationships. Stanley's principal antagonist in *The Birthday Party* is Goldberg, ostensibly the most powerful character in the play. But Goldberg's power is always put in question: he relies on McCann to perform the more physical aspects of their duties for him, and to sustain him physically, by blowing in his mouth; he is defied ultimately unsuccessfully by both Stanley and Petey. It is no accident that the motif of 'hunting' occurs so often in Pinter's work, as it does in Beckett's. The

motives for pursuit may often remain obscure but the panic of the quarry and the excitement of the chase are shown extraordinarily. Stanley, in *The Birthday Party* is terrified when he hears that two strangers are coming to the boarding-house and the 'hunt' is translated into nightmare terms both in the game of the blind man's-buff and when the lights goes off. This nightmare sequence of hunting in the dark is repeated in Pinter's *The Servant*. Thus, reading the play in terms of animal imagery can provide an interesting insight.

Harold Pinter has achieved the ultimate distinction for a living dramatist. He has made his own adjective: 'Pinteresque' for whatever he has done so far. It is generally applied to a situation fraught with menace in which common speech camouflages a ferocious battle for territory. But there is much more to Pinter than masked conflict and hidden threat. His pervading theme is memory: the way our existence is haunted by a recollection, however fallible or imaginary, of some vanished world in which everything was secure, certain and fixed. The wordplay in Pinter is striking. Questioning, self-doubt and distrust of values amongst the characters constitutes some other major preoccupations in the play.

SAQ:

1. What according to you are the reasons behind Pinters acceptance as one of the leading dramatists of the contemporary world? (100 words)

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2. List some of the common themes of Harold Pinter as found in this play? (60 words)

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3.6 CRITICAL RECEPTION OF THE PLAY

The critics of *Encore*, the foremost radical theatre journal of the time was, found in Pinter's plays significances of which Pinter himself was unaware. But from *The Birthday Party* (1958) to *The Homecoming* (1965), Pinter's plays are subjected to long and serious criticism and it was the Encore Publishing Company that produced, the first edition of *The Birthday Party* which it advertised as 'not only pungently funny and disquietingly macabre, but rich with concern about the state of our society'. There was however, one lonely voice who praised Pinter's works. His name was Harold Hobson who proclaimed that that –“Mr. Pinter, on this evidence of this work, possesses the most original, disturbing and errasting talent in theatrical London.” Dealing with *The Birthday Party* he further said-“ One of the greatest merits of this play is the fact that no one can say precisely what it is about, or gives the address from which the intruding Goldberg and Meccann came, or say precisely why.. Stanley is so frighten... it is exactly in this vagueness that its spine chilling quality lies.”

Accused sometimes of retreating into private worlds, Pinter from the mid-1980s onwards, has answered his critics and expressed his sense of moral outrage with a series of pungent, political plays dealing with abuse of human rights as found in *One For The Road* (1984) *Mountain Language* (1988) *Ashes to Ashes* (1996) and so on. Pinter is now recognised as one of the most widely performed and best-known dramatists in the contemporary world. An active Pinter Society in the US is producing a Pinter Record annually. There is a formidable body of Pinter studies. Contemporary British Playwrights are mostly used to being a part of the Pinter Canon.

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