

**Institute of Distance and Open Learning
Gauhati University**

MA in English

Semester 4

Paper 19

European I – Modern Dramatic Works



Contents:

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Block 2 : Drama in Norwegian

Block 3 : Italian Drama

Block 4 : German Drama

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Contents	Page No.
Block 1: Russian Drama	
Block Introduction	5
Unit 1: Russian Drama	7
Unit 2: Anton Chekhov	31
Block 2: Drama in Norwegian	
Block Introduction:	55
Unit 1: The Background of Norwegian Drama	57
Unit 2: Ibsen and His World	69
Unit 3: The Wild Duck	87
Block 3: Italian Drama	
Block Introduction	109
Unit 1: Italian Drama	111
Unit 2: Luigi Pirandello	127
Block 4: German Drama	
Block Introduction	149
Unit 1: German Drama	151
Unit 2: Bertolt Brecht	167

Block 1

Russian Drama

Block Introduction :

This block introduces you with Modern Russian drama. You must have noticed that the plays that you have to study in this course (paper XIX) are categorized in accordance with their national lineages. These divisions are intended for your convenience so that some national traditions (Russian, German, Norwegian, Italian, and French) come promptly to your mind. Europe, we all know, is a continent, a multi-national concept. Events in the recent past have highlighted the point most dramatically, that 'Europe' is a huge conglomeration of multiple communities. So, even though we would wish to subsume so many different cultural histories within one label – "European" – we still have to recall that writers refer back (sometimes, forward!) to many localised traditions. As for instance, in the case of the Russians, we always have to remember the cultural fact of the 'Slavophile'. This block brings to you some information on Modern Russian drama with a reading of Anton Chekhov's play *The Sea Gull*.

Some 'facts' regarding Chekhov's life and career should be noted; he began his career as a medical practitioner but his writing began as the means of support for his family. Chekhov's literary career is marked by a new phase in the year 1886. By 1888 he was fully committed to writing and had also embarked on the road to the theatre as a dramatist. *The Sea Gull* (1896) belongs to the period when Chekhov produced his four great masterpieces of modern drama. Alexander Sergeyevich Pushkin (June 6 1799 – February 10 [1837])

Chekhov's predecessors in drama in the nineteenth century include the names of Alexander Sumarókov (1718-1777), Ozeroff (1769-1816), Pavel Aleksandrovich Katenin (22 December 1792 - 4 June 1853), Griboyedoff (1795-1829), Alexander Sergeyevich Pushkin (June 6 1799 - February 10 [1837]) Ostrovskiy (1823-1886) etc. *The Sea Gull* marked Chekhov's first great success in the theatre as well as brought fame to the Moscow Art Theatre whose staging of the performance in 1898 was highly successful.

Chekhov's dramaturgy is different from the more familiar practices of Ibsen and Strindberg, elsewhere in Europe, as well as from his Russian predecessors. In the early twentieth-century, Chekhov was, however, overshadowed by his more famous contemporary, Maxim Gorky, whose career in the theatre he had encouraged. The best way to understand a play is to watch a performance. When you happen to be a spectator to a production of *The Sea Gull* you may appreciate the Chekhovian technique of allowing the emotions and even the smaller details of daily life constituting the 'action' of the play. Perhaps, this technique is what makes this play so entirely remarkable. Another part of this 'story' is that Chekhov had much occasion to disagree with the famous stage-director and actor, Konstantin Stanislavsky!

You will encounter more details both about Chekhov and his play which you will find useful to get at deeper meanings that the words on the page lead to. Reading drama is helped by a vigorous imagination which helps to visualise the actual performance on the stage. In that sense, you should be aware that reading a play is taking you away from the 'original' action on stage, as well as from the language and the culture. However, this brief outline may stir you to a wider reading of Russian drama. It will show you some of the ways in which Russian dramatists have enriched this field of art.

This block contains the following units:

Unit 1- Russian Drama

Unit 2- Anton Chekhov

Unit 1

Russian Drama

Contents:

- 1.1 Objectives
- 1.2 Introduction
- 1.3 Socio- historical Context
- 1.4 Major Influences and Trends
- 1.5 Important Playwrights and their Plays
- 1.6 Production Houses and Histories
- 1.7 Major Preoccupations
- 1.8 Critical Reception
- 1.9 Summing up
- 1.10 References and Suggested Readings

1.1 OBJECTIVES

This unit is designed to help you understand the various social, political and cultural contexts leading to the development of Russian drama. This unit intends to:

- *outline* the social and historical situation of the age of rise of Russian theatre
- *narrate* the dual origin of Russian drama, out of the religious “mysteries” on the one hand and popular comedy on the other
- *describe* the pioneer dramatists of Russia and the source and description of their works
- *help* you analyse the effect of time and location in Russian drama
- *relate* the history of the theatre houses and their public reception
- *connect* the characteristics of the early Russian drama with that of other nations
- *help* you critically analyse the typical characteristics of Russian drama with reference to the juncture of its advent

1.2 INTRODUCTION

The drama in Russia is said to have a dual origin. It developed out of the religious “mysteries” juxtaposed by the popular comedy. Witty interludes

were introduced and synthesized with the grave, moral representations of subjects borrowed from the Old or the New Testament. Several such mysteries were adapted in the seventeenth century by the teachers of the Greco-Latin Theological Academy at Kiev for representation in Little Russian by the students of the Academy, and later on these adaptations found their way to Moscow. The Religious drama in its earliest form, called Mysteries, was introduced into Russia from Poland in the beginning of the twelfth century. They were known under the name of Religious Dialogues, or simply as Histories, and were at first played exclusively in monasteries as a part of religious celebration. It was performed by students in the universities and public schools in Polish or Latin after 1603. The earliest Latin Dialogue that has come down to us is entitled *Adam*, and bears on its title page the date of 1507; the earliest in Polish is *The Life of the Savior From His Entry Into Jerusalem*, and was composed by a Dominican of Cracow, in the year 1533.

There was another class of dramatic representations peculiar to Russia. Essentially a mode of religious education besides being entertaining, these plays were exhibited in a species of perambulating booth called “Vertep,” and divided into three stories; the first and third of which were occupied by the performing figures, the middle one being devoted to the machinery necessary to put the marionettes in motion. They formed the chief attraction at the large fairs held in the principal cities during the Christmas holidays, and the card-figures consisted of the Virgin, Joseph, the Savior, Angels, Shepherds, and the Magi. The Nativity and the Massacre of the Innocents usually formed the subjects. To represent the latter, other characters were introduced, including Herod, Death, in the shape of a skeleton, and the Devil, who came in at the end to carry off the soul of the godless monarch.

Stop to consider:

You should consider a curious hand of the church in the advent of performances for purely educative purposes in every civilization. You should also note the similarity of these plays to the early English mystery plays, morality plays and interludes, as we will discuss in the following section. The allegorical portrayal of the plays must be to facilitate the understanding of the commoners about the religion and to impart the Biblical knowledge to the illiterate mass unable to read the Bible. You should also read the condition as a fair way of educating the novice taking the Holy Order.

Like the Mysteries, the Vertep plays were at first of a strictly religious character, but gradually they metamorphosed into corrective satires on contemporary life and manners. There were three annual scenic festivals, or acts patronized by the church. The first represented the delivery of the Three Children from the furnace of fire, and was played at Christmas both in Moscow and Novgorod; the second, dating from the fifteenth century, represented the entry of the Savior into Jerusalem, and was performed on Palm Sunday; the third, played on Sunday in Carnival week, was preceded by solemn religious ceremonies, and depicted the final judgment. Very few of these Mysteries have been preserved and traced to the present days. Those that posterity possesses are characterized by the same features like the English miracle-plays of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. In the so-called “pitiful comedy” of *Adam and Eve*, printed at Kiev about 1675, it is only the prologue that is in any way concerned with the story of man’s first disobedience. The four acts of which it is composed are devoted to the exploits of Alexis Michaelovitch, where both biblical and allegorical personages mingle freely with historical characters throughout the drama. Some of the Mysteries were written with a polemical objective. The author of *The Martyrdom of Stephen*, whom you will perceive to be a Catholic, states his intention for writing the play, in the prologue: “Peter was undeservedly deprived of his supremacy,” and further dilates on the “juggling tricks” of Sophia, who, contrary to all justice, had “usurped her brother’s rights.”

Stop to consider:

If you read any of these Vertep plays, you will notice that here is a similar confusion of the terms ‘tragedy’ and ‘comedy’ in their titles, an indifference to chronology, and a like synthesis of Biblical as well as historical and contemporary personages as seen in the mystery and morality plays of England and Germany. The comedy of *Adam and Eve* shall appear to you to be highly personalized and fashioned in the manner of a quest of human being across developing consciousness. If you look closely, you will perceive the strangely conclusive nature of the playwright as far as making it a propaganda play.

1.3 SOCIO- HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Towards the end of the seventeenth century, Peter I in certain aristocratic circles of Moscow, desired to introduce the contemporary European ways of living, and this venture was patronized by the father of Peter, the Tsar Alexis. He favoured theatrical representations, and influenced some foreigners residing at Moscow to write the necessary pieces for representation at the Imperial palace. A person named Gregory, unknown to us was assigned this task and, taking German versions of plays, which used to be called at that time "English Plays," he adapted them to the Russian setting. *The Comedy of Queen Esther and the Haughty Haman, Tobias, Judith, etc.*, were represented before the Tsar. A high functionary of the Church, Simeon Polotskiy, wrote several such mysteries, and quite a few of them have come down to us. The Grand Duchess Sophie, a pupil of Simeon, broke the strict habits of isolation which were then obligatory for women, and had theatrical representations given at the palace in her presence.

After the death of Alexis, the theatre was closed by the Conservatives; and it was not until 1702, when Peter I, being very fond of the drama, besides considering it to be mode of cultural education for the subjects, opened a theatre in the old capital. Moreover, another sister of Peter I, the Grand Duchess Nathalie, highly patronized dramatic performances, and took all the properties of this theatre to her own palace, a few years later. She ordered performances given there first in German, and later in Russian. We suspect that she herself wrote a few plays in collaboration with one of the pupils of Doctor Bidlo, who had opened another theatre at the Moscow Hospital where the students performed and wrote plays to alleviate their boredom and often entertain their patients. Later, the theatre of Princess Nathalie was transferred to the new capital founded by her brother on the Neva.

The performances of this theatre were quite varied, and included, other than German plays, like *Scipio the African, Don Juan and Don Pedro* and crude and unrefined German farces, free translations from Molière like *The Flying Doctor* and *The Doctor in Love*. Other than these, there were also a few original Russian plays, partly contributed, in all probability by

Nathalie. These were often compositions drawn from the lives of the Saints, and from some Polish novels widely read at that time in Russian manuscript translations.

Stop to consider:

You should pay attention to the influence of the ruling class in the moulding of early drama — how drama loses its purely religious and ecclesiastical touch and connection with the Biblical characters and stories, and starts as a form of entertainment for the wealthy and the powerful, depending increasingly on more secular objects. You will further notice the exclusion of the commoners in this cultural pursuit.

It was out of these elements and out of West European models that the Russian drama evolved, when the theatre became, in the middle of the eighteenth century, a permanent institution. It is most interesting to note, that it was not in either of the capitals, but in a provincial town, Yarosláv, under the patronage of the local tradesmen, that the first permanent Russian theatre was founded, in 1750, and also that it was by the private enterprise of a few actors: the two brothers Vólkoff, Dmitrévsky, and several others. The Empress Elisabeth - probably following the advice of Sumarókoff, who himself began about that time to write plays-ordered these actors to move to St. Petersburg, where they became “artists of the Imperial Theatre,” in the service of the Crown. Thus, the Russian theatre became, in 1756, an institution of the Government.

In 1698, Peter the Great (1689-1725) returned from the terror of wars and international politics of Europe. His intention was to remake Russia after the then sophisticated and cultural mould of France, more particularly Paris. He prohibited traditional Russian costumes, and adopted the Western Calendar. He also moved his capital to St. Petersburg, “the Russian Versailles”, as he called it. For further Westernization of his nation, Peter moved the theatre from the palace to a new state theatre, built in 1702 in Moscow. In 1709, the theatre moved to St. Petersburg. During his rule of the Great Reformation, Peter elevated the status of the nobility, and encouraged the improvement of the conditions of the middle class, developing their manufacturing and commerce. Moreover, he introduced Western

theories regarding Science and Mathematics to develop the economy. As a result, an elite class of enlightened gentry and officers developed nationwide. This affected the strictly Catholic church of Russia, and their influence declined resulting in the growth of theatre.

As Peter II's wife, Tsarina Catherine II (reigned 1762-1796) was crowned, she continued to foster the growth of theatre initiated by Peter the Great's love for the culture of enlightened France. She started communicating with the French writer Voltaire, and even tried to write a series of nine comic scenes. She wrote an imitative version of Shakespeare's *The Merry Wives of Windsor*. By 1750, middle class capitalism had started to make its way into medieval feudalism. In addition, some nobles invited French and German tutors, though more often than not insufficiently educated, for their children, whereas other nobles were sent away to study. Some European scholars also accepted invitations to visit Russia.

Stop to consider :

You will undoubtedly notice the gradual change of the subject of the drama from religious seriousness to more entertaining comical themes.

Reconsidering the section, you will perceive the growth of the nation from a cultural immersion to an era of Enlightenment under Peter the Great where aristocracy is being influenced by the ways of France, Germany and Poland. Around the time of the reign of Catherine II, English literary influences started creeping into Russia.

In the following section, you will notice the gradual growth of middle class education and economy, ultimately giving rise to the middle class theatre.

By the early 19th century, the literacy rate tripled, as serfs sought a way to prosperity and affluence. The number of university students increased eightfold in the 19th century, due to government scholarships and grants which enabled the middle class to afford education. In 1817, workers suspected the bourgeoisie for suppressing their rights, thereby deliberately delaying reform, urging caution, and ignoring the need to change the civil service and the judiciary. Titles had not been abolished as they had been during the French Revolution. Nobles and clergy retained their property ad

privileges. The provisional government despatched forces to suppress uprising, and the theatre allied itself with the power brokers.

The movement pursuing Naturalism that was encompassing the whole of Europe reached its premier artistic peak in Russia in 1898 with the formation of the Moscow Art Theatre (later called the Moscow Academy Art Theatre). Its name became synonymous with that of Anton Chekhov, whose plays about the commonplace life of the landed gentry achieved the desired poetic realism that was years ahead of its time. Konstantin Stanislavsky, its director, became the 20th century's most influential theorist on acting. Considering the wider European context, in the early 19th century Russian theatre had been one of the most backward in Europe, comfortable to play a repertoire of stock theatrical pieces, mainly French comedies and farces, or Russian imitations of them. They were hardly well-rehearsed and the direction was far from being either original or satisfying; the plays were so similar that the same performances and sets could be used time and again. However, the Meiningen Company, which had visited Russia during the late 1880s, had pointed the way to reform with its exemplary discipline. During a 17-hour conversation in a Moscow restaurant, Stanislavsky, an amateur actor of considerable experience, and Vladimir Nemirovich-Danchenko, a playwright, teacher, and drama critic, talked over their vision of an ideal theatre company, its artistic policy, and its production methods. On the basis of their discussion, they formed a group they called the Moscow Art Theatre Company. No great stir was made until later that year, they revived Chekhov's *Chayka* (1896; *The Seagull*), which had failed badly in its incompetent first production in St. Petersburg. An instant success, the new production established the reputation of both Chekhov and Stanislavsky. The intimacy and truthfulness of the acting were something entirely new. Through his stagings of several of Chekhov's other plays, *Dyadya Vanya* (1897; *Uncle Vanya*), *Tri sestry* (1901; *Three Sisters*), and *Vishnyovy sad* (1904; *The Cherry Orchard*), Stanislavsky developed a style of infinitely detailed production, the result of long and methodical rehearsals, to achieve an almost perfect surface naturalism.

SAQ

What do you notice about the characteristics of Russian plays in the earlier period which may anticipate its later characteristics? (60 words)

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Compare and contrast the contribution of the authority and the commoners on the history of Russian drama. (100 words)

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How does the effect of the peasant revolution in Russian drama resemble that of the French Revolution? (50 words)

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Check your progress

1. What is the effect of the Reformation of Peter the Great on Russian Drama?
2. The evolution of Russian drama from its earlier religious to its relatively secular subject matter is the effect of internal as well as foreign factors. Comment broadly with suitable reasons.

1.4 MAJOR INFLUENCES AND TRENDS

Beside the influences of religion, the Vertep plays, mysteries, Polish, German and French elements including that of Moliere’s in Russian drama, some other elements like legends and folklore influenced Russian drama. Rural Russian drama was of several kinds – ritual drama, puppet theatre, non-ritual drama and folk theatre. Various aspects of the theatrical have penetrated

Russian culture, ranging from games and ceremonial rituals to the elaborate and almost “literary” folk play as *Tsar Maksimilian*. Taking advantage of classic works on Russian theatre, such as V.N. Vsevolodskii Gerngross’s *Istoriia russkogo teatra*, Russian folklorists explore the field of Russian drama. You will observe the spectrum of ritualized Russian folklore as it is expressed in the common transformation of a real experience into dramatized analogies which carry special conscious and unconscious meaning for those who participate in the creative art.

We can compare various kinds of Russian puppet plays and techniques to each other and their European counterparts. The relationship between the Russian Vertep and the miracle plays of the Middle Ages can be well-explored. It has been commonly stated that the modern Russian theatre grew out of the 17th century Kiev academy, which in turn, drew its inspiration from the Western miracle plays of Poland. Perhaps this observation ignores cultural influences closer to home.

Stop to Consider

You will definitely observe that the Russian religious Vertep contained many of the features found in the early Russian allegorical miracle plays. Both dramatized episodes from the Bible, used similar characters, and even differentiated dialogue in alternative ‘sacred’ and ‘profane’ scenes. A Vertep presentation, you see, may have inspired some Kiev academicians to try the same thing with human characters.

Of the many non-ritual dramas only a few remain today. *Tsar Maksimilian* triggered the comparativists to discuss the stock comic characters since counterparts of the Russian figures of the Jew, the Cossack, devil, gravedigger and doctor may be found in numerous Western plays as well as in the commedia dell’arte.

In the later period, as we have discussed, increasingly secular and often satirical trends began to be noticed in Russian drama. Besides being a mode of entertainment for the aristocracy and royalty, it became the point of view of the middle class and increasingly powerful serfs and the influence of the university-educated gentry became apparent. Peter the Great influenced the drama with royal approval and European enlightening views. During the

reign of Catherine the Great, English and French literary trends became apparent. During the 19th century, however, with the opening of Moscow Art Theatre, revolutionary ideas surfaced with the rudiments of realism, naturalism and communism.

The period between the Revolution of 1917 and Stalin's consolidation of power at the beginning of the 1930s was one of the richest and most exciting for all branches of the arts in Russia. The atmosphere of the age encouraged artists such as the director Vsevolod Meyerhold to experiment, and dramatists tried to capture in their work the impact of the Revolution, civil war and early years of Soviet power. Although the Revolution itself was a major influence on drama and theatre, the questions about the very nature of theatre posed in the 1920s echoed those which had been engaging the attention of writers including Maxim Gorky and Alexander Blok and directors such as Konstantin Stanislavsky and Meyerhold since the beginning of the century. The diversity of Soviet theatre and drama of the 1920s continued the major trends of the pre-Revolutionary years.

Stop to Consider:

You can easily draw a relationship between Russian folk theatre and that of the West in terms of parallels between episodes, stock characters and dramatic devices. You may try to establish similarities between the Petrouchka puppet play and the Punch-and-Judy show in the West. Who were instrumental to the transmission of images – foreigners or Russians, may arise in your mind.

1.5 IMPORTANT PLAYWRIGHTS AND THEIR PLAYS

Sumarókkoff (1718-1777) wrote, besides verse and valuable fables, a considerable number of tragedies and comedies, playing an important part in the development of the Russian drama. In his tragedies, he imitated Racine and Voltaire following strictly their rules of 'unity', and caring even less than they did for historical truth; but as he had not the great talent of his French masters, he made his heroes mere personifications of certain virtues or vices, figures quite devoid of life and rather unrealistic, and indulging in continuous affected monologues. Several of his tragedies (*Hórev*, written in

1747, *Sináv and Trúvor*, *Yaropólk and Dilitza*, *Dmitri the Impostor*) were based on Russian history and popular legends; but after all their heroes were with almost incomprehensible Slavonian characteristics as Racine's heroes were pseudo-classical. This, however, you must feel in favour of Sumarókoff, that he never failed to express in his tragedies the more advanced humanitarian ideas of the times - sometimes with real feeling, which pierced through even the conventional forms of speech of his heroes. As to his comedies, although not as successful as his serious dramas, they were much nearer to life. They contained touches of the real life of Russia, especially of the life of the Moscow nobility, and their satirical character undoubtedly influenced Sumarókoff's followers.

Knyazhnin (1742-1791) followed on the same lines. Like Sumarókoff he closely translated tragedies from the French, and attempted various imitations of French tragedies, taking his subjects to a degree from Russian history (*Rossláv*, 1748; *Vadim of Nóvgorod*, which was printed after his death and was immediately destroyed by the Government on account of its tendencies towards freedom.

Ozeroff (1769-1816) continued the work of Knyazhnin, but introduced the sentimental and the romantic elements into his pseudo-classical tragedies (*Oedipus in Athens*, *Death of Olèg*). With all their defects, these tragedies enjoyed a long-lasting success, and effectively contributed to the development of both the stage and a community of serious playgoers.

At the same time, comedies also began to be written by the same authors (*The Brawler*, *Strange People* by Knyazhnin) and their followers, and although they were for the most part imitations of the French, nevertheless subjects taken from Russian everyday life began to be introduced effectively. Sumarókoff had already done something in this direction, and he had been supported by Catherine II, who contributed a couple of satirical comedies taken from her surroundings, such as *The Fête of Mrs. Grumbler*, and a comic opera from Russian popular life. She was perhaps the first to introduce Russian peasants on the stage; and it is worthy of note that the taste for a popular vein on the stage rapidly developed the comedies, *The Miller* by Ablesimoff, *Zbitenshik (The Hunter)*, by Knyazhnin, and so on, all taken from the life of the people, being for some time great favourites with the playgoers.

Von-Wizin, by his two comedies, *The Brigadier* (1768) and *Nédorosl* (1782), which continued to be played up to the middle of the nineteenth century, became the father of the realistic satirical comedy in Russia. *Denunciation* (*Yábeda*), by Kapnist, and a few comedies contributed by the great fable writer Kryloff belong to the same category.

SAQ:

What similarity do you notice in the works of the early Russian dramatists? Consider both the tragedies and comedies. (100 words)

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During the early decades of the 19th century, Russian theatre developed at astonishing rate. The stage produced, at St. Petersburg and at Moscow, a number of gifted and original actors and actresses, both in tragedy and in comedy. The number of writers for the stage became so considerable that all the forms of dramatic art were able to develop at the same time. During the Napoleonic wars patriotic tragedies, full of allusions to current events, such as *Dmitri Donskói* (1807), by Ozeroff, invaded the stage. However, the pseudo-classical tragedy continued to hold its own. Better translations and imitations of Racine were produced by playwrights like Katenin and Kokoshkin and enjoyed a considerable popularity, especially at St. Petersburg, owing to good tragic actors of the declamatory school.

Pavel Aleksandrovich Katenin (22 December 1792 - 4 June 1853) was a Russian classicist poet, dramatist, and literary critic who also contributed to the evolution of Russian Romanticism. Katenin was an avid theatre-goer who spurned Shakespeare as vulgar and obscure, while he admired Corneille and Racine for their noble diction and clarity. His enthusiasm for neoclassical theatre induced him to translate a number of French tragedies for the Russian stage. He also wrote *Andromache* (1809-19), the last 'regular' Russian

tragedy. The actor and playwright Vasily Karatygin was considered his disciple.

At the same time, translations of Kotzebue had an enormous success, as also the Russian productions of his sentimental imitators. Some of his greatest successes - *Adelheid von Wulfingen* (1788), *Menschenhass und Reue* (1789–90; *The Stranger*), *Die Indianer in England* (1790; *The Indian Exiles*) - were written while he lived there. His *Spanier in Peru* (1796) was adapted by the English playwright Richard Brinsley Sheridan as *Pizarro* (1799) and also proved a great success.

Romanticism and pseudo-classicism were, of course, at war with each other for the possession of the stage, as they were in the domains of poetry and the novel; but owing to the spirit of the time, and patronized as it was by Karamzin and Zhukovsky, romanticism triumphed. It was aided especially by the energetic efforts of Prince Shavovskoy, who wrote with a good knowledge of the stage, more than a hundred varied pieces - tragedies, comedies, operas, vaudevilles and ballets - taking the subject for his dramas from Walter Scott, Ossian, Shakespeare, and Pushkin. At the same, comedy - especially satirical comedy—as also the vaudeville (which approached comedy by a rather more careful treatment of characters than is usual in that sort of literature on the French stage), were represented by a great number of more or less original productions. Besides the excellent translations of Hmelnitzkiy from Molière, the public enjoyed the pieces of Zagoskin, full of good-hearted merriment, the sometimes brilliant and always animated comedies and vaudevilles of Shahovskóy, the vaudevilles of A. I. Pisareff, and so on. True, all the comedies were either directly inspired by Molière or were adaptations from the French into which Russian characters and Russian manners had been introduced. But as there was still some original creation in these adaptations, which was carried a step further on the stage by gifted actors of the naturalist realist school; it all prepared the way for the truly Russian comedy, which found its embodiment in Griboyédoff, Gogol, and Ostrovsky.

Griboyedoff (1795-1829) died very young, and all that he left was one comedy, *Misfortune from Intelligence* (*Góre ot Umá*), and a couple of scenes from an unfinished tragedy in the Shakespearean style. However, the comedy is a work of genius, and owing to it alone, Griboyédoff may be

described as having done for the Russian stage what Púshkin has done for Russian poetry. While, staying at Tiflís, and acting as a secretary to the Lieutenant of the Caucasus, he worked hard in the same diplomatic domain; but he worked also all the time at his comedy, and in 1824 he finished it, while he was in Central Russia for a few months. Owing to a mere accident, the manuscript of *Misfortune from Intelligence* became known to a few friends, and the comedy produced a tremendous sensation among them. In a few months, it was being widely read in manuscript copies, raising storms of indignation amongst the old generation, and provoking the greatest admiration among the young. All efforts, however, to obtain its production on the stage, or even to have it represented once in private, were thwarted by the censorship, and Griboyédoff returned to the Caucasus without having seen his comedy played at a theatre. He wrote a tragedy in the romantic style, *A Georgian Night*, and those of his friends who had read it in full rated extremely high its poetic and dramatic qualities; but only two scenes from this tragedy and the outline of its contents have reached us. The manuscript was lost, perhaps at Teheran. *Misfortune from Intelligence* is a powerful satire, directed against the high society of Moscow in the years 1820-1830. Griboyédoff knew this society from the inside, and his types are not invented. Real men gave him the foundations for such immortal types as Fámusoff, the aged nobleman, and Skalozúb, the fanatic of militarism, as well as for all the secondary personages. As to the language in which Griboyédoff's personages speak, it has often been remarked that up to his time only three writers had been such great masters of the truly Russian spoken language: Púshkin, Krylóff, and Griboyédoff. Later on, Ostróvskiy could be added to these three. It is the true language of Moscow. Besides, the comedy is full of verses so strikingly satirical and so well rendered that scores of them became proverbs known all over Russia.

Alexander Sergeyevich Pushkin (June 6 1799 – February 10 [1837]) was a Russian Romantic author who is considered to be the greatest Russian poet and the founder of modern Russian literature. Pushkin pioneered the use of vernacular speech in his poems and plays, creating a style of storytelling - mixing drama, romance, and satire - associated with Russian literature ever since and greatly influencing later Russian writers. While under the strict surveillance of government censors and unable to travel or publish at will, he wrote his most famous play *Boris Godunov*, but could not publish until

years later. In 1830, he wrote *Malenkie tragedii* (*The Little Tragedies*) which was followed by *Kamenny gost*; (*The Stone Guest*), *Motsart i Salyeri*; (*Mozart and Salieri*), *Skupoy rytsar*; (*The Miserly Knight, The Covetous Knight*), *Pir vo vremya chumy*; (*A Feast During the Plague*). Alexander Pushkin is usually credited with developing literary Russian. Not only is he seen as having originated the highly nuanced level of language which characterizes Russian literature after him, but he is also credited with substantially augmenting the Russian lexicon. Where he found gaps in the Russian vocabulary, he devised calques. His rich vocabulary and highly sensitive style are the foundation for modern literary Russian. Alexander Pushkin played an absolutely unique role in the Russian literature. Russian literature virtually begins with Alexander Pushkin. His talent set up new records for development of the Russian language and culture. He became the father of Russian literature in 19th century, marking the highest achievements of 18th century and the beginning of literary process of 19th century. Alexander Pushkin introduced Russia to all the European literary genres as well as a great number of West European writers. He brought natural speech and foreign influences to create modern poetic Russian.

Ostrovskiy (1823-1886) was the one who best realised this mutual relation between the dramatic author and the stage, and thus he came to hold with regard to Russian drama the same position that Turguéneff and Tolstóy hold with regard to the Russian novel. Ostróvskiy was from the age of 17 an enthusiastic visitor of the Moscow Theatre. At that age, his favourite topic of conversation with his comrades was the stage. It was from the merchant class that Ostróvskiy took nearly all the types of his first and best dramas. Only later did he begin to widen the circle of his observations, taking in various classes of educated society. His first comedy, *Pictures of Family Happiness*, was written in 1847, and three years later appeared his first drama, *We shall settle it among Ourselves, or The Bankrupt*, which at once gave him the reputation of a great dramatic writer. It was printed in a review, and had a great vogue all over Russia (the actor Sadóvskiy read it widely in private houses at Moscow), but it was not allowed to be put on the stage. The Moscow merchants even lodged a complaint with Nicholas I. against the author, and Ostróvskiy was dismissed from the civil service and placed under police supervision as a suspect. Only many years later in 1860 was the drama played at Moscow, and even

then the censorship insisted on introducing at the end of it a police officer to represent the triumph of justice over the wickedness of the bankrupt. For the next five years Ostróvskiy published nothing, but then he brought out in close succession (1853 and 1854) two dramas of remarkable power - *Don't take a seat in other People's Sledges* and *Poverty-No Vice*. One of the best dramas of Ostróvskiy is *The Thunderstorm* (translated as *The Storm*).

Count Alexéi Konstantínovitch Tolstóy (1817-1875) was above all a poet; but he also wrote a historical novel from the times of John the Terrible, *Prince Serébryanyi*, which was very successful, partly because in it for the first time censorship had permitted fiction to deal with the half-mad Tsar who played the part of the Louis XI of the Russian monarchy, but especially on account of its real qualities as a historical novel. He also tried his talent in a dramatic poem, *Don Juan*, much inferior, however, to Púshkin's drama dealing with the same subject, but his main work was a trilogy of three tragedies from the times of John the Terrible and the impostor Demetrius: *The Death of John the Terrible*, *The Tsar Theódor Ivánovitch*, and *Borís Godunóff*.

Turguéneff wrote, in 1848-1851, five comedies, *A Rash Thing to Do*, *Fortune's Fool*, *The Family Charge*, *A Month in the Country*, *An Evening in Sorrento* which offer all the elements of refined acting and are very lively and, being written in a beautiful style, are still the source of aesthetic pleasure for the more refined playgoers.

Sukhovó-Kobýlin wrote a comedy called *The Marriage of Kretchínskiy*, which made its mark and is still played successfully, and a trilogy *The Affair*, a powerful satire against bureaucracy, but is less effective on the stage than the former.

Písenskiy (1820-1881), wrote, besides a few good novels and several insignificant comedies, one remarkably good drama - *A Bitter Fate*, from the peasants' life, which he knew well and rendered admirably. It must be said that Leo Tolstóy's well known *Power of Darkness* - taken also from peasant life - notwithstanding all its power, has not eclipsed the drama of Písenskiy.

The novelist A. A. Potyékhin (1829-1902) also wrote for the stage, and must not be omitted even in such a rapid sketch of Russian drama as this. His comedies, *Tinsel*, *A Slice Cut-off*, *A Vacant Situation*, *In Muddy*

Waters, met with the greatest difficulties as regards censorship, and the third was never put up on the stage; but those which were played were always successful, while the themes that he treated always attracted the attention of our critics. The first of them, *Tinsel*, can be taken as a fair representative of the talent of Potyékhin.

Finally the path was paved for Gorky and Chekov who created the statement of Russian Theatre.

Anton Chekhov renounced the theatre after the disastrous reception to *The Seagull* in 1896, but the play was revived to acclaim by Constantin Stanislavski's Moscow Art Theatre, which subsequently also produced *Uncle Vanya* and premiered Chekhov's last two plays, *Three Sisters* and *The Cherry Orchard*. These four works present a special challenge to the acting ensemble as well as to audiences, because in place of conventional action Chekhov offers a "theatre of mood" and a "submerged life in the text". The ovations for *The Cherry Orchard* in the year of his death showed him how high he had risen in the affection of the Russian public - by then he was second in literary celebrity only to Tolstoy, who outlived him by six years - but after his death, Chekhov's fame soon spread further afield. Constance Garnett's translations won him an English-language readership and the admiration of writers such as James Joyce, Virginia Woolf, and Katherine Mansfield.

Maxim Gorky's principal dramas are *Children of the Sun* (1905), *Enemies* (1906), *The Lasts* (1908), *Children* (1910), *The Old Man* (1915). His drama, *The Artisans*, undoubtedly reveals a dramatic talent, while his *At the Bottom* there are only scenes, without an attempt at building a drama-are extremely powerful, and eclipse his best sketches.

SAQ:

What factors do you think affected the gradual change of drama in the early 19th century? Explain briefly. (100 words)

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1.6 PRODUCTION HOUSES AND HISTORIES

In 1659, Russian ambassador Lichachev saw his first play in Florence. Most of all he liked the rapid change of decorations and wooden horses that were moving as if they were alive. After his return to Russia, he suggested to Tsar Aleksey Mikchailovitch (1629-1676) to build a theatre in the house of Russian diplomat Matveev. In 1676 under the guidance of Matveev, theatrical performances were being played in Preobrazenskoe, the summer residence of Tsar Aleksey Michailovitch. For that purpose, a special mansion called 'Comedy Charomina' was built. Some German and Russian actors worked there under the pastor I.G. Gregory's leadership. For performances at winter time, in 1673 some place in Kremlin was equipped. In the 17th century, there were some private theatres in Kiev, in the Saikonospassky cloister, in the Novgorod seminar, y and at the bishop's house in Rostov. In such theatres, as a rule, novices played. All dramatic works of that time, in terms of their content, could be considered as spiritual performances. Among them you could find pieces such as *Sinner*, *Christ Christmas and Resurrection*, *Saintly Martyr Evdokia*, *The Second Lord's Advent* and others. The authors of these plays were Saint Dmitry Rostovsky and monk Semen Polozky. Abbey of the Baturinsky cloister Feofan had written some comedy in poetry. Princess Sofia Alekseevna was the author of the first Russian tragedy *Martyr Ecaterina*. After Aleksey Mikhailovitch's, death his theatre was closed.

In the time of Peter the First's government, a school theatre was organized by the Greek-Slavonic Academy. Since 1701 the school theatre's performances in allegorical form about the Tsar's reforms, Russian army's deeds and victories had been told.

In 1702 at the Red Square was founded a theatrical building called 'The Comedy Charomina' (Temple of Comedy) where German troupes of I.X. Kunst played. The theatre was meant for the general public. Pieces of Moliere, Kalderon and others were played here. In 1706 the theatre was closed as well but theatricals continued their life in amateur theatres.

As for constant theatre, one such was founded in Yaroslavl in 1748, but in 1756 under the highest (tsar) order the theatre's actors were sent to St. Petersburg where at the national theatre people managed to see wonderful comedy presented by the best actors of the troupe.

In 1702, Peter I opened a theatre in the old capital. But a few years later, the Grand Duchess Nathalie patronized dramatic performances and took all the properties of this theatre to her own palace. In 1756, F.G. Volkov opened the first professional theatre in St. Petersburg. In 1757, Catherine established an Academy under her patronage.

The University Theatre of Moscow University was opened in 1757. From 1759 to 1761, its plays had been acted at the Lokally Opera-House scene. At that time, the students group become a professional one and was named 'Russian Theatre'. In 1780 a big house was built on Petrivasky Street for the first Russian constant public theatre founded by Moscow prince P.V. Usov and entrepreneur M. Medoks. Here, in 1783 a comedy by D.I. Fonvisin 'Nedorosl' was presented for the first time. From the second part of the 18th century, the most famous became landowners' theatres (Sheremetievsky, Yusupovsky) in which peasants played.

In 1824, the house of merchant Vargin was rebuilt for dramatic troupes. The theatre was called "Maly Theatre" (Small Theatre). Plays of Shiller (*Robbers*), Sheakspeer (*Hamlet*), Griboedov (*Grief through the Mind*) were staged. A new step of the theatre begun from the pieces of A.N. Ostrovsky gave to the Russian scene a great variety of realistic national works.

From the end of 1860, contrary to the monopoly of empire theatres, some attempts to create private ones was undertaken. In 1865-83 by force of amateurs and professional artist, an "Artists Set" was organised. At the XIX century one of the Russian laws forbade to show theatricals in time of the Lent, on holidays and Saturdays. But under the personal decree governor Dolgoruky - who considered himself as apporioned prince and did not obey St. Petersburg— the artist set was allowed to play during the Lent and other spiritual holidays. To write on theatrical poster not only full name of the play, but "scenes of the tragedy *Makbet* (for example), although whole performance were played, was the only conditions of Dolgoruky to allow performances on these days.

In 1888, The Society of Art and Literature, where young K.S. Stanislavsky made his theatricals, was founded.

In 1914, A. Tairov and a group of young actors organised Kamerny Theatre, the main idea of which was to bring up the actor, being in possession of all theatrical styles—from tragedy to operetta.

A lot of new theatres sprang up after the Great October Revolution—“Meyerhold Theatre”, “3th Studio of MHT” (now it’s known as “Vahtangova Theatre”), “Theatre of Revolution” (now called “Mayakovsky Theatre”), “Theatre of Young Spectator” and others.

New piece (*Lubov Yarovaya* by Trenev, *The Days of Trubiny* by Bulgacov, *Optimistical Tragedy* by Vishnevsky) played in the theirs reflected the idea of revolution, its results, its problems. Some of them (*Mandate* by Erdman, *The Bug* and *Banya(The Bath)* by Mayakovsky) were written to discover enemies of revolution. But some classical pieces - the plays of Chehov (*Wedding*), Ostrovsky (*A Profitable Place*), Gogol (*Inspector*) were interpreted and given a new life.

In the time of the Great Patriotic War most of the Moscow theatres were evacuated but from their artists some military theatres and concert brigades were organised. They show such patriotically theatricals as “Russian people” by K.M. Simonov, “Invasion” by L.M. Leonov and others.

During the first peaceful years, an important part of performances was occupied by plays dedicated to the heroes of the Great Patriotic War (*Young Guards* by A.A. Fadeev).

Since 1920, Moscow theatres regularly show their performances abroad—in USA, France, Polan, Germany, Greece, Bulgaria, Czechoslovakia. At the same time, some foreign ones have their starring in Russia: “La Comedy Francaise” and “National Public Theatre of France”, “England Shakespeare Theatre” and “The Bruck’s Theatre” etc.

The actors’ and producers’ training is available in Moscow State Institute of Theatrical Art, at the studio by Children Music Theatre, studio-school of Nemirovitch-Danchenko, in theatricals school of Schepkin and in the Schukin one.

Stop to Consider

The rise of the theatre houses in the early days of Russian Theatre seems to be under the tutelage of the royal or ecclesiastical authority. Even in the later days, you will notice, that the theatre houses were principally under the patronage of the nobility. It was only in the later more democratic period that you will see the advent of theatre for public education or entertainment.

SAQ:

What difference do you notice in the degree of public access to the theatre over the centuries? (60 words)

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1.7 MAJOR PREOCCUPATIONS

Considering the previous sections you will notice that in the infancy of Russian drama, the major preoccupation of the playwrights was ecclesiastical education for the masses. There was a tendency to employ allegorical characters like Sin, Mercy, Death, Patience and other Biblical virtues and vices in the manner of the Morality plays for better understanding of the masses. The preoccupation of the drama changed with its increasing popularity and its purpose. As it came under the royal tutelage for the entertainment of the nobility, more secular characteristics like the quest of a hero often of the noble lineage to achieve something selfless for the community. It does not completely eradicate the religious symbols, though you will notice a certain form of personalized strait-laced morality in the drama. During this period, there is a marked confusion about the comedy and the tragedy as the main theme is the conflict between good and evil, where good triumphs after much torture of righteousness.

With the rise of European culture and increasing University-educated gentry, the preoccupation of theatre changed into the imitation of the French, German, Polish and even later English plays. This followed the use of folklore in drama, when not only folk elements but also historical, legendary and popular figures and themes were taken into account. By the early 19th century, with the rise of the serfs and the bourgeoisie, we witness the rise of middle class theatre. This genre was characterized by the point of view of the peasants, and was preoccupied with the oppression of the powerful. This was followed by the naturalism and the pseudo-classicism of the theatre, finally resulting into the rise of communism and socialism in Russian theatre.

Stop to Consider

You will easily perceive that the major preoccupations of the theatre correspond to the social and political changes in the life of the nation. Find out the other possible factors responsible for these changes

1.8 CRITICAL RECEPTION

The early Russian drama or the Religious Dialogues, or Histories were at first played exclusively in monasteries as a part of religious celebration. It was performed by students in the universities and public schools in Polish or Latin after 1603. This purely religious outlook gave theatre a wide berth as it was sanctioned and favored by the public. But in the later period the imitative plays in the reign of Peter the Great's father displeased the conservatives which lead to the closing of theatre in the early 18th century. The scope for criticism was restricted as it was royally favoured after the reopening of the theatre by Peter the Great and becoming a part of the Governmental institution. Later, you will surely notice that the plays were mostly imitations or adaptations of popular manuscripts and plays which the commoners were too ignorant to criticize and the enlightened too fond to disparage.

The early Russian playwrights show as many defects as merits. Sumarokoff was severely criticized for having affected characters that were far from having natural Slavonian characteristics. In his effort to imitate French and Polish plays, Knayzhnin too made his characters unlike Russians. Griboyedoff is alleged to incline towards melodrama. The later dramatists faced proper literary and theatrical criticisms, and often corrected themselves accordingly. However, in the communist and socialist regime, plays came under strictest censure and were much restricted.

Stop to Consider:

You will notice that much more important than the theatre world was the powerful theatrical milieu out of which these plays grew. Russian modernist culture was nothing if not synthetic. In the first decades of the 20th century, Russian writers, painters, composers all strove to erase the boundaries separating what had traditionally been seen as discrete artistic areas. Frequently, a union of the arts

was accomplished in the oeuvre of a single person. I will suggest you to seek the influence of Mikhail Kuzmin, the Futurists like Vladimir Mayakovsky and David Burliuk and Mikhail Matiushin.

1.9 SUMMING UP

We can conclude that despite its conventional origin, Russian theatre rose to great heights and can now be compared with the illustrious drama of other nations. In 20th century modernist theatre, Russia witnessed depth as well as an encompassing feeling. Great plays were written and produced in this period, including the major plays of Chekhov, Mayakovsky and Bulgakov.

Boris Pasternak studied music with the composer and pianist Scriabin and expected to make a career as a composer before he turned to poetry and prose. Collaborative projects, particularly in the area of book design, were also popular. Russian poets and artists combined to produce some of the most beautiful works of the 20th century.

In their intensive search for synthetic forms, it was only to be expected that the Russian modernists would find theatre, with its potential for a mixture of text, music, motion and pictorial art particularly attractive. Indeed, discussions of theatre and its function played a central role in the frequently opaque theoretical discourse of Russian modernism. As Andrei Bely put it, “The drama represents the dynamic principle of creative energy in art. The drama enshrines the synthetic principle. In the drama, we touch the massive trunk, as it were, from which the manifold forms of art spring in all directions to form a luxuriant crown.” The weightiest voice calling for a revival of drama as synthetic art, however, belonged to Viacheslav Ivanov, perhaps the leading theoretician of Russian symbolism. He saw the theater as “fully capable of replacing religion and the Church for a humanity which had lost its faith,” and envisioned a return to the Greek roots of theatre, to its Dionysian origins. “The spectator must become an actor—a participant in the ritual act.” Similar beliefs could be seen all across the theoretical spectrum. Anatoly Lunacharsky, for example, who would eventually become the first Soviet cultural arbiter and who was no admirer of symbolism, waited eagerly for the day when a “free, artistic, and constantly creative cult will transform temples into theaters and theaters into temples.”

1.10 REFERENCES AND SUGGESTED READINGS

Alexander Sumarokov - *A Biography of Russia's First Modern Tragic and Comic Dramatist.*

Anton Chekhov , *The Boor.*

Leonid Andreyev, *He Who Gets Slapped and Other Plays.*

Paul Kuritz, *The Making of Theatre History.*

Robert Leach, *The History of Russian Theatre.*

Konstantin Rudnitsky, Lesley Milne, and Roxane Permar, *Russian and Soviet Theatre: Tradition and Avant-Garde.*

Unit 2

Anton Chekhov

Contents:

- 2.1 Objectives
- 2.2 Introduction
- 2.3 Chekhov and his works
- 2.4 Chekhov in translation
- 2.5 Historical and Theatrical context of *The Seagull*
- 2.6 Reading the play
- 2.7 Themes and Techniques
- 2.8 Summing Up
- 2.9 References and Suggested Readings

2.1 OBJECTIVES

The objectives of this unit is to

- *give* you an insight into Chekhov's life, his major works, the narrative and dramatic techniques that he employed in his major works and their translations
- *familiarize* you with the historical and theatrical context of *The Seagull*
- *inform* you about the reasons instrumental to the origin of the play, the major themes and the main characters and their role in the evolution of the plot
- *draw* your attention to the structure of the play, the idea of time, and the symbolic significance of *The Seagull*
- *introduce* you to various schools of thought prevalent during that time such as Naturalism, Psychological Realism, Impressionism and Proto-Absurdism
- *help* you analyse Chekhov in general and *The Seagull* in particular, applying the features of these
- *acquaint* you with the performance history of the play, and the reactions it evoked among the viewers and readers, and the way it influenced its successors.

2.2 INTRODUCTION

Anton Pavlovich Chekhov (1860-1904), considered the father of the modern short story and of the modern play, was born as the third of six children in the Russian seaport town of Taganrog, near the Black Sea. He was well-acquainted with the realities of 19th century lower middle class and peasant life, and these formed a major theme in his plays renowned for the objective and unsentimental manner of depiction. Chekhov's father is supposed to have been a terrorizing figure, and he says that recalling this childhood experience makes him feel 'queasy and fearful'. It is from his mother that Chekhov learned to read and write and narrate stories. Though he was sent to the local grammar school, where he was just an average student, he soon became noted for his satirical comments and pranks. From then on, he was interested in plays and used to attend drama performances, and was even part of some amateur theatre companies. He also composed a play named *Fatherless*, which he is supposed to have destroyed later.

Financial crisis struck his family, and the young Chekhov was left behind to finish his school, while everyone else left for Moscow. The loss of his home and a secure base influenced him very deeply, which he later developed as a theme in his play *The Cherry Orchard* (1904). He graduated as a doctor and was passionate about the medical profession. Chekhov's medical and science experience is seen in much of his work as evidenced by the apathy many of his characters show towards tragic events. He considered it more important than writing plays, and he used to say "Besides medicine, my wife, I have also literature—my mistress."

His plays came up during a period of political repression in Russia, when any direct or critical expression against the imperial government could punish the writer by deporting him to Sakhlain Island in Siberia. But Chekhov never wrote anything politically provoking. In fact, he was so unconcerned about it that Ronald Hingley in *A New Life of Anton Chekhov* has said, "He might as well have been living on the moon as in Imperial Russia."

Stop to Consider

Reading Chekhov would demand of the readers an insight into the social, cultural and political awareness of the Russia in which Chekhov lived, apart from understanding his personal influences and interests. Read the play and come back to the initial section of these notes for a profound understanding of the play

2.3 CHEKHOV AND HIS WORKS

The first published work of Chekhov appeared in the St. Petersburg weekly *Dragonfly* in March, 1880. He had mostly written under the pseudonym 'Antosha Chekhonte' at that time. Most of his initial works were published in comic weeklies, and this made him master the skill of economical prose style in fiction. Of the short stories published during this time, the popular ones are *The Death of a Government Official* (1883), *Fat and Thin* (1883), *The Daughter of Albion*, (1883), *A Chameleon*, (1884), *Oysters* (1884), *A Dreadful Night* (1884), *The Huntsman*, (1885), *The Malefactors* (1885), *The Misfortune* (1885) and *Sergeant Prishibeyev* (1885). The only novel that he wrote during his initial days is *The Shooting Party* (1884). The themes of these are the tyranny of government officials, the crudeness and sufferings of the poor, the vagueness, unpredictability and ironical behaviour of human beings, which he presents in a comical manner. But later in the mid-eighties, he started using more serious themes in his stories, such as starvation in *Oysters*, abandonment in *The Huntsman* and remorse in *The Misfortune*. But in most of his stories, there is no plot, no dramatic emotional flare up, etc. Writing in newspapers like *The Petersburg Gazette*, *New Times* established him in the literary field as he started using his own name in the works thereafter.

The years 1886 to 1887 were the most productive in Chekhov's career. He continued writing stories in a lighter vein such as *Romance with Double Bass* (1886), *Revenge* (1886), and *The Work of Art* (1886). His other stories such as *Vanka* (1886), *Grisha* (1886), *The Witch* (1886), *Easter Night* (1886), *The Kiss* (1887) showed a great sense of pathos. He merely portrays a picture of life without commenting or preaching on the vices and virtues of the characters. His philosophy of literature can be summed up into this quote, "To think that it is the duty of literature to pluck the pearl from the heap of villains is to deny literature itself. Literature is called artistic when it depicts life as it actually is.... A writer should be as objective as a chemist." He believes that the duty of an artist is the correct posing of a problem and not providing solution for a problem. However, like Tolstoy, he also writes some stories such as *The Encounter* (1887), *The Beggar* (1887) etc. which display a tendency towards moralizing.

Stop and Consider :

To get a clearer insight into the works and writing style of Chekhov, read some of his short stories such as *Ward No:6*, *The Work of Art* etc.

He suffered from serious health problems and even though he was a doctor, paid little attention to it. During a vacation that he took to recover from ill health, he composed *The Steppe* (1888) which tells the story of a nine-year-old boy's journey across the vast plains of southern Russia with his merchant uncle and a local priest. Although this work was criticized for its length and lack of plot, it did succeed in establishing Chekhov in the ranks of major Russian writers. His short story collection, *In the Twilight*, won him the Pushkin Prize from the Division of Russian Language and Letters of the Academy of Sciences in 1888.

Through the premiere of the four-act play *Ivanov* (1887), Chekhov made his theatrical debut at Korsh Theatre in Moscow. The response to this play has been varied. Some consider it very demoralizing, whereas some consider it as better than his *The Seagull: A Comedy in Three Acts*. He continued to write for the theatre, and some of his famous plays include *The Wood Demon* (1889), *The Bear*, *The Proposal*, *A Tragic Role* and *The Wedding*.

SAQ

Read Chekhov's short story *The Work of Art*, and give a short account of Chekhov's concept of art and beauty, keeping in mind the above mentioned details. Analyse how far his life experiences have contributed to his evolution as a writer. (60 words)

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After 1888, he went back to fiction, and in the next two years, he composed renowned works such as *An Awkward Business* (1888), *The Beauties* (1888), and two brilliant long stories: *The Name-Day Party* (1888) and *A Dreary Story* (1889). Some of his stories had a lot of instances that he might have gathered from his medical experience. For example, in *The Name-Day Party*, he describes in detail the miscarriage of the main female protagonist due to the physical and mental torture that she endures. There are some critics who say that the insomniac pessimistic protagonist of *A Dreary Story* is modelled on Chekhov himself. The meaninglessness of life, cynicism towards the fulfillment of human hopes, and the need to do the best for the present and leave the rest to the future, whether the result be happiness or disappointment, are some of the main themes of his plays.

Although a prominent literary figure, Chekhov too went through a rough time. In 1890, *The Wood Demon* had been rejected by two theatres, and had closed for good after three performances at a third theatre. To escape from the artistic failures and boredom, he took a trip to the Eastern Siberian penal colony of Sakhalin Island and other Eastern nations such as Singapore, Ceylon etc., and based on these trips wrote *Gusev* (1890), *In Exile* (1892), and *Murder* (1895). Later, he served as a doctor in the Moscow District, and compiling this experience he wrote *Peasants* (1897) and *In the Ravine* (1900), which depicted the miseries in the life of the peasants. The kinds of relationships that he had in his life were also used as subject of his plays such as *The Seagull*. It also depicted his attitude towards sex, marital and extra-marital relations.

His plays and stories were mainly published in the journal *Russian Thought*. Other than *The Seagull* and *The Three Sisters*, they also published 13 of his short stories including the celebrated *Ward Number Six* (1892). Other works written during this period are *The Black Monk* (1894), *A Woman's Kingdom* (1894), *Three Years* (1895), *In the Cart* (1897) and the so-called "trilogy" of stories *A Hard Case* (1898), *Gooseberries* (1898), and *Concerning Love* (1898). The method of narration in these stories is such as that the narrator in one novel tells the story to two characters who are narrators in the other two stories.

The Seagull (1895) is a play that defied the 19th century stage conventions completely in which the dramatic action declines as the play evolves. It

employs the element of symbolism popularized by Henrik Ibsen. The dead seagull is a symbol of hopes betrayed and the bleak future. Though the play deals with the professional and personal ruin of a young woman and the suicide of a man who loved her, it has, ironically, 'A Comedy in Four Acts' as its subtitle. The performance of this play was disappointing, and its failure prompted Chekhov to swear never to return to theatre again. But he later made a comeback with the revival of *The Wood Demon* as *Uncle Vanya*. Due to some health problems, he retreated from writing and was under complete rest. Later, he was approached by the founders of Moscow Art Theatre: Vladimir Nemirovich-Danchenko and Constantin Stanislavsky, to encourage 'new drama'. The staging of *The Seagull* in 1898 by Moscow Theatre Company won great appreciation, and Chekhov once again established himself as a prominent literary figure.

His later short stories portrayed an awareness of the class distinctions in society, and the need to bridge the rift between them. His friendship with Maxim Gorky also contributed in the formulation of his socialistic views. In early 1899, Chekhov was elected an Honorary Academician of the Pushkin Section of Belle Letters of the Academy of Sciences.

The year 1899 also witnessed the staging of his play *Uncle Vanya* by the Moscow Theatre. A tragic-comedy employing breakdowns and cross references in conversations, poignant symbols, *Uncle Vanya* is about the irrevocability of life. His story *A Lady With a Pet Dog* (1889) is supposed to sum up Chekhov's entire attitude on women and love. In 1900 his play *The Three Sisters* won the praise of the critics as being the most musical of Chekhov's plays in construction. He revised the third and fourth acts of the play when the playhouse demanded it, although he was not very happy about it. Even after that, *The Three Sisters* gained a lukewarm response among the audience. Throughout his literary career, Chekhov was dissatisfied with the way his plays were reviewed and produced by the various theatre houses.

In 1901, Chekhov and his friend Vladimir Korolenko, resigned from the Academy of Sciences in protest over the expulsion of Maxim Gorky. This enhanced his image among the liberal intelligentsia. He completed *The Cherry Orchard* in October 1902, and sent it to the Moscow Theatre for rehearsal. It has a balance of tragedy and farce, and tells the story of economic

exploitation and the absurdity and foolishness of opening up oneself for the sake of beauty and love. Its premiere in 1904, as part of ‘Jubilee Celebrations’, marking the twenty years of Chekhov’s artistic career, was an immediate success.

He was suffering from constant health problems all along, and it worsened by the beginning of the twentieth century. In May 1904, his health condition worsened, and he was sent to Germany for rest. But he died on July 2, suffering from heart attack.

Stop to Consider :

In addition to *The Seagull*, try to read one of his other plays such as *The Three Sisters*, *The Cherry Orchard* or *Uncle Vanya*. A close and comparative study will help you understand the characteristics and peculiarities of Chekhov as a playwright. This will also help you read the play prescribed for your course with greater insight.

Chekhov is a very prominent and influential figure among modern short story writers and playwrights. His innovation in literature such as the unique method of narration, the concentration on ‘mood’ rather than on action of the characters, the unconventional points of views depicted in his plays, his method of blending social events and psychological impact on the characters make him an exponent of new methods among dramatists. The method of the ‘Theatre of Mood’ that he introduced, although was an innovative step in the field of performance art, had to face a lot of criticism from a lot of people including Tolstoy. Tolstoy is supposed to have said, “You know, I cannot abide Shakespeare, but your plays are even worse”. His employment of broken conversations, absent characters playing a major role, lack of a proper beginning-middle-and-end for the play – were all innovative techniques. One of his major contributions was the way he dealt with time – the stage time did not adhere to the time in the play; sometimes years passed by between the gaps of acts. He influenced the Western playwrights such as George Bernard Shaw, Harold Pinter, Tennessee Williams, Bertolt Brecht, Samuel Beckett, etc.

His short stories won great critical acclaim. They seem to have certain elements of the stream of consciousness method, which later gained

popularity through the works of Virginia Woolf and James Joyce. He insisted on the necessity of this method because he considered art as a means to ask questions and not one to provide answers with.

He presented a world which had no villains, where the major concern was what the characters should and should not do. But almost all the characters face disaster and disappointment in life, mainly due their own action or inaction. Thus the 'Chekhovian manner' characterizes dramatic understatement, a deep poetic perception of loss and psychological impotence. All these influenced writers such as Katherine Mansfield, Ernest Hemingway, Franz Kafka, etc.

Chekhov's works have invited quite contradictory reviews. While Gorky refers to it as "quiet, deep sigh of a pure and human heart", another critic Nina Toumanova calls him "gentle soul ... in desperate fear of life," taking refuge "in a queer world of silvery twilight and dark shadows." Almost all of them agree to the fact that he was a master of irony, but they cannot reach a consensus on when he is ironic. Thus he himself can very well be called a "tantalizing phenomenon: a Chekhov character" as Hingley suggests in *A New Life of Anton Chekhov*.

2.4 CHEKHOV IN TRANSLATION

Translations of literary works put a great deal of strain on the translators as it demands loyalty to the original text and to the readers of the second language at the same time. Things become a bit problematic when the author includes certain satirical remarks and puns that are culture-specific, and it has been said that "when a play is translated from Source Language to Target Language culture, it is no longer a translation, but an adaptation." Thus when a reader or a student compares the original and the translated plays, there needs to be an emphasis on the difference between the cultures as well.

When we consider the translations that Chekhov's plays have undergone over the years, we realize that there have been quite a lot of variations, including names of characters. Most translations or adaptations into regional languages come through the English translations. The English translators have always been keener on the literary beauty and fidelity to the original text, and hence, the numerous translations that have come out of the plays

have been truer to the texts. But in case of translations to regional languages, there have been instances where even the names have been changed as it is quite difficult for the readers to deal with the Russian names and surnames. But ultimately the focus of the translators is in maintaining the linguistic beauty, cultural resonances and sensibility of the original text.

Some of the translations of *The Seagull* are: the translation by Fred Eisemann published as *The Sea-gull*, R. G. Badger, 1913; translation by Julius West published as *The Sea-gull: A Play in Four Acts*, Hendersons, 1915; translation by Stark Young published as *The Sea Gull*, Scribner, 1939, first produced on Broadway at the Shubert Theater, March 28, 1938, reprinted as *The Sea Gull: A Drama in Four Acts*, Samuel French, 1950; translation by Magarshack published as *The Seagull: Produced by Stanislavsky*, edited and introduced by S. D. Balukhaty, Dobson, 1952; translation by David Ifffe published as *The Seagull: A Play*, Samuel French (London), 1953; translation by Bernard W. Sznycer published as *The Gull: A Comedy in Four Acts*, [New York], 1967, published in England as *The Gull*, Poets' and Painters' Press, 1974; translation by Jean-Claude Van Itallie published as Anton Chekhov's *The Sea Gull: A New Version*, Dramatists Play Service, 1974, published as *The Sea Gull: A Comedy in Four Acts*, commentaries by William M. Hoffman and Daniel Seltzer, textual notes by Paul Schmidt, Harper & Row, 1977; translation by Ann Jellicoe published as *The Sea Gull*, edited by Henry Popkin, Avon, 1975; translation by David French published as *The Seagull*, Playwright's Co-op (Toronto), 1977, published as *The Seagull: A Play*, notes by Donna Orwin, General Paperbacks, 1978; translation by Thomas Kilroy published as *The Seagull*, Methuen, 1981; translation with introduction by Tania Alexander and Charles Sturridge published as *The Seagull: A Comedy in Four Acts*, Amber Lane Press, 1985; translation and introduction by Frayn published as *The Seagull: A Comedy in Four Acts*, Methuen, 1986; translation by Saunders and Dwyer published as *The Sea Gull/Chaika: A Comedy in Four Acts*, Smith and Kraus, 1994; translation by George Calderon published as *The Seagull*, adapted by Robert Brustein, I. R. Dee (Chicago, IL), 1992; edition by Landes published as *The Sea-Gull*, Players Press, 1996; translation by Michael Henry Heim published as *The Seagull: A Comedy*, Dramatic Publishing Co. (Woodstock, IL), 1992.

2.5 HISTORICAL AND THEATRICAL CONTEXT OF *THE SEAGULL*

For a better understanding of any literary writing it is absolutely necessary to look into the context, that is, know about the political, social, cultural setting of that given period. In this way, we can understand the uniqueness of that particular piece of writing.

Chekhov started writing the play *The Seagull* in the year 1895 and completed it in 1896. In the year 1895, Russia was in a state of turmoil as Czar Alexander III died in November 1894 and his son Nicholas II succeeded him to the Russian throne. That same month, the new czar married Alexandra, a German-born princess who had a great influence over her husband. In May 1896, Nicholas II and his wife Alexandra were crowned czar and czarina. Nicholas was a poor ruler, neither trained nor inclined to rule and was also against all kinds of reforms. He maintained czarist absolutism. Due to the rapid growth of capitalism, the state of mind of the people was of mental and moral stagnation and social frustration. It was during this period of social and spiritual gloom that *The Seagull* was written.

The change in the political setting had its effect on the cultural setting as well. The Russian theatre was in a dreadful state at the end of the 19th century. Vladimir Nemirovich-Danchenko (1858-1943) a dominant figure in early 20th century Russian theatre, together with Konstantin Stanislavsky, founded the Moscow Art Theatre.

Originally known as the Moscow Popular Art Theatre and the Moscow Academic Art Theatre, the Moscow Art Theatre drew its actors from the better of two groups: Nemirovich-Danchenko's students at the Moscow Philharmonic School, where he remained until 1898, and from the Society of Art and Literature, which Stanislavsky had co-founded in 1888. The Moscow Art Theatre had a great influence on Russian as well as world theatre. It brought a radical change in the style of acting. Stanislavsky had complete control in staging the productions and Nemirovich-Danchenko served as producer and dramaturge. As dramaturge, he was in charge of selecting new plays for production; he also advised Stanislavsky on interpretation and staging.

The first production of the Moscow Art Theatre occurred on October 14, 1898. The play was the 1868 historical drama *Tsar Fyodor*, by Aleksey

Konstantinovich Tolstoy. *Tsar Fyodor* went through some 70 rehearsals before the staging, and while the critics gave it good reviews Stanislavsky was disappointed in the performance, declaring that the actors were imitating his directions rather than truly acting. The theatre struggled through three more productions *They Who Take the Law into Their Own Hands*, *The Merchant of Venice*, and *Antigone*. For the theatre's fifth production, Nemirovich-Danchenko engaged Chekhov's *The Seagull*, which had not only lost out on the Griboyedov prize to Nemirovich-Danchenko's own play but had also received bad notices from the critics. It was with their production of *The Seagull* that the Moscow Art Theatre achieved its first real success. The play starred Vsevolod Meyerhold, who would himself become an influential director, and Olga Knipper, who eventually became Chekhov's wife. Nemirovich-Danchenko had always encouraged Chekhov's theatrical aspirations, and he was the perfect playwright for the theatre's philosophy. Thus began a long collaboration between Chekhov and the Moscow Art Theatre. Later on *Uncle Vanya*, *The Three Sisters*, and *The Cherry Orchard* were staged. In 1904, Nemirovich-Danchenko also staged an independent production of Chekhov's *Ivanov*.

Besides Chekhov's plays, Nemirovich-Danchenko also staged William Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar*, which was considered as a masterpiece of psychological theatre. He also produced *Lonely Lives* in 1899, a play by Gerhart Hauptmann, whom Chekhov admired, as well as work by Maurice Maeterlinck. Another playwright whom Nemirovich-Danchenko admired and appreciated was Henrik Ibsen. In the 1890s, while he was the drama instructor at the Moscow Philharmonic School, Nemirovich-Danchenko had been the first director to successfully stage Ibsen's work in Russia when he produced *A Doll's House*.

Stop to Consider :

Try to read the history of Russia during the year 1894-98. It will help you understand the psyche of the people, particularly of the characters in the play.

2.6 READING THE PLAY

Initially Chekhov started writing humorous stories for journals and newspapers for the sake of money to support his large family. But his

fondness for dialogue drew him to the theatre. His early plays such as *Ivanov* and *The Wood Demon* artistically dissatisfied him. In 1895, he began working on a rather original theatrical project. In October 1895, Chekhov wrote to his friend and publisher Alexei Suvorin "I am writing it with considerable pleasure, though I sin frightfully against the conventions of the stage. It is a comedy with three female roles, six male roles, four acts, a landscape (a view of a lake), and much conversation about literature, little action and five tons of love." It was a play that defied many of the traditional elements of common stage productions.

The Seagull is Chekhov's earliest success as a playwright. It centers on Treplyev, a young writer who hopes to change the world of the theatre with something fresh and experimental. Treplyev gathers a group of friends and family at his country estate for the first performance and the results are both comic and tragic and insightful.

The plot is about unreciprocated love; all the characters love someone who doesn't care for them. The only equal relationship is the affair between successful author Trigorin and actress Arkadina which is not exactly one with much love in it. The central characters in the play are Arkadina's son, Treplyev, who is an aspiring author, and local girl Nina whom he loves but who likes Trigorin perhaps only because he might be able to get her a part in a play in Moscow. The play contains a lot of discussion on drama, and includes excerpts from the play Treplyev has written for Nina, in which she takes the part of the World Spirit. It is an experimental, symbolist play; Treplyev wants to move drama on, but his work is fairly typical of second-rate avant garde literature.

The Seagull was a failure in its first run in St. Petersburg. One reviewer wrote, "Chekhov's *The Seagull* is a boring, drawn-out thing that embitters the listener...Chekhov is not a playwright." Furious and humiliated, Chekhov swore never to stage another play again and said, "Writing for the theatre is like eating cabbage soup from which a cockroach has just been removed."

The most significant stage of Chekhov's career began when Nemirovich-Danchenko approached him with the request to stage *The Seagull*. Fortunately, *The Seagull* met with success in 1898 at Stanislavsky's Moscow

Art Theatre. Through his characters' personalities, Chekhov portrays the various manners of being an artist, and especially an artist in love. All four protagonists are artists in love. Arkadina, Trigorin, Treplyev and Nina have divergent relationships with their craft and their lovers. For Arkadina and Nina, acting is of greater priority than the everyday affairs of life. Arkadina places herself on this same pedestal using her identity as an actress to excuse her vanity. Nina exalts acting as well, but contrary to Arkadina, she endows acting with nobility, sacrifice, and privilege. In writing, Konstantin compulsively paralyzes himself in the pursuit of perfection, while Trigorin obsessively gathers details from his life and the lives around him for his work without allowing the work to affect his life.

In the play, all the characters have their own strengths and weakness, and Chekhov portrays these protagonists in such a way that we sympathize with them and question their actions and words. He presents several takes on love and the artist, allowing his audience to take what they will from the examples that may or may not mirror their own lives and those of their loved ones. All four characters love art and pursue it because it boosts their ego. They want to be admired and respected for their work. Treplyev is the one who longs for admiration for his talents as well as for his self. His ego is wounded because of Nina's unreciprocated love. Success in love and in writing is equally important to him, but he is successful in neither.

Trigorin has the satisfaction of success in his writing, though he is never satisfied, and as he says, always starts a new story once the old one is finished. In love, Trigorin pursues Nina because he feels he might substitute the satisfaction and sense of completion that he lacks in his work with a love that would fulfill the void he felt as a youth. In some sense, the satisfaction these characters obtain from being artists becomes equivalent with their feeling of being loved.

Stop to Consider:

You might like to read Anton Chekhov: "A Life in Letters" translated and edited by Gordon McVay. This will help you get to know Chekhov better.

2.7 THEMES AND TECHNIQUES

The theme of the play is the role of an artist in life and in love, about evaluating the self, about the meaning of life. In his dramatic works, Chekhov conveys the texture of everyday life, moving away from traditional ideas of plot and conventions of dramatic speech. Chekhov's protagonists are sensitive people who are struggling and trying to maintain their integrity against the temptations of worldly success. Dialogue in his plays is not smooth or continuous: characters interrupt each other, several different conversations often take place at the same time, and lengthy pauses occur when no one speaks at all. A recurring theme is the pointlessness of radical, mechanical change, versus the powerful inertia of slow organic cycles.

One of the actors once told Chekhov that Stanislavsky intended to have frogs croaking, the sound of dragonflies, and dogs barking on the stage. "Why?" Chekhov asked with a note of dissatisfaction in his voice. "It is realistic," the actor replied. "Realistic," Chekhov repeated with a laugh, and after a slight pause he said: "The stage is art. The stage reflects in itself the quintessence of life, so one must not introduce on it anything that is superfluous," he said.

Chekhov disliked Symbolist drama, and Konstantin's play parodies it in *The Seagull*. All the same, he confessed that one of his great influences was Maeterlink. And then there was Ibsen whom Chekhov admired. In fact, Chekhov once remarked that without *The Wild Duck* (one of Chekhov's favorite plays), *The Seagull* would not be as it is, indeed perhaps would not exist at all.

Chekhov emphasizes the mundane in life repeatedly throughout the play. The symbol of the seagull changes in meaning over the course of the play. At first, it represents freedom and security of the lake to Nina; after Treplev shoots it, the seagull symbolizes how he will be dead in Nina's honour. Later Trigorin uses the seagull as a symbol for Nina and the way he will destroy her just like Treplev destroyed the seagull. In the final act, Nina calls herself the seagull, depicting her destruction by a loved one (Trigorin). Nina fulfills Trigorin's prophecy of destroying her just like the seagull, and Treplev kills himself in Nina's honour at the end of the play when she still does not love him. The seagull changes its meaning from freedom and security in the beginning to destruction in the end.

The Lake symbolizes freedom once again; it's a kind of naturalistic theatre without any boundary. It is also a place of reflection; where you can reflect back on what has happened. It is also a place of escape from the everyday problems of life. The lake meant something different to each of the characters. For Nina, it was a home where she felt secure and safe. For Treplev, the drying up of the lake represents his life without Nina's love. For Trigorin, the lake is a place where he can be with himself, to think about his life and its present meaning.

Chekhov and Ibsen have a lot in common. They can be called revolutionaries, romantics, naturalists and feminists. Both had a profound effect on the theatre of their times. A primary value for Ibsen as well as Chekhov is freedom, which they believe to be essential for self-fulfillment. Ibsen's plays stimulated the avant-garde theatre in Germany and France. Just like Chekhov's plays, Ibsen's plays too caused directors to find new ways of staging plays and actors to develop new ways of acting. That is perhaps the reason why in Moscow Art Theatre, Ibsen's *A Doll's House* was staged soon after Chekhov's *The Seagull* was.

Their themes were also similar: freedom and self-fulfillment in modern society (this theme may also be called The Self vs. Society), the role and the nature of the artist in modern society, living vicariously versus living life directly. In the following sub-sections, we will be discussing the important issues relevant to the reading of this play.

Naturalism

The seagull and the lake are powerful images from nature that also carry symbolic meaning in the play. It would be interesting to note that both these images are mostly associated with the character of Nina. In Act I, the lake forms a backdrop for Treplev's symbolic play in which Nina represents the World Spirit. It is Nina who first introduces the image of the seagull in the play by saying: "I am drawn here, to the lake, like a seagull!" Through this statement, the two natural images, the lake and the seagull, are established in the play. These images are also associated with death, as the seagull is later destroyed in the play, and water carries strong undertones of the fate of Ophelia from the play *Hamlet*. Nina reveals her love for the lake on the shores of which she was raised as a seagull that longs to be near water bodies.

Chekhov's plays are set in the countryside. Nature is significant in *The Seagull* as it forms the backdrop for the play-within-the-play. A contrast is drawn between nature and Treplev's play. His play is cold and intellectual, but it invariably revolves around the theme of nature. The play discusses complex themes like death and re-birth with nature serving as a background. Nina represents the consciousness of the universe that encompasses all nature and humanity. She says:

The World Spirit am I. I. Within me is the soul of Alexander the Great, of Caesar, Shakespeare and Napoleon- and of the most miserable leech. In me the thoughts of men are mingled with the instincts of animals. I remember all, all, all, and I relive anew in my own being every other life.

The play fails to evoke nature as it attempts to present a philosophical and artistic view of the world. We see art eclipsing nature, as the artist fails to derive his true inspiration from nature. His life becomes analogous to the destroyed seagull. The artist dies, and with him dies the sustenance of nature. The renewal of nature through art fails, as the artist himself is estranged from nature and his surroundings. The consciousness of the artist who encompasses nature is destroyed.

We also see interplay between nature and reality in his plays. Chekhov employs naturalism to give a realistic approach to the setting as well as the characters. In the stage directions, Chekhov clearly points out how the lake in the background is blocked by a rough stage that will later stage Treplev's play. Nature is also a primitive setting that takes us back to the beginning of beginnings where man lived in perfect harmony with nature.

In *The Cherry Orchard*, the orchard is destroyed in the end. The boredom surrounding the characters in the play is mainly due to their withdrawal from nature. In spite of being surrounded by nature and its beauty, the characters fail to realize the healing potential of nature. In *Uncle Vanya*, towards the end we see tension between man and nature.

Psychological Realism

There are underlying tones of psychological realism in the play. The relationship between Irina and Treplev, as well as Treplev and Nina, can be interpreted through a psychoanalytic approach. The play deals with repressed emotions that seem to have no outlet. The characters are prevented from expressing their desires and longings. The characters often speak at

each other, and not to each other. The dialogues are constantly interrupted or downplayed by other characters.

Impressionism

Chekhov uses the impressionistic technique so that the audience can make thematic associations between characters and sights and sounds surrounding them. Like the settings in the paintings by the Impressionists, Chekhov's plays are all set in rural landscapes with vivid details from nature forming a realistic and vivacious backdrop.

SAQ

Analyse some of the paintings by Impressionists such as Claude Monet, Edgar Degas, and Pierre Auguste Renoir and study the techniques employed by them. Compare those techniques with that of the dramatic techniques employed by Chekhov. (50 words)

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Proto-Absurdist Idea of Acting/Role Playing

Chekhov has often been considered by critics as Absurdist due to the pessimism that runs throughout his plays and the futility of existence that he projects through his characters. We have discussed earlier how Chekhov situated his characters against a realistic background and brought out subtleties of thought and disposition through his plays. It is important to understand that the plays of Chekhov are not entirely pessimistic or tragic in nature but there is an element of comedy that underlies most of his plays. Chekhov's plays have been read by several critics as comic and this aspect of his play has to be studied in detail to understand how close he is to the other absurdist playwrights such as Beckett, Ionesco, and Genet in terms of plot and characterization. The comedy that we find in Chekhov can be compared to the comedy that we find in a play like *Rhinoceros* by Ionesco or *Waiting for Godot* by Beckett.

For depicting the correct idea of Chekhov's plays, Stanislavski devised a system of acting/role playing which is called proto-absurdist idea of acting/role playing. Stanislavski made it possible for actors to explore the inner lives of their characters and to create the necessary subtext in performance.

Looks like this system suited most Chekhov's plays, where the depiction of inner life of characters was more important. Without this acting system, there would have been no way for actors to communicate the conflict between their characters' public and private lives and thus present Chekhov's implied criticism of their failure to live up to their aspirations. Without actors capable of creating an inner life for their characters, audiences would have been able to perceive only the drab reality of 'life as it is' and would have been unaware of any implied vision of 'life as it should be'.

Chekhov was fortunate to have had his plays performed by the actors of the Moscow Art Theatre. Whatever the agony he suffered seeing his plays presented in an uncongenial manner; whatever the limitations Stanislavski had as a director of his plays, Chekhov could not have found a group of actors more appropriately trained to perform his works.

This system enabled the director to interpret the text of the play and to find the theatrical means of realising that interpretation.

Increasingly, Stanislavski took over both the interpretive and creative functions, and today most directors regard it as normal practice to carry out these dual functions, though this seems to have placed an undue burden on directors. Not only are they expected to have a complete knowledge of the theatre arts, they are also expected to be experts in literary interpretation.

SAQ

Read the plays written by Absurdist dramatists such as Beckett, Genet, and Ionesco and identify the absurdist elements in them. Compare these elements with that of Chekhov's drama. (50 words)

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Comparison with Pirandello

Chekhov worked in the main tradition of 19th century realism, but at the same time his works showed traces of 20th century theatre's complete rejection of realism. To understand this paradox, we should look into the nature of this realism and its critical relationship with the actual developments in society.

All of Chekhov's works are rooted in a sense of society and the necessary connection between the public and the private. The events that happen in the life of the characters are taken as a generalized view of the society in which they live. The aim of the playwright is to give a totality of experience.

In Luigi Pirandello's plays, the reality exists in several layers and the individual exists in a variety of states. There is an attempt at breaking the totality of life and reality. The uncertainty that we see in Pirandello's works is the uncertainty of the world. The domestic tragedy that we see in his plays is necessarily the tragedy of the world.

The complicated structure of guilt and illusion plays a major role in Chekhov's as well as Pirandello's works. The characters are intertwined in a relationship of guilt and illusion, or fantasy becomes the means to avoid this guilt. In *The Seagull*, the indecisive and grief-stricken character of Treplyev is a good example for this. He sees art as a means of escape from the world, but fails miserably at that.

SAQ

Read works by Pirandello such as *Six Characters in Search of an Author* and *The Game of Roles* and study the playwright's engagement with reality.

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Performance history

The first staging of the play was on October 17, 1896 at the Alexandrinsky Theatre in St. Petersburg. It was a failure and was received with hostility

from the audience. Chekhov renounced the theatre due to its disastrous reception. The play was later directed by Konstantin Stanislavsky at the Moscow Art Theatre in 1898, and became a huge success. Stanislavsky played an important role in bringing out the subtleties of the play. He laid emphasis on the psychological realism of the play. The Moscow Art Theatre went on to produce and premiere his later plays, such as *Uncle Vanya*, *Three Sisters* and *The Cherry Orchard*.

Intertextuality (*Hamlet*)

In the play, the characters make direct references to William Shakespeare's play *Hamlet*. Irina Arkadin and Constantine Treplev, at several points, quote lines from *Hamlet*. However, Chekhov's preoccupation with *Hamlet* does not remain at the level of references, but underlies the whole thematic structure of *The Seagull*. Chekhov interpreted Hamlet as a strong character, and not a cowardly or weak character. Hamlet was a man of indecision, and this is characteristic of Treplev in *The Seagull*.

We can draw parallels between certain characters in *The Seagull* with characters from *Hamlet*. Treplev can be identified with Hamlet, Nina with Ophelia, and Irina with Gertrude. The complex relationship between Irina and her son Treplev resemble the almost oedipal relationship shared by Gertrude and Hamlet in Shakespeare's *Hamlet*. Nina's character is similar to Ophelia's character to a great extent. Both Nina and Ophelia are driven by love that borders on madness. Treplev's frustrated relationship with Nina also echoes Hamlet's relationship with Ophelia.

The identification of Treplev with Hamlet is further strengthened in Act II when Masha comments on the way Treplev reads. She says: "When he reads, his eyes burn, his face turns pale; he has a beautiful, sad voice." In this line, Hamlet, the "man of pale cast" and who is also preoccupied with words, is evoked. In another scene, the association between Trigorin and Hamlet is made by Treplev as Trigorin enters carrying a book in his hand. Here, Treplev wearily comments, "Words, words, words," reminding the audience of the Hamlet-Polonius scene in *Hamlet*:

Polonius: What are you reading my Lord?

Hamlet: Words, words, words.

Treplev, in *The Seagull*, never achieves the tragic stature attained by Hamlet. Treplev continues to be emotionally weak and childlike till the end

of the play without ever taking charge of his life. Hamlet, on the other hand, is an emotionally charged character who carries out extremely passionate debates within himself.

In *The Seagull*, Treplyev's character self-consciously identifies with the character of Hamlet. As the play progresses, the audience becomes aware of the contradictions and ironies in this self-identification. The play turns out to be an ironic comment on the assumptions and identification made by the characters in the play. Nina, unlike Ophelia, turns out to be a morally strong character ready to face the realities of the world. Treplyev, unlike Hamlet, walks out of life, without achieving grandeur or catharsis.

Play within a play

The play-within-a-play is a technique used both in *The Seagull* and *Hamlet*. In *Hamlet*, the play within the play is a strategy used by Hamlet to expose the treacherous character of his uncle Claudius, who married his mother after supposedly murdering his father. In *The Seagull*, the play-within-the-play is written and directed by Treplyev, who wants to introduce a new theatrical form and also create an impression on his mother Irina, who is a renowned actor.

The play-within-the-play brings to the forefront the conflict between Treplyev and his mother Irina. Just before Treplyev's play begins, we hear quotations from *Hamlet* exchanged between Treplyev and his mother. These are lines from the closet scene in *Hamlet*, where Hamlet confronts his mother and accuses her for being dishonest with his father. This verbal exchange between Treplyev and Irina draw our attention to the play *Hamlet* as well as strengthen the association of the relationship between Treplyev and Irina in *The Seagull* and Hamlet and Gertrude in *Hamlet*:

Irina [declaims from Hamlet]: 'O Hamlet, speak no more:

Thou turns't mine eyes into my very soul;
And there I see such black and grained spots
As will not leave their tinct.'

Treplyev [from Hamlet]: 'Nay, but to live
In the rank sweat of an unseamed bed,
Stew'd in corruption, honeying and making love
Over the nasty sty...'

The play-within-the-play in both *Hamlet* and *The Seagull* end abruptly and abortively. In *Hamlet*, the play achieves its purpose, which is to trap Claudius. On the other hand, in *The Seagull*, the play ends in failure. However, the two plays are intrinsically linked to the life of the characters, and are revelatory in nature. In *Hamlet* the play is a climactic moment that discloses a parallel between ‘The Murder of Gonzago’ and the murder of Hamlet’s father by his uncle Claudius. In *The Seagull*, the failure of the play, in a way, reveals the failure of Treplyev to cope with his life.

In both *Hamlet* and *The Seagull*, it is after the play-within-the-play that the break between the lovers happens. In *Hamlet*, after the play, Ophelia fades into the background and eventually dies, as Hamlet becomes excessively preoccupied with revenge and murder. In *The Seagull*, Nina breaks away from Treplyev, and falls in love with Trigorin. She fails to support and love the emotionally and morally weak Treplyev, who is on the verge of ruin.

Stop to Consider

Chekhov was greatly influenced by Shakespeare, not only in terms of themes and techniques, but also in terms of the portrayal of characters and the subtlety of dramatic structure. It is important to read a few plays by Shakespeare and understand the range of his influence on Chekhov.

2.8 SUMMING UP

Apart from giving you an insight into Chekhov’s life, his major works, the narrative and dramatic techniques that he employed in his major works and their translations, this unit has helped you to have an understanding of the major ideas of the play *The Seagull*. Here, an effort is made to familiarize you with the historical and theatrical context of the play prescribed, the performance history of the play and the various schools of thought prevalent during that time such as Naturalism, Psychological Realism, Impressionism and Proto-Absurdism so that at the end of the unit you should be able to have a more in-depth understanding of the play. A reading of Chekhov’s play *The Seagull* in terms of the issues mentioned and structure of the play, the idea of time, and the symbolic significance of the title will enable you to formulate your own way of approaching the text.

2.9 REFERENCES AND SUGGESTED READINGS

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Block 2

Drama in Norwegian

Block Introduction:

This block introduces you to Henric Ibsen and his play *The Wild Duck* accompanied by an overview of Norwegian drama. We have chosen Ibsen, in this course, as the representative of modern Norwegian drama with the view that he is probably the most important and influential modern dramatist in the north European country Norway.

Norwegian is one of the North Germanic or Scandinavian group of languages that include other modern languages like Icelandic, Danish, Swedish, and Faeroese. Norwegian literature exhibit an intricate connection of themes and worldviews with literatures produced in these other Scandinavian languages because of their deeper cultural and linguistic ties. So it remains always a difficult attempt to delineate what is Norwegian in literature produced in Norwegian language. However, in this block, the readings on different movements and preoccupations in Norwegian literature will help you to develop your ideas on the same and it will eventually help to pave your way into the play you need to study.

Ibsen was the pioneer of social plays; his social plays discussed problems of education, marriage, society and the individual, social sanction and individual integrity, besides others. His plays revolve around human predicaments, human situations jeopardised by decisions made at the wrong moments in time and responses that thwarted the smooth functioning of the general principles of life. Ibsen is perhaps one of those few dramatists who consistently feature women in the general pattern of things and events. Feminism and Ibsen are no disparate terms since in his realistic plays the study of women's position in the family and society attains a significant level.

Ibsen's *The Wild Duck* is thematically linked with his other plays like *The Pillars of the Community*, *A Doll's House*, *Ghosts*, *An Enemy of the People* that take up the question of morality at the individual as well as the social levels. It also deals with the ideas of innocence and experience, tries to problematise the binary oppositions like 'good and bad', and raises

questions about the ethical. Besides, the play makes an intricate use of symbolism through the wild duck which helps Ibsen to refer to beyond what he could represent in the realistic mode of presentation.

Now, as you start reading a new play, it is advisable that you begin your reading not only for the purpose of examination. Read the complete text of the play and try to enjoy it first, and then try to explore the possible ways of looking at the text. The units in this block will guide your approach. While you go through this block, try to access your understanding through the SAQs provided within this booklet. It will be a helpful practice for you to prepare for the examination.

This block contains the following units:

Unit 1 The Background of Norwegian Drama

Unit 2 Ibsen and His World

Unit 3 *The Wild Duck*

Unit 1

The Background of Norwegian Drama

Contents:

- 1.1 Objectives
- 1.2 Introduction
 - 1.2.1 “Four Hundred Years of Darkness”
- 1.3 ‘National Romanticism’ onwards
- 1.4 Major Trends & Influences
- 1.5 Movements & Preoccupations
 - 1.5.1 Transition to Realism
- 1.6 The Making of a Modern Literature
- 1.9 Summing up
- 1.10 References and Suggested Readings

1.1 OBJECTIVES

The purpose of providing you with knowledge of the Norwegian background of Ibsen’s work is to enhance your awareness of the very specific national contexts in which the body of literature collectively known as “European” literature took its birth. If we are not clear as to which national territory a writer owed her/his immediate allegiance, we may overlook the immediate literary heritage with which the writer accomplished her/his work. So, by the end of this unit, you should be able to

- *identify* the national heritage which Ibsen related to
- *describe* the important features of Norwegian literary history
- *relate* Ibsen’s dramaturgy to the particular concerns of Norwegian theatre

1.2 INTRODUCTION

The North Germanic group of languages from among the Germanic languages include, in their modern forms, Norwegian, Icelandic, Danish,

Swedish, and Faeroese. Scandinavian (these North-Germanic languages as they are collectively known) literature consists of writings in these languages that exhibit similarities on account of their deeper cultural and linguistic ties. Norwegian literature looks back a thousand years or more to a phase in its beginnings when it was tied to Icelandic literature. Although the Norwegian element cannot be specifically named in this body of literature, its presence is undeniable. This corpus of literature was either composed in Iceland or by Icelanders elsewhere in Scandinavia or even by those who had sojourned for long periods in the territory of Norway itself.

Much of the early Scandinavian poetry can be found in Icelandic manuscripts. The earliest poetry is to be found in the Codex Regius manuscript containing the *Poetic Edda* or *Elder Edda*. This constitutes the Eddaic poetry dealing with, in two sections, heroic lays and mythological lays. Skaldic verse forms another part of early Norwegian literature. The Icelandic word, *skáld* or 'poet', gives its name to skaldic poetry composed by Norwegians and Icelanders from the 9th to the 13th centuries. Not much is known about skaldic verse forms but they are believed to have developed in Norway around the 9th century and may have even been influenced by the forms and the diction in use among the Irish poets. Bragi the Old is regarded as the earliest poet who probably wrote in Norway in the late 9th century. Skaldic verse seems to have emerged from Norway and to have been developed by Icelandic poets (like Egill Skallagrímsson who lived for long in Norway or wrote eulogies of Norwegian kings) or did Sigvatr who was the counsellor and court poet of Olaf II of Norway. Such lines of the development of skaldic poetry, for instance, make it difficult to distinguish between Icelandic and Norwegian literature.

Once Christianity came to be adopted in Iceland in around 1000 A.D. the path was opened for the entry of west European influences pertaining to the study of Latin, the writing of history and hagiography. In the case of the Icelandic sagas, the word in Icelandic stood for any kind of story or history, oral or written. In English it stands for the biographical accounts of heroes or groups of heroes written in the period between the 12th to the 15th

centuries in Iceland. More often these heroes were kings of Norway who had been the early founders of Iceland or they could even be legendary Germanic figures belonging to the 4th till the 8th century. Somewhere in the late 12th century Icelandic historians came under the influence of the short Norwegian histories of Norwegian kings. In this context, the *Ágrip*, or a summary of the histories (or sagas) of the Norwegian kings was particularly influential partly due to their having been written in the vernacular.

SAQ

Which languages are counted as ‘Germanic’? (30 words)

.....
.....
.....

Without delving further into the historical beginnings of Norwegian literature, we can observe some of the more notable features. The Icelanders’ sagas dealt with heroes who were supposed to have lived in the 10th and 11th centuries. The historical content of these is debatable in view of the fact that they contained much of the oral tales, or the traditions of oral poetry. Probably the greatest of these Icelanders’ sagas is the *Njáls saga*. The “sagas of antiquity” include the famous *Völsunga saga* in prose which showed a furthering of the element of fantasy and the romantic which had come into view since the 13th century. The heroes of these “sagas of antiquity” (*fornaldar sögur*) were presumed to have lived in Scandinavia and Germany before Iceland was settled. The Old English poems “Widsith” and *Beowulf* contain the figures of Danish and Swedish heroes revolving around whom ancient traditions make up some of the famous heroic lays of *Hrólfs saga kraka* which are retold in prose in the *Völsunga saga*.

Between the 12th and 14th centuries some secular literature was translated from Latin. Translation of the Bible into Norwegian was begun at the end of the 13th century.

Stop to Consider

The Icelandic Sagas

“Icelanders’ sagas, also called FAMILY SAGAS, the class of heroic prose narratives written during 1200-20 about the great families who lived in Iceland from 930 to 1030. Among the most important of such works are the *Njáls saga* and the *Gisla saga*. ..The family sagas are a unique contribution to Western literature and are far in advance of any medieval literature in their realism, their controlled objective style, their powers of character delineation, and their overwhelming tragic dignity. The family sagas represent the highest development of the classical age of Icelandic saga writing. Their artistic unity, length, and complexity have convinced most modern scholars that they are written works by individual authors, although the theory that they were composed orally still has adherents. Their historicity has also been the subject of long debate; but whether or not they are true to history, they are true to the grim ethos of a vanished way of life, which they portray with dramatic power and laconic eloquence.”

- *Encyclopedia Britannica*

1.2.1 “FOUR HUNDRED YEARS OF DARKNESS”

The dramatist, Henrik Ibsen, called the period from the 14th century up to the 19th “four hundred years of darkness”. It was considered to be a dark age in the nation’s literature though Norwegian-born writers such as Peder Claussøn Friis and Ludvig Holberg contributed to the common literature of Denmark-Norway.

“Political union between Denmark and Norway started in 1380, and the Danish language eventually became the official and the literary medium. Copenhagen, with its university, established itself as the cultural capital of the two countries. Not until after the Reformation were there signs of renewed literary activity in Norway itself; *e.g.*, in the nostalgic apologia for Norway, *Om Norgis rige* (“Concerning the Kingdom of Norway”), written in 1567 by Absalon Pederssøn Beyer. The most original and most conspicuously Norwegian writer of this age was Peter Dass, whose *Nordlands trompet* (*The Trumpet of Nordland*) gives a lively picture in verse of the life of a clergyman; although probably completed before the turn of the century, this work was not printed until 1739.” [*Encyclopedia Britannica*]

With the imposition of the Reformation on Norway in 1537 came the opportunity for the Dano-Norwegian rulers to impose Danish culture. With pastors trained in Copenhagen, this kind of imposition was effected through the pulpit as well as through written records. Inevitably, written Norwegian became intertwined with Danish. The literature became Danish in essence. Norway became the focus of the important historical work, *Concerning the Kingdom of Norway* (1567) by Absalon Pederssøn Beyer and also of the work of Peder Claussøn Friis. Norwegian literary activity was meagre unless we include Petter Dass' *Nordlands Trompet* and the religious poetry of Dorothe Engelbretsdotter, the first recognised woman author of Norway whose first work was published in 1678. Anders Arrebo translated the Psalms into Norwegian and wrote the *Hexaameron*. Norwegian literature was a significant element in the combined heritage of Denmark-Norway.

The whole period from the 14th century to the 19th is otherwise considered to be a dark age in Norwegian literature.

The resurgence or the renewal of Norwegian literature comes from the events of 1811 and 1814. A Norwegian university was established in Christiania (now known as Oslo) and the first Norwegian constitution was signed in 1814. The name of Henrik Wergeland is identified with the nationalism which demanded a complete break with Denmark, as opposed to the movement led by Johan Sebastian Welhaven which sought to accommodate the Danish contributions to the national culture and thus symbolised a more temperate and restrained approach. Wergeland's name dominates the entire period but the conflict between the two factions led by these two figures came to constitute the conflict between the "patriots" and the "intelligentisia" which has become part of the Norwegian psyche.

Stop to Consider

Vernacular Works and Drama

"The pre-Christian literature of Europe belonged to an oral tradition that was reflected in the *Poetic Edda* and the sagas, or heroic epics, of Iceland, the Anglo-Saxon *Beowulf*, and the German *Song of Hildebrand*. These belonged to a common Germanic alliterative tradition, but all were first recorded by Christian scribes at dates later than the historical events they relate, and the pagan elements they

contain were fused with Christian thought and feeling. The mythology of Icelandic literature was echoed in every Germanic language and clearly stemmed from a common European source. Only the Scandinavian texts, however, give a coherent account of the stories and personalities involved. Numerous ballads in different countries also reflect an earlier native tradition of oral recitation.”

This passage above from the *Encyclopedia Britannica* is given here to help you understand the historical evolution of Scandinavian traditions especially with regard to Norwegian practices. Note how the introduction of Christianity brought about changes in language and literature. As we can see, every Germanic language looked back to a common pre-Christian past of an Icelandic corpus which, again, could be called truly “European”. So when we mention the “vernacular” we are not simply talking of separate languages but of languages likely to have developed separately over time.

1.3 ‘NATIONAL ROMANTICISM’ ONWARDS

From the middle of the 19th century, the “national Romanticism” of Norway became the signature for the higher aspirations of the nation. There was a turning back to the past to reclaim it for the Norwegian heritage. You may find it interesting to know that Wergeland’s sister, Camilla Collett, published *Amtmandens døttre* or “The Governor’s Daughters” in 1855 in which the place of women in society was considered. It opened the way for a new trend in writing which was greatly encouraged by the famous Danish critic, Georg Brandes. By the 1870s and the 1880s this new trend blossomed into the “problem” literature so closely associated with Ibsen and his contemporaries like Bjørnson. By 1877 we get Ibsen’s *Pillars of Society* which established his fame worldwide. Bjørnstjerne Bjørnson, not quite eminent in the same way as Ibsen, nevertheless was a major figure in Norway’s literary circles as well as in its public affairs. His 1875 drama, *The Bankrupt*, is a substantial example of this new literary trend.

Besides the names of Ibsen and Bjørnson there were also the names of the novelists Jonas Lie and Alexander Kielland who were the major contributors to a modern Norwegian literature enriched by an outstandingly large body of significant work between 1870 and 1884. To this period belong Ibsen’s *A Doll’s House*, *Ghosts*, *An Enemy of the People*, *The Wild Duck*. To this period also belong Bjørnson’s dramas *The New System*, *A Gauntlet*,

and *Beyond Human Power* as well as his novel, *The Heritage of the Kurts*. Works by Lie and Kielland also added to the period's creative flowering. Individual expression and development became the common themes of this period in tune with the optimism that characterised it. In 1885 a scandal was caused by the publication of *Fra Kristiania-Bohømen* ("From the Christiania Bohemia") by Hans Henrik Jaeger as it seemed to espouse sexual licence. Amalie Skram was a writer who expounded extreme Naturalism, particularly in the four-volume novel of 1887-98: *Hellemyrsfolket* or "The People of Hellemyr". In the work of Arne Garborg who was a poet, novelist, dramatist, and a critic, could be seen reflections of Romanticism, Realism, Naturalism and Neoromanticism. His best-known work is the poem cycle, *Haugtussa* of 1895.

1.4 MAJOR TRENDS & INFLUENCES

Some of the impetus behind Norwegian literary history appears in Norwegian history itself. The Norwegians derived a revolutionary spirit from the examples of the American and the French revolutions. Following the Napoleonic wars, this spirit was further strengthened as the result of having to separate from Denmark and the enforced subordination to Sweden. In 1814, therefore, the Norwegians signed their first constitution. This spelt the turning point for Norwegian literature as the event brought forth to prominence a series of powerful writers who were first accorded recognition in Scandinavia before proceeding to make their mark at the international level.

Of these, we have to remember the names of Henrik Wergeland – as helping in the rise of a new Norwegian literature – besides those of Peter Asbjørnsen and Bishop Jørgen Moe who compiled collections of Norwegian folk tales. You should note that folk tales belong to the oral traditions of a community which often reflect an earlier stage of its cultural development. It is from this perspective that the cultural heritage of a community is often linked to its cultural past and thus becomes an aspect of its cultural distinctiveness. The Norwegians, who seem to have gained their own ethnic identity only through a belated process, would have definitely sought to create the uniquely 'Norwegian' culture rooted in their mountainous homeland.

To the above, we must add the fact of the attempt to create a composite Norwegian language embracing dialects from the Norwegian heartland. Ivar Aasen (1813 – 1898), a scholar of linguistics, and a philologist, is attributed with having given shape to ‘Nynorsk’ or ‘New Norwegian’ (the “speech of the country”) replacing the official language originating in Denmark. To this day, Nynorsk is one of the two official norms of written language in Norway.

The *Encyclopedia Britannica* describes these developments in these words: “After 1814 a new, exciting, and difficult age began for Norway: an opportunity seemed to be offered to develop an independent Norwegian culture and way of life, but there were deep differences of opinion as to how this could best be achieved. A poet and critic, Johan Sebastian Welhaven was chief representative of those who insisted that the existing Danish element in the culture should not be neglected. Henrik Wergeland was a spokesman for those whose nationalistic pride led them . . . to demand a complete break with Denmark. ...

Wergeland dominated the age as poet, orator, and social reformer, and the clash between him and Welhaven and between the two factions associated with them – the “patriots” and the “intelligentsia” – began an ideological conflict that has continued to persist in modified forms.”

1.5 MOVEMENTS & PREOCCUPATIONS

Of the period of Norway’s “national Romanticism” in the mid-19th century, we have to count as major developments the compilation of “Norwegian Folk Tales” between 1841 and 1844, by Christen Abjørnsen and Jørgen Engebretsen Moe. Another collection, “Norwegian Folk Ballads”, came in 1853, the work of Magnus Brostrup Landstad. Yet another landmark in this history was in the shape of the eight-volume history of the Norwegian people (1857 -63) by Peter Andreas Munch.

Another trend in this literary history can be seen in the work of establishing connections between the language of literary activity and the Old Norse dialects. This belongs to the efforts of the Landsmål movement. During these years, Ibsen’s earlier works as well as those by Bjørnson turned to the heroic past and the peasantry of Norway. The poet, Aasmund Olafson Vinje, who founded the periodical *Dølen*, used Nynorsk as the language of his poetic work.

SAQ

Which of Ibsen's works count among his earliest ? (30 words)

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.....
.....

1.5.1 TRANSITION TO REALISM

Wergeland's sister, Camilla Collett, published "The Governor's Daughters" in 1855. It set an example for others to follow by focusing on the social status of women, a feature which received encouragement from the highly influential critic, Georg Brandes. It set the pace for the writing of realistic "problem" literature particularly in the 1870s and the 1880s. To this trend belongs Ibsen's *Pillars of Society* (1877) and Bjørnson's *The Bankrupt* (1875). Ibsen's verse dramas, *Brand* (1866) and *Peer Gynt* (1867) belong to his earlier phase as does his *The Emperor and the Galilean* of 1876.

Stop to Consider

Georg Brandes

"About 1870 there arose in Denmark a new movement, led by Georg Brandes, from which a modern (*i.e.*, a Naturalistic or Realistic) literature emerged. His *Hovedstrømninger i det 19de aarhundredes litteratur* (1872-90; *Main Currents in 19th Century Literature*), describing the growth and defeat of reaction, caused a great sensation. As noted earlier, he influenced Ibsen and Strindberg and wrote many scholarly and critical works illustrating radical ideas. His later biographies of Shakespeare, Goethe, Voltaire, Julius Caesar, and Michelangelo revealed how he was influenced by Nietzsche into developing a philosophy of aristocratic radicalism."

– *Encyclopedia Britannica*

1.6 THE MAKING OF A MODERN LITERATURE

A remarkable number of important literary works were produced between 1870 and 1884. The names of the novelists Jonas Lie and Alexander Kielland, besides those of Ibsen and Bjørnson, stand out among the creators

of this corpus of modern literature. Ibsen's works, *A Doll's House*, *Ghosts*, *An Enemy of the People*, and *The Wild Duck* figure among the works of this period. So do Bjørnson's plays, *The New System*, *A Gauntlet*, and *Beyond Human Power* as well as his novel, *The Heritage of the Kurts*. Kielland and Lie also published some of their important works at this time.

Broadly speaking, the literature of this period laid stress on the individual in keeping with a larger optimism regarding social change and development. Such optimism was to turn into bitter skepticism and growing disillusionment with established social institutions. To this spirit of radical cynicism belongs "From the Christiania Bohemia" by Hans Henrik Jaeger of 1885, which created a scandal by seeming to promote sexual license. This body of literature displayed the influences of Naturalism, Realism and Neoromanticism.

The 1890s brought a questioning of what the established writers had espoused. This came through in an important essay of 1890 in the periodical, *Samtiden*, or "The Present Age". The essay was written by Knut Hamsun and was entitled, "From the Unconscious Life of the Mind". It made demands on behalf of the idiosyncratic and the individual in place of the universal and the typical. Hamsun made a break with the prevailing emphasis on social problems; his early novels (*Hunger*, *Mysteries* and *Pan*) reflected these ideas. In 1920, he was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature.

In the early 20th century Norwegian literature flowered in the fields of the novel and lyric poetry, less so in drama except the plays of Gunnar Heiberg and Nordahl Grieg.

Stop to Consider

Emigration Literature:

Although a side note to the mainstream of Norwegian literature, the literature which documents the experience of Norwegian emigrants to America is as important as the Norwegian immigrants became to the growing America of the 19th century. Three authors are recognized in this genre; Ole Rølvaag wrote about immigrants, while Johan Bojer and Ingeborg Repling Hagen wrote about emigrants. Ole E. Rølvaag, who immigrated to America, experienced life in the Prairies, and rose to become professor of Norwegian at St. Olaf College in Northfield, Minnesota,

provided a strong record of the joys and pains of the immigrant in adapting to the harsh realities of and carving out a new life in a wild new country. Norwegian author Johan Bojer provided a mirror image, depicting the struggles and processes which led to the decisions to emigrate. Ingeborg Refling Hagen, having two brothers and a sister in the United States contemplated the emigrants' longing for home and their harsh struggle "over there" in a known collection of emigrant poems from 1935.

Modernism in Norway:

Modernist literature was introduced to Norway through the literature of Knut Hamsun and Sigbjørn Obstfelder in the 1890's. In the 1930s Emil Boyson, Gunnar Larsen, Haakon Bugge Mahrt, Rolf Stenersen and Edith Øberg were among the Norwegian authors who experimented with prose modernism. The books of the 30s did not receive the same recognition as modernist works after the war. In 1947 Tarjei Vesaas published a poetry collection *Leiken og lynet* that led to major debate about the shape and rhythm for Norwegian poetry. This evolved further in the 1950s. Rolf Jacobsen achieved recognition as a poet of modernistic style after the war. Kristofer Uppdal was also recognized for his work.

(Adapted from Wikipedia)

1.7 SUMMING UP

In this unit you must have gained a fair idea of the various trends of Norwegian Drama. Your awareness of this background will facilitate your understanding of Henrik Ibsen as perhaps the most influential Norwegian dramatist who has succeeded in leaving his mark in World Drama. In the following units you will read in detail on Ibsen the dramatist and one of his highly acclaimed plays *The Wild Duck*.

Unit 2

Ibsen and His World

Contents:

- 2.1 Objectives
- 2.2 Introduction
- 2.3 Introducing Ibsen
- 2.4 His Plays and Works
 - 2.4.1 Ibsen & Women
 - 2.4.2 Problem plays or Plays of Ideas?
- 2.5 Critical Reviews
- 2.6 Summing up
- 2.7 References and Suggested Readings

2.1 OBJECTIVES

This is the second unit of this Block I (Part II). In this unit our intention is to let you know in detail about Henrik Ibsen and his works. After the end of this unit, you should be able to

- *locate* Ibsen in the arena of European Literature
- *assess* Ibsen as a prominent exponent of European dramatic realism/naturalism
- *grasp* a comprehensive idea of Ibsen as a man and as a writer
- *understand* the major preoccupations of Ibsen as a dramatist

2.2 INTRODUCTION

Ibsen occupies a most extraordinary position as a dramatist in Europe. The radical themes that he deals with in his plays confer on them a sensational quality and also a controversial character. The exceptional treatment given in those plays contribute towards the evocation of a peculiar atmosphere and a sense of hushed suspense and mystery. Poignant human situations are

drawn where man occupies the central vacillating role in the midst of absorbing moral questions and dilemmas.

Henrik Ibsen was probably the most influential dramatist of the north European country, Norway. Norway was the centre of Nordic culture that became a byword for ruthless adventure, obdurate, tenacious struggle for survival and enigmatic mythical characters. But the condition of Norwegian theatre at the time of Ibsen's writing was far from enviable. The theatre was largely dominated by Denmark, its plays were staged by Danish companies. Ibsen wrote a one-act play named *The Warriors' Barrow* (1850) and that was accepted by the Theatre Christiania for performance.

Ibsen's contribution to the world of drama is highly significant from the point of view of his breaking new grounds of reality. His was an act of "total cultural demolition" of conventional ideas of life and reality which taught man to see life in an absolutely novel manner. Bernard Shaw, for instance, had insisted upon the unsuitability of old styles of acting for his 'New Drama'.

SAQ

Beside which other names in the history of European drama does Ibsen's name appear? (50 words)

.....
.....
.....

2.3 INTRODUCING IBSEN

A Norwegian, Henrik Johan Ibsen was born in a family of six children, of Knud Ibsen and Marichen on 20 March, 1828, in Skien. The family shifted for the next eight years to Venstyp, a few miles away from Skien. Within this life-history which we read here, Henrik earned a living as an apprentice to an apothecary in Grimstad and wrote his first play, *Catiline*, in 1848-49, and submitted it to the Christiania Theatre but was rejected. The next year he published the same play privately and arranged for his play, *The Burial Mound*, to be staged in the same theatre.

Ibsen spent this period between 1851 to 1855 writing articles, essays and drama sporadically—*St. John's Night*, *Lady Inger*, *The Feast at Solhaug*,

etc. He came to be recognised as the dominating voice in Norwegian or European theatre in the eighteen sixties and 'seventies.

In 1863 he was appointed literary advisor to the Christiania Theatre. Next he was sent to Rome on a government assignment to study "art, art history and literature". In the meantime he completed *Brand* and *Peer Gynt*. Ibsen spent many years moving around the Continent, being recognised as the cultural ambassador from Norway. After many years in exile, Ibsen returned home in 1874 and was awarded a stupendous welcome by a torchlight procession by Christiania students. He did not stay on there but returned to Munich in 1875.

Stop to Consider

In 1864, he left Christiania and went to Sorrento in Italy in self-imposed exile. He was not to return to his native land for the next 27 years, and when he returned it was to be as a noted playwright, however controversial.

"Norway was a difficult country to have as a fatherland", Ibsen wrote. He spent twenty-seven years of exile outside Norway. He left his country when he was 36 and went to Rome on a government grant to "study art, art history and literature". After that, during this long period he resided in Rome, Dresden and Munich and created all his important works. His plays were honoured but scarcely in his own country - he became a world-famous figure and almost a household name in Denmark, Sweden and Germany. Returning in 1891 to settle down in Norway, he wrote to his friend, Georg Brandes, who hailed him as the man of the "modern breakthrough" - ". . . my dear Brandes, one does not live twenty-seven years out in the great, free, liberating world of culture for nothing. Here among fjords is my native land. But - but - but - where shall I find my home ?"

The reason for his long exile was probably the unrest and dissatisfaction that Ibsen felt because of the lack of warmth accorded to his plays in his own country!

He came to Munich to reside there for the next three years. In 1877 he was awarded with an honorary doctorate degree by the University of Uppsala, Sweden. In the same year the first of Ibsen's realistic cycle of plays, *Pillars of Society* was published. The subsequent important plays of this cycle are *A Doll's House* (1879), *Ghosts* (1881), and *An Enemy of the People* (1883). It is curious to note that every two years Ibsen published his major plays; *The Wild Duck* in 1884, *Rosmersholm* in 1886, *The Lady From the Sea* in 1888, *Hedda Gabler* in 1890, *Little Eyolf* in 1894, *John*

Gabriel Borkman in 1896. His last play, *When We Dead Awaken*, was published in 1899.

In 1900 Ibsen suffered a massive heart stroke which stopped him from further writing. He died on 23 May, 1906. Thus one of the most controversial and volatile, and the most dominating, voice of theatre of the 19th century stopped forever.

Stop to Consider

You would be well-informed to have an idea of how the influence of Ibsen came into England. Since the Theatre Regulation Act of 1737, English drama remained alive only through the spoken drama permitted in the two “ ‘legitimate’ patent theatres” in Covent Garden and Drury Lane. However, in the lesser “illegitimate” theatres, audiences were satisfied by combining dialogue with music, song, dance, mime pageantry, circus and spectacle. The Licensing Act was repealed in 1843 following which some of these minor forms began to take on a more mature line of development. Yet, in 1879, Matthew Arnold could still say with justification, that in England “we have no modern drama at all.”

Around the eighteen-eighties, “the tide of Ibsenism began to flow. The “discoverer” of the Norwegian dramatist had been Edmund Gosse, who since 1871 had written several critiques bringing him to notice and in 1876 had translated *Emperor and Galilean*. In 1880 William Archer’s translation of *Pillars of Society* appeared, and in 1884 Henry Arthur Jones collaborated on a bowdlerized perversion of *A Doll’s House*. With the production in 1889 of Archer’s faithful rendering of that play the storm began to rise, Clement Scott, the dramatic critic, being the leader of the opposition, and Sir Henry Irving, the foremost actor of the period, setting his face against the “new” drama. When in 1891 the Lord Chamberlain refused to license *Ghosts*, the controversy became acute. To this year belongs G. Bernard Shaw’s *The Quintessence of Ibsenism*, the expansion of a lecture of the previous year. . . . With Elizabeth Robins’ production of *Hedda Gabler* in 1892 the status of Ibsen began to be accepted and controversy gradually subsided. That the English theatre preferred the social plays of Ibsen’s middle period to his earlier poetic plays and continued to prefer them to his later symbolic dramas was . . . due . . . to the prominence of the contemporary “problem novel” and to current sociological speculation. The “bleak Norwegian” furnished weighty support to English criticism of middle-class society.”

(- *A Literary History of England, Vol.IV: The Nineteenth Century and After*, ed. Albert C. Baugh)

2.4 HIS PLAYS AND WORKS

By the time that Ibsen's work came to the fore, the standing of theatre as artistic enterprise was at its lowest. In Britain, until the arrival of *A Doll's House* in 1889, the most significant play was Sheridan's *School for Scandal* (1777). During the prolific production of Romantic poetry and prose, the dramatic genre was curiously on the decline. In French theatre, too, not much development took place: Alfred de Musset wrote 'closet dramas' which were mainly intended to be read.

So the theatre-houses were dominated by sentimental well-made plays or melodramas. Later came 'thesis plays' that caught public attention with the sentimental treatment given to the theme of topical social morality.

Stop to Consider

The cycle of plays by Ibsen

Ibsen was an avid experimenter of various genres, of diverse themes and the nature of psychological portraiture in most of his plays. He started out with verse drama, extended it to a largely symbolic documentation and when he became aware of its shortfalls, left it for more realistic portrayals of theme, character, situation and structure.

Peer Gynt, the last of Ibsen's major verse plays actually is a complex whole, uniting many and diverse traits of symbolic and poetic dramaturgy. It claims diverse shifts in rhyming and verse-patterns. The fantasy and the unreality of the play derive their origin from the curious treatment of the Norwegian folk-tale of Peer Gynt, a nomadic replica of a prodigal son wandering through places and subsequently returning to his native rural state. Peer, as a lovable rogue, claims to be a storehouse of incredible energy and resilience which, for Ibsen, worked as the creative force or, to put it otherwise, helped to see the potential negativity in characters like Krogstad in *A Doll's House*, Reilling in *The Wild Duck* and Judge Brack in *Hedda Gabler*. The quest theme is treated with various undertones of the tragic and also the comic.

Peer Gynt was the last of the verse plays written in 1867 and the 'reality' cycle began in 1877 with his writing of *The Pillars of Society* which was the first of its kind (if the documentation of the pitfalls of contemporary society is taken to

serve as lasting themes of the succeeding Ibsen plays). In *The Pillars of Society* Ibsen introduces many of his preoccupations which would provide later the matter of his socially conscious plays. The closer bonding between the individual and the society is manifested in some important plays like *The Enemy of the People*, *The Master Builder* and of course, *A Doll's House*.

As a socially committed playwright Ibsen always projected individuals in close association with the welfare projects of society. The Ibsen protagonists are connected to responsible offices and their activities are in one way or the other bound to have a significant impact on the course of events in society. For Ibsen it was absolutely important that the individual should act in a totally responsible manner in order to avoid the slow but certain process of disintegration in the social fabric. Dr. Stockman in *The Enemy of the People* wages a singular and solitary battle against the odds apparent in society. The story revolves around the detection of the infected water of the spa which gives rise to a number of related but contradictory situations which the protagonist tries to resolve with all the best of his intentions. The sense of public duty and social responsibility creates in him an intense dilemma and against all odds he chooses the moral conscience in him and declares, "the strongest man on earth is he who stands most alone".

In Ibsen's plays society plays the active and also animated background where the individual wages his lone struggle in the quest of a synthesised existence. Many of his plays exhibit that journey undertaken by the protagonists. In *A Doll's House*, Ibsen reflects this trait through the story of Nora who grows mature enough to cast aside the false sense of love and of a secure home and to set out on an unknown journey. After spending nine years with her husband, Hjalmar, Nora begins to realise the futility of their existence together.

SAQ

Name at least three of Ibsen's plays which contribute to his reputation as a dramatist of 'social commitment'. (10 words)

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Possibly the most outstanding play – in terms of social commitment - that Ibsen wrote after the publication of *The Enemy of the People* was *Ghosts*. A conservative confirmation of the existing social structure was thought to be safe and adaptative. But this kind of attitude definitely gave rise to a thwarting of individual freedom and liberty. Ibsen’s contemporary, Georg Brandes, the critic, inspired by the playwright himself advocated a rising of the newer generation devoted to the production of liberated art that would proclaim “liberty of thought and human condition”. Brandes rose against the stasis of conservatism and bondage of the human spirit. Ibsen, with this radical thinker, stressed the need for a dynamic quality to prevail in the stream of life. Too much conformity with the conventional notions of life and society gives rise to a sense of conceit and complacency which are detrimental to social progress. As reflection and also commentary on life and society, literature was bound to be influenced by overall ideology that sought to detect and reform the maladies of society. The term sometimes tends to be a misnomer as Ibsen’s ‘realism’ or for that matter, ‘greatness’ cannot be categorised within confined territories.

Stop to Consider

The ‘objective’ reality

Ibsen was extremely careful regarding the opinions expressed by the characters. He tried to dissociate himself from the portraiture as far as his role as a dramatist would take him. His sole aim was to convey a sense of reality to his readers and the audience. This lay behind his saying, “The method, the technique, underlying the form of the book was in itself quite enough to prevent the author making himself apparent in the dialogue.”

Ibsen focuses on those givens, e.g., established norms, codes of conduct that slowly fix people into determined positions. Nora, a conventional, submissive and accepting wife, in her experiences in her ‘doll house’ probes with an intense gaze her self-status and identity. And she emerges as the one who realises the futility of her sacrifices to keep up the decayed features of her home, the foundations of which is not solid faith and respect for each other; where she is just a doll-wife, role-playing in various guises as they suit the husband, which he tends to accept and reject through whims and biases.

SAQ

Enumerate those details of setting and characterisation in *The Wild Duck* by which the playwright brings the whole action closer to a general sense of reality. (For instance, Hedvig’s list of the things kept in the attic shows its ‘domestic’ role. You could also note down the details of family meals and items of dress.) (90 words)

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2.4.1 IBSEN & WOMEN

In *A Doll’s House*, the central character, Nora’s, realisation of her own situation is based on her increasingly horrified observation of the fact through all her years of marriage that she had been living in “a doll’s house” where she occupied the place of a pet, a doll or a thing possessed by her husband. At the end of the story, therefore, Nora takes that major decision that sets her apart from all other female protagonists of contemporary drama – to slam the door on her husband’s countenance and leave the ‘comfort’ of the ‘doll’s house’. This famous gesture endowed on Nora the status of the “New Woman”, the prototype of an emancipated autonomous individual.

Ibsen is perhaps one of those few dramatists who consistently feature women in the general pattern of things and events. Feminism and Ibsen are no disparate terms since in his realistic plays the study of women’s position in the family and society attains a significant level. It all started with the projection of the “New Woman” in *A Doll’s House* in the character of Nora who, in the course of the action, is shown to develop and emerge as a person totally independent and autonomous in her own terms, starting of course as a faithful and dependent wife, constantly conscious and active towards pleasing her husband and finding her happiness in that submission of hers.

“New Woman”

In October, 1878, Ibsen sat in Rome sketching some ideas for what he called “the modern-day tragedy”. He wrote, “There are two kinds of moral law, two kinds of conscience, one in the man and a completely other one in the woman. They do

not understand one another; but the woman is judged in practical life according to the man's law . . .". From all these notes and drafts later emerged the present version of *A Doll's House*. Ibsen transformed some radical ideas of his own and transported himself to the thesis of the 'new woman'.

Ibsen commented, with regard to the Norwegian Women's Rights League, on 26 May 1898, that he was not a conscious supporter of the League but was always concerned about the status of women in society. Ibsen's statements on women have to be regarded within the broader purview of humanism. For Ibsen feminism and socialism went hand in hand as women's rightful status in society also pointed towards equality of human beings without discrimination in terms of hierarchy, class and gender. His argument is for humanity at large and not for feminism in particular. He said, "I am not even quite clear as to just what this Women's Rights Movement really is. To me it has seemed a problem of humanity in general." (*Speeches and New Letters*, trans. Arne Kildal)

A Doll's House

"A woman cannot be herself in contemporary society, it is an exclusively male society, with law drafted by men, and with counsel and judges who judge feminine conduct from the male point of view." (in the notes to *A Doll's House*) Whatever be the declared position of Ibsen the playwright on the feminist movement there is no denying the fact that the overwhelming response that *A Doll's House* received started a whole range of discussion and debate on the issue. The movement in general received a boost from the successful staging of Nora's tale – the pioneering move of a woman who vociferously denounces the shackles of tradition and servility woven around her by walking out on her husband's home. Nora began to be considered as an icon, a symbolic prototype of the 'New Woman' who rebelled against the injustices committed against her. Debates were entered into; opinions were formed; she was praised and raised as an emancipator who decried any kind of bondage however divine and stood for the radical awakening that happened internally and in the social scene. Some critics like pastor M.J.Farden warned of the future of this change in attitude: "...The emancipated woman has taken her place at the door, always ready to depart, with her suitcase in her hand. The suitcase – and not, as before, the ring of fidelity – will be the symbol of her role in marriage." Like the pastor, other detractors included another great playwright of the time – August Strindberg who spoke of "the famous Norwegian bluestocking, the promoter of the equality mania."

So Nora Hjalmar by her act of rebellion and self-promotion or the attempt towards autonomy, stood as a representative “New Woman” a literary type which flourished in Victorian fiction of the 1890s. The typical New Woman represents a quest for self-fulfilment and a sense of independence and freedom from stereotyped conventional feminine roles of self-sacrificing mothers or wives. The New Woman, rather than be seen as sexually abused, would like to remain unmarried. She is well-educated, well-read and often employed in a job. She is also physically virile and vigorous. Of course it must be said alongside that Ibsen’s concept of the women who had emancipatory ideas did not fully conform to the concept of the stereotyped ‘New Woman’. But the fact remains that Ibsen’s portrayal of women characters with their strength, vulnerability, charisma, and other attributes remains illuminating and refreshing.

Notwithstanding the sensitivity which he revealed in his responses to the status of women in various matters and fields, Ibsen stood for women’s role in a number of public offices. For instance, in a speech delivered to the Scandinavian Society in Rome, he opted for the post of librarian to be filled by a woman and he also urged for voting rights in favour of the Society’s women members.

Ibsen was one of the supporters of the petition filed in favour of separate property rights for married women. Ibsen’s ‘subjective’ approval of his women characters made James Joyce comment, “Ibsen’s knowledge of humanity is nowhere more obvious than in his portrayal of women. He amazes one by his painful introspection; he seems to know them better than they know themselves. . .” Ibsen has created memorable and equally famous women characters like Nora Helmer, Helene Alving, Rebecca West, Hedda Gabler, to name a few.

Femme Fatale

Almost exactly opposite to the notion of the New Woman is the notion of the ‘femme fatale’ who is equally charismatic, emancipatory and with a high degree of sensuality.

Mrs. Alving of *Ghosts* is a matured version of Nora who, at one point, walked out on her ‘doll’s house’. Her lukewarm maturity has as if hardened into rigid scepticism, carefulness and pessimistic perspectives on life and family. Slowly having outgrown the role of an estranged wife, at a careful distance from a licentious husband and his affairs, Mrs. Alving has recovered from the bitterness and repressed animosity and looks forward to a renewed

life invigorated by a young, active son. But the intensity of shock she now faces heightens the situation and brings to focus Ibsen's concept of the tragic. We find an echo here of the Greek idea of fate in Greek tragedy where the revelation of past events sharpen the view of the present and events are re-examined in a profounder light.

In the plays of his mid-career, Ibsen portrays Rebecca, Ellide, Hedda—the three protagonists of *Rosmersholm* (1886), *The Lady From the Sea* (1888), and *Hedda Gabler* (1890). All are intriguing personalities and revealing of the “demonic”—a curious element of the other-worldly. These women are enchanting but assertive of their own rights or convictions. Ibsen shows them to be victims of illusory fantasy or hallucinatory neuroses but they contain a spark, an uncanny spirit for living, as if all are living energy incarnate or ‘libido’, in Freudian terms. These middle plays of Ibsen verge on the hallucinatory, illusory border of the symbolic, deviating somewhat from the realistic.

Hilde, of *The Master Builder*, too, exhibits that “demonic” streak - she is obsessed with the master builder and cannot wait to see him climb to the tower to be amidst clouds. This achievement of Harvard Solness leads him to his death but at the moment of his fall she, with her uncanny spirit screams with excitement, “At last! At last! Now I can see him great and free again.”

Check Your Progress

1. Attempt a comparison of Ibsen's *The Wild Duck* with Shaw's *Pygmalion* in terms of their commitment to the portrayal of social realities.
2. Give an outline of the artistic indebtedness of Shaw to the work of Ibsen.
3. Attempt an analysis of Ibsen's characteristic paradox that sets the ‘realistic’ stereotype of women against the militant emergence of the ‘New Woman’. Do we see this paradox in the portrayal of characters like Gina in *The Wild Duck*?
4. Consider the structure of *The Wild Duck* as the strategy of creating ‘dramatic illusion’. Relate this to the ‘exposition’ and the action that takes place off-stage among the characters.

2.4.2 PROBLEM PLAYS OR PLAYS OF IDEAS?

To speak generally about Ibsen’s plays, they revolved around human predicaments, human situations jeopardised by decisions made at the wrong moments in time and responses that thwarted the smooth functioning of the general principles of life. Though the term, “problem plays”, was inflicted upon this special genre of drama, with balanced and equal poignancy, there was from the beginning a sense of novelty, uniqueness conveyed by his plays that had made them become instantly popular in the Continent.

Ibsen was the pioneer of social plays; his social plays discussed problems of education, marriage, society and the individual, social sanction and individual integrity, besides others. In *A Doll’s House*, Ibsen introduced the ‘New Woman’, a concept made famous in households at the beginning of the ‘thirties in the Continent and which was an offshoot of modernist realism. In the play, such a simple housewife learns the lessons of life and realises for the first time in her life that the foundation upon which her family is formed or erected is false and baseless. The illusory world of happiness, peace and tranquillity begins to crumble around Nora and she takes a difficult decision of walking out of the house of deceit and falsehood and embracing the reality of life.

SAQ

How would you understand the descriptive phrase, “problem play” ?
Does *The Wild Duck* present the ‘problem’ of social morality in its first Act? (60 + 70 words)

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Nora makes the ultimate sacrifice and leaves her husband’s home and goes out into the street. The novelty of thought and the social issue of failed marriage or the exploring of the root of the social institution was something very novel and indeed, radical. The way Ibsen studies human situations and

poignantly portrays the helplessness of individuals before something beyond them, is really extraordinary. In *An Enemy of the People* and *Ghosts*, Ibsen explores the lives of people on the social plane, at the level of the individual against social sanction or social propriety. Dr. Stockmann of *An Enemy of the People* fights a lone battle against the evils of the society and conventional social opinion. He is a true Ibsenian spokesperson in the sense that he represents the truly liberated spirit in the human heart that does not bow down before constraints but always holds its head high. This insurmountable pride of the human heart is truly represented by his decision to go against the public opinion that is represented by his brother, the mayor of the city and also other people who are afraid to raise their voices against the corruption in society. The forthright soul of Dr. Stockmann in the face of all protests and antagonisms decides the fight alone and at the end of the play he declares in a truly Ibsenian manner — “The strongest man is he who can fight alone.”

Radical thinking was thought to be the beckoning light for the changing world scenario towards the end of the 19th century and Ibsen, writing at the fag-end of the century, brought in the new wave of social and individual thinking. Ibsen was a naturalist like his predecessor in Europe, Emile Zola, but like a true master, he accommodated the anger of the day and the craving of his soul for artistic expression in a more mature form of realism – naturalism and also expressionism.

Ibsen, with Georg Brandes (1842–1927) challenged the conventional values of bourgeois middle-class society and set out to formulate the basic rights and liberties of the individual. Brandes arranged a series of public lectures in Copenhagen and threw light on the ideology of the liberation of human thought which he thought would rejuvenate the stasis of a false morality and destroy all features of tyranny.

The plays published by Ibsen between 1877 and 1882, namely – *The Pillars of Society*, *A Doll’s House*, *Ghosts* and *An Enemy of the People*, probed the dichotomy between the ideal and practice prevailing in both official and private lives of the individual. In fact most of the plays tended to reveal a facade masking a murkier reality underneath. How is the individual repressed under the tyranny of the so-called social respectability of convention?

In a letter to Georg Brandes dated 17th February, 1871, Ibsen confirmed his belief in liberty which to him is “individual” and “political”. As he said, “I

shall never agree to making liberty synonymous with political liberty. What you call liberty, I call liberties; and what I call the struggle for liberty is nothing but the constant, living assimilation of the idea of freedom.” Hence the ‘problem’ he delineated through the realistic plays was at the core of the conflict that the individual manifested in the stand against society and its conventional norms.

‘Realism’, for Ibsen, did not seem to coincide with any mimetic pattern or representation of reality – in fact his attempt to draw individual concerns into a realistic fold of events and the plot was to problematise the existential ideal of the individual and the pragmatic conflicts evoked therein. As observed by Jennette Lee, an Ibsen play was never a portrayal of some problem (delineated in a forthright way); rather the concept of the problem play essentially not in his line. “The conception of a problem play as one in which some problem of modern life is discussed by the characters and worked out in the plot is foreign to Ibsen, as to all great artists.”

Stop to Consider

Naturalism

Naturalism was a modernist and post-Darwinian concept which emphasized accuracy and realistic theory of representation of men and society. It was a method found in the works of the French novelist, Emile Zola, who referred to scientific objectivity in depicting or representing states and things. In accordance with the theories of naturalism and realism, the novelists attempted to document life and human beings in the most ‘naturalistic’ manner. This kind of endeavour also included efforts to investigate not only material reality but also the moral behaviour of men. Realism and naturalism were offshoots of a single strain of thought reflected in both literature and art.

Like many other movements, Naturalism too was made up of conflicting strands. But it developed essentially in France under the aegis of the leadership of Emile Zola for whom writing novels was an experiment like a scientific study. The trend of Naturalism visible in Ibsen was evident in the effect his plays had on the audience. A strong resemblance to life was created by the naturalistic stage settings and the aura evoked of life and relationship. But one thing must be noted of Naturalism or realism in Ibsen and that is the extraordinary atmosphere or ambience created by his lines, stage settings, characters and the tones/underlying

principles working in the plays. For this same reason Ibsen remains a realist, a naturalist and also most curiously a symbolist and psychologist.

Ibsen imbibed Brandes' ideas of individualism, emancipation and human free will and at the same time also accommodated Zola's determinism which deprives characters of 'free will' and makes them 'completely dominated by their nerves and their blood.' Hence, fusing diverse elements of naturalism, radical realism, symbolism or the part played by allegory, Ibsen created modern tragedy for us, the form in which he excelled and through which, like Shakespeare, he conveyed the multilayered messages and truths of life to us.

Ibsen as a Naturalist

The categorisation of Ibsen as a naturalist soon becomes contentious because of the various expressions of Ibsen's creative art. He was a realist in matters of documentation of social realities, social maladies, social evils and concerns. But his treatment of themes along with characters and situations can never be acknowledged as totally naturalistic.

In the case of stage-settings Ibsen meticulously described every minute detail of the stage, the household, the plans of the rooms and the furniture therein. The ambience of Ibsen's houses and families as in *Ghosts*, *Doll's House*, *An Enemy of the People*, is completely realistic, contributing to the variety and intensity of his social themes.

Ibsen's "naturalism" would seem to contrast with his taking recourse to symbols. For a realist and a conscious advocate of social uplift, the perennial theme of individual versus society holds great significance. The basic conflict that is reflected often is the individual's craving for liberty and the constricting norms seeking to curb the flights of individual freedom. In *The Wild Duck* the theme of the ideal versus the mundane real validates the conception of the conflict we have stated above. Yet the fact remains that the nature of the ideal professed by Gregers in *The Wild Duck*, Manders in *Ghosts* and Helmer in *A Doll's House* are varied and not similar. In the case of Gregers in *The Wild Duck*, it is an intense obsession to remove the cover to reveal the fact, event, personality, and relationship.

Ibsen's Exile

"Norway was a different country to leave as a fatherland"-Ibsen wrote. He spent twenty seven years of exile outside Norway. He had left his country when he was 36 and went to Rome with a Govt. grant to "study art, art history and literature." After that during the long period of staying outside his country he stayed in

Rome, Dresden and Munich and created all the important works. His plays were honoured but scarcely in his country—he became a world famous figure and an almost household name in Denmark, Sweden or Germany. After coming back in 1891 to settle down in Norway, he wrote to his friend Georg Brendes, who hailed him as the man of ‘modern breakthrough.’, “—my dear Brander , one does not live twenty seven years out in the great, free, liberating world of culture for nothing. Here among the fjords is my native land. But –but—but where shall I find my home?”

The reason of his long exile was probably the unrest and dissatisfaction that Ibsen felt because of the lack of warmth, his plays were received in his own country. Another reason was to show his protest by leaving his country as the Norwegian did not support the Danes in their war with the Prussians.

2.5 CRITICAL REVIEWS

The bulk of Ibsen criticism has been immense and for that reason a cohesive and comprehensive history of this body of commentaries is difficult to easily summarize. Ibsen was always a serious author and in all earnestness he tried to encapsulate the reality as he also confirmed it. Ibsen had a great following, innumerable admirers who were eager to contribute to the cause of “Ibsenism” – as it was called in the years following the publication and staging of his *A Doll's House*. The critical environment of Ibsen’s plays during the years between the 1870s to the first World War was mostly represented by Bernard Shaw’s treatise *The Quintessence of Ibsenism*, critics like Edmund Gosse and William Archer, who attempted to make Ibsen known beyond the borders of Norway by arranging the plays’ staging, translating or adapting the plays or through polemical pro-Ibsen campaigns. Eleanor Marx and Edward Aveling arranged for a reading session of a *A Doll's House* in their flat in Great Russell Street on 15 January 1886. Bernard Shaw was invited and he readily read the part of Krogstad while William Morris’ daughter played Mrs.Linde. The idea behind the whole endeavour was to reaffirm their political belief in socialism and various welfare activities to pronounce the economic and intellectual emancipation for women and workers alike. Though they predicted the domestic catastrophe of Nora as

a condensed metaphor for the exploitation and oppression of labour, the later development in the lives of Eleanor and Aveling was an ironical pointer to the difficulty of pinning down great works to definite bounded categories. But the fact remains that Eleanor Marx was the pioneering critic to give rise to socialist feminist critique. Bernard Shaw was better reasoned and more logical in his arguments than William Archer. But Shaw too was given to portray Ibsen as a blatant realist who captured accurately social realities and situations. He disregarded on the whole of Ibsen's use of psychological reality and the undercurrents of the unconscious in character and situation. Ibsen the symbolist, who used stagecraft to evoke emotion and suggestion, was largely ignored. For Shaw Ibsen was a thorough-going realist holding the mimetic mirror to the society and capturing the image and the light reflected on it.

Along with the modernists' obsession with Ibsen, the beginning of the psychoanalytical school of criticism also showered the canonical status to Ibsen in the same vein as to Shakespeare and Sophocles. Freud himself in his analyses of neuroses cited vital references from Ibsen's work, notably, *Little Eyolf* and *Rosmersholm*. Freud analyses with convincing authority the strange behaviour of Rebecca West of *Rosmersholm* and points to the repressed psychical trauma buried in her unconscious. Without going into the value-judgment that could be offered to the Freudian analyses of Ibsen's plays, it should be emphasized that Freud's study further opened avenues for many other sub-textual appreciations which could be equally applied to Ibsen's plays.

In the case of psychological criticism of Ibsen's plays, Freud himself refers to his indebtedness to Ibsen for articulating on the stage in a substantial manner, the oblique confessional mode of the characters in life through "gestural/behavioural style", the repressed psychical fevers. We may not be totally in agreement with the hermeneutic approach offered by Freud in reading Ibsen's plays as expressing universal human fantasies (both intentional and unconscious strategies) or in treating his characters as clinical case-studies of neurosis. But successful and illuminating interpretations have

been made by bringing psychoanalytical tools to read the half-lit, half-dark world of *Ghosts*, *When We Dead Awaken*, *Little Eyolf*, *Rosmersholm*, or *The Master Builder* or, for that matter, *Hedda Gabler*.

2.6 SUMMING UP

As you have finished reading this unit, you know it for sure that Ibsen represents a very productive phase of European realist and naturalist drama during late 19th century and early 20th century.

Unit 3

The Wild Duck

Contents:

- 3.1 Objectives
- 3.2 The Title
- 3.3 Reading the Play: *The Wild Duck*
 - 3.3.1 The Action of the Play
- 3.4 Theme/s in the Play
- 3.5 Characterisation
- 3.6 Symbolism
- 3.7 Summing up
- 3.8 References & Suggested Readings

3.1 OBJECTIVES

This unit brings to you the play by Henrik Ibsen, *The Wild Duck*, belonging to the group of plays united thematically by Ibsen's concern with morality at the personal and the social levels: *The Pillars of the Community*, *A Doll's House*, *Ghosts*, *An Enemy of the People*. Below is an extended commentary touching upon the various aspects of the play which should inform your reading. By the end of the unit you should be able to-

- *read* the play as a composite whole with a wide range of concerns
- *study* the characters and dialogues in relation to Ibsen's range of thought
- *explain* the major features of the play in terms of Ibsen's literary preoccupations

3.2 THE TITLE

The title of the play was presumably suggested to Ibsen by Welhaven's poem, "The Sea-bird" which deals with nature and description of wilderness and also a particular species of wild bird that dives into the deeps and feeds on the weeds below. The beauty and serenity of the wild duck in the poem must have impressed Ibsen and very tellingly he transposes that innocence

and naivety onto Hedvig who seems to represent the bird of course. Ibsen tends to work on the title at various levels. The title containing the reference to the wild duck also seems to bear a resemblance to Chekhov's sea-gull but more closely it seems to echo the suggestion of sacrifice imbuing the story of Boccaccio's falcon, cited in the *Decameron*. Here the story narrated refers to a young gentleman called Federigo and his love for Madame Giovanna of Florence. In order to satisfy his lady-love, who comes as a guest to his poor mansion one day, unable to afford anything else, he sacrifices his dearest falcon and cooks a delicious meal with it to offer to her. After dinner she discloses her intention behind visiting him and she confesses her daughter's desire to have the dear falcon.

Though most critics like to identify Hedvig with the wild duck, often the characters in the play, too, affiliate subliminally with the bird and its status as a symbol of purity or happiness. Gregers speaks of the wild duck and he seems to see something of the duck in Hjalmar. For him, Hjalmar too, like the bird, has dived into the deep and survived among the weed and muck. Gregers sees himself as the clever dog who jumps in after the duck, retrieves the bird from the depths of the sea. He, too, would save Hjalmar by showing him how to confront the blatant truths of life.

3.2 READING THE PLAY: *THE WILD DUCK*

The Wild Duck, the next important Ibsen play written in the realistic vein after *An Enemy of the People* (1882) was published in November 1884. It was written as a domestic drama like *A Doll's House* and *Ghosts* but this play is always considered on a separate plane by critics because of the symbolism used and also the suggestive props and stagecraft used by Ibsen to evoke a definite atmosphere. The delusional world of the Ekdals is inhabited by rabbits, poultry and the wild duck that forms the title of the play and this space, the skylighted attic, actually becomes a refuge from reality.

The play tells the story of Hjalmar Ekdal, a poor studio photographer who lives with his father, wife, Gina, and daughter, Hedvig. The happy atmosphere in the family is disrupted by an intruder, Gregers, who pronounces a programme for living which is enriched by "the claims of the ideal". This turns out to mean that people should face the absolute truth about themselves,

be it what it may and what it may lead to. Actually the plot unravels with Greger's intervention and Gina's past relationship with Greger's father, the elder Werle, which disconcerts Hjalmar totally and ruffles the domestic happiness. Hjalmar threatens to walk out of home and denounces Hedvig who is mortally shocked by this rejection by her dear father. While others are speculating over her shooting her favourite wild duck, as advised by Greger, finally Hedvig shoots herself.

Stop to Consider

Ibsen worked on *The Wild Duck* in clearly defined stages, from the winter of 1882 until April 1884; then he worked on drafting dialogues for nearly eight weeks till June 1884 and at the end revised the play for eleven weeks till August 1884.

The attic in the play which is used by old Ekdal and Hedvig is suggested as a refuge for the characters. Like Hedvig, it may be noted that the young Ibsen - "an unsociable child" - too had retreated when hurt and humiliated into a garret, a little room near the back entrance. Ibsen brings back small autobiographical details, — a paint box, a clock, a book on the history of London into the play, — into his work and connects them to the consciousness of Hedvig who perceives with her childlike wonder and obsession the world around her. She is totally absorbed in that world, the world of the wild duck, a reality represented on a plane altogether different by Ibsen.

3.3.1 THE ACTION OF THE PLAY

Act I

The play is structured around five acts in which the relationships between two families (the Werles and the Ekdals) through incidents from the past and the present which are shown to be so entwined that human will and character fall miserably short of their liberating capacities and become something, far more regulatory and deterministic.

The action unfolds with a dinner party arranged at the Werle household. A few minor characters such as Pettersen, Jensen and a few unspecified guests like 'A fat guest', the 'Bald-headed guest', a 'Third guest', etc., are also introduced. This act reveals among other things, the strange unwelcome presence of Ekdal among them — through the dialogue Ekdal is revealed to

belong to a socially subordinate position before the others. He is shown to be some kind of an assistant to the Werle household. The fact that he survives on financial aid from Werle is revealed in the conversation between the son and the father. The relation of friendship between Gregers and Hjalmar is also unravelled but curiously, Hjalmar pretends not to notice Ekdal in the party at the Gregers'.

The past is invoked in the conversation between Werle and Gregers and the incidents behind the marriage of Hjalmar and Gina Hansen, the then housemaid of the Werle household are brought to light. It is also known that Werle was responsible for arranging the marriage between Gina and Hjalmar as he incurred the expenses of the marriage. Werle was instrumental in more than one respect to find a settled home for Hjalmar. Werle is revealed in a contrary light when the hints of a relationship between Werle and Gina are thrown in.

So the first Act prepares the audience for the later developments of the plot which are based on the social disparity between the two households, the estranged relations of the father and son, the apparent 'charity' of old Werle towards the Ekdals, Werle's ailing eyesight, and the financial transactions. In the same act Gregers is seen leaving his father's house and taking up residence with the Ekdals. He takes Hjalmar's house on rent despite Gina's resistance to accommodate him.

ACT II

The audience sees Gina and Hedvig at home as old Ekdal comes home from the party. When Hjalmar comes back home from the dinner-party at Werle's, he is welcomed with animated cheerfulness by Gina and Hedvig. Hjalmar narrates stories of the party and they listen with mesmerized attention. Old Ekdal too wants to know about the party. We, the audience, can see how the little episode at the party, when the son gave no public acknowledgement of the father's presence, is papered over. After all these queries, Hjalmar is reminded of something which he has apparently brought for Hedvig. Hedvig waits in suspense while her father brings out a paper – the menu or "the bill of fare". In an animated manner Hjalmar begins describing the dishes or food proffered at the party. Hedvig is disappointed that her father has not brought anything for her from the party but she tries to hide her dejection. Hjalmar, with exhaustion, exclaims about the tiring duties of a

“family breadwinner”. In an agitated manner he accuses the family members of not responding to him warmly and according to him they are used to showing “sour faces” to him. On the other hand, it is also revealed that Gina and Hedwig constantly endeavour to please and placate Hjalmar’s temperamental bouts. Hjalmar, in turn, accuses Gina of not trying enough.

Gregers enters into the household as an interceptor. He is informed that Hjalmar’s house is large enough to accommodate him. It is revealed that Hedvig is suffering from a curious malady and that she is gradually losing her vision. The source of the malady, it is said, is ‘heredity’. Gina here intervenes and says that Hjalmar’s mother had bad eyes. Gregers is also told that Hedvig is completely unaware of the plight that she is going to be afflicted with.

Gregers is then introduced to Old Ekdal and when asked says that he has of late left hunting. He regrets losing the ‘old hunting grounds’ due to the growth of cities. Ekdal wants to show his little ‘wood’ to Gregers. He and Hjalmar (who is embarrassed) lead Gregers to the garret or the attic filled with moonlight. The wild duck is not clearly visible in the partial light but its presence is shown to be the main attraction. At last the ‘wild duck’ is referred to by Ekdal. Without showing it on the stage it is suggested that it is used to lying on a basket of straw and she is said to have a trough of water to ‘splash around’ in. Another vital piece of information is imparted that the wild duck was given to the Ekdals by Old Werle, bringing in a suggestion of affinity between Hedvig and the Wild Duck. It is also said that the wild duck is thriving well in the Ekdal household.

Gregers offers himself as a tenant in Hjalmar’s room which is not welcomed by Gina. Gina tries to refuse by saying that the room is not large enough but those ideas are set aside. Gina raises the topic of the wanderers, Molvik and Relling, who are also living ‘down below’. Gregers speaks of his disgust at his acquiring the family name of ‘Werle’. When asked what he would have liked to be if not a Werle, he promptly replies that he should have been a ‘clever dog’. After Gregers goes out saying that he would be moving in the next day, Gina and Hedvig converse about Gregers and his strange comments. Gina expresses her opinion that Old Werle may not like the idea of Gregers’s moving into Ekdal’s house.

Act III

On being asked whether she had seen Gregers, Gina informs Hjalmar that Gregers had already moved into their household as their tenant and eager to do things himself had tried to light fire, which had proved to be a mess. It also transpires that Hjalmar had already invited Gregers and also Molvik and Relling for lunch. Ekdal and Hjalmar have an affinity between them, most unlike the other father and son—Werle and Gregers. Ekdal is seen busy working out the arrangements with Hjalmar for the pets and poultry in the loft. While they remain busy, Gregers meets Hedvig and learns from her of the wild duck, along with other mundane affairs of the household.

Hedvig says that she likes to look after the Wild Duck herself as the poor Duck does not seem to have anyone. As she says, "...the poor thing has no one to turn to." And "... every thing is so really mysterious about the wild duck. There is no one who knows her and no one knows where she's come from, either."

Gina comes in and sets the table with Hedvig to serve lunch. Hjalmar's nature is exposed when he exclaims that he keeps himself busy with more important thoughts leaving his wife to do more mundane matters. He cites his marvellous invention which he is sure is going to change the future of his family. In this conversation Hjalmar announces that his prime motivation in life is to restore the 'dignity' and 'honour' of the 'Ekdal name'. Gregers declares in the course of this exchange with Hjalmar, that he has "a strain of the wild duck" in him because he had "landed in a poisonous swamp" with "an insidious disease" and had "dived to the bottom to die in the dark". For a moment, Hjalmar resists Gregers' view of him and his situation. We also learn, through Relling, of Gregers' "claim of the ideal". Relling, with his gregarious and hearty outlook on life, calls Molvik a "demoniac" and counts Hjalmar among the lucky ones. As Gregers raises the subject of the 'swamp vapour', Gina, Relling, and Hjalmar all charge him with perversity, with Gina insisting that the 'stench' is aired out of the place. Relling accuses Gregers that he virtually carries the uncut version of that "summons to the Ideal" in his back pocket. The talk is about to turn into altercation when old Werle comes in and charges his son that by residing in the Ekdal household, he is conspiring against him, his father. The father-son conflict falls out into the open as Gregers counter-accuses his father of having spoilt his entire

life as he is said to have led a life “which is whipped and driven by this guilt-ridden conscience”. He also announces that he would not go back to Werle not even for the estate. Rather he would continue in his life’s mission. Gregers asks Hjalmar out for a walk but both Gina and Relling advise him against it: Gregers is referred to as a person “really crazy”, by Relling, and a “cold fish’ by Gina.

Act IV

In Act IV, Hjalmar is shown coming back from the walk with Gregers and there is a visible change in his behaviour. He does not take food and refers to a person’s compulsion of getting used to “a lot of things’. He announces his intention to be busy in his work and sternly refuses to do anything with the loft, the ‘infernal wild duck’ all which he says in intense hatred. He sends Hedvig out for a walk in order to engage himself in a vital conversation with his wife. He wants some information regarding household expenses which she provides. As to the stipend paid to Ekdal for copy work, Hjalmar wants to know how much money is paid by Old Werle. When Hjalmar tries to corner Gina by his probing questions Gina defiantly asks Hjalmar what exactly happened between him and Gregers during their walk together.

Hjalmar blatantly asks Gina about her relationship with Old Werle when she was serving in that household. Gina denies outright anything between them but informs Hjalmar that, because Werle’s wife had suspected something amiss Gina resigned from the job. But after that Gina admits that as Werle became a widower, he still pursued Gina and he “had his way”. Hjalmar listens to the account horrified and immediately accuses Gina of betraying him. Gina tries to defend herself by saying that she had long forgotten all that “old affair”. She handles it in a firm manner and now charges that had it not been for her mature handling of the household matters, Hjalmar himself would have been in deep trouble.

Gregers comes in and emotionally heightens the situation by referring to his mission of “high purposes”, which allegedly prompts him to instill the ‘truth’ of past history and relationship. Relling cuts him short and admonishes that unless Gregers is thrown out of the house he is going to destroy the household. Gregers tries to defend himself by saying that he only wanted that Hjalmar achieve a “true marriage”. Relling refers to Hedvig and says that at least for the sake of Hedvig, Gregers should have spared the couple. Relling speaks

of Hedvig's age and says that because of her age she is vulnerable to "erratic ideas" which might prove dangerous.

Mrs. Sorby comes to visit and informs them that she was going to be married to Old Werle and so it was a kind of goodwill farewell visit. During her conversation it is revealed that Mrs. Sorby was intimate with Relling for some time and Gregers warns her that he might inform Werle about this entanglement. But Mrs. Sorby reassures him saying that she had already confided about her past to Werle as she did not believe in working in an underhand manner. After Mrs. Sorby walks out, Hjalmar raises the topic of happy marriages and compares the solid foundation of Werle's relation with Mrs. Sorby and comments that very rarely did this kind of forthrightness exist between characters on the verge of entering into marriage.

Hedvig returns from the walk and timidly informs Hjalmar that Mrs. Sorby had brought a present for her and she was asked to open it only on the next morning, her birthday. But Hjalmar insists and the child allows him to open it. A letter addressed to Hedvig comes in the manner of a gift from Werle and it says that Old Ekdal would receive one hundred crowns a month and he need not exert himself about copy work. This infuriates Hjalmar and he tears the document into pieces. What angers him all the more is the fact that after Ekdal passes away the pension would continue in Hedvig's name. Like a man who sees the truth, Hjalmar 'realizes' the uncanny link between Werle's good will towards Hedvig and the commonness between Werle's eye disease with that of Hedvig. He now enquires about Hedvig's true lineage. Pitifully, Gina cannot answer Hjalmar's question "... does Hedvig belong to me"? She only says, "I don't know". Hjalmar ruefully decides to leave the household. Hedvig runs after him, but Hjalmar rudely snubs her. She becomes inconsolable as she does not have any idea of what happened between her parents. Gina, in an attempt to bring back Hjalmar, goes in search of him. Gregers consoles Hedvig by way of saying that there seems to be one way only to please her father and that is, if she sacrifices her wild duck for her father's sake; he could be pacified. He asks her to do it and she promises to give it a try.

Act V

This act also takes place in Hjalmar's studio. Hedvig comes in and informs her mother that her father was at Relling's place. Gregers and Relling discuss

the emotional upheaval experienced by Hjalmar. Relling speaks of an antidote for the malady of life, which he refers to as 'life—lie' in persons. Now, as Gregers comes to meet Hedvig again, he reminds her of the sacrifice she had promised. He emphasizes that once she makes way for "true, joyful, courageous spirit of self sacrifice", her father would come back to her. After that, Hedvig enquires of her grandfather Ekdal how he would have shot at the wild duck if at all he wanted to shoot. Without understanding the underlying suggestion he tells her how to shoot at the bird at the breast, "against the feathers". She stealthily takes away a double-barrelled pistol from the book shelf.

Next Hjalmar comes back but as he says "for one moment". Hedvig sees her father and with a shriek of delight rushes toward him, but very cruelly Hjalmar puts her off and asks her to go away. Hedvig silently goes out. Hjalmar announces that he is going to leave the house and live elsewhere with his father. He speaks of his books and papers, his memoirs etc., which he intends to finish in a short time. While seeing Hedvig again he chides her and refers to her as an 'intruder'. Gina sends Hedvig to the kitchen and then to her room. Gina enquires whether to give his flute along with the goods. Hjalmar replies that he wanted to take along his pistol. When the pistol is not to be found everyone thinks that it must have been Ekdal, who has gone for hunting. Gregers comes in and seeing Hjalmar at home enquires and Hjalmar too seems hesitant whether actually he wants to leave the house or not. Gregers asks him to start all over again but Hjalmar is confused. His apprehension regarding Hedvig is that she would be won over by the money and position at the Werles'. But Gregers reassures him saying that Hedvig is going to prove her love for her father through an act of sacrifice. In the meantime a gunshot is heard and Gregers rejoices thinking it to be Hedvig shooting the wild duck. They look for the child but can't find her inside the house. They think that Old Ekdal must have been shooting the duck at Hedvig's calling. But soon this misconception is also clarified and at last they discover the lifeless body of Hedvig from the loft. She still has fingers curled around the pistol. To his utter dismay Hjalmar realizes that it was his rudeness that saw Hedvig having "crept terrified into the loft and died out of love for" him. After her death Gregers comments that Hedvig did not die "in vain" as it has tended to bring out traces of 'greatness' in Hjalmar.

3.4 THEME/S IN THE PLAY

The past embodies significant development of emotional responses in the characters. So memory plays with various causes and effects in the conscious and the unconscious states of persons. Past events cast an influence on the present emotions and responses. Ibsen shows that tragedy occurs because the past events and memories tend to bring back potential avenues of change and reversal dangerous for the seemingly stable balance of existence in the present.

In *Ghosts* catastrophe occurs when Mrs. Alving finds to her horror that the misdeeds and licentiousness of her dead husband now inhabit her only son Oswald with an inherited disease. Of course, in *A Doll's House*, the past works as a cleansing process as well because the protagonist Nora, after failing to accommodate the increasing pressure of Krogstad to blackmail her accepts the present that she has to face, in the ordeal of her dear husband.

With Hjalmar's hypocritical response to her misdeed (forgery of the signature of her dead father in order to provide money for Helmer's cure/restoration), she begins to see her condition with a novel perspective and various aspects of her state and her family begin to dawn upon her. She realises that after all these years of voluntary and submissive sacrifices and services, she is only given the status of a pet or a plaything in the 'doll's house' of hers. Then she decides to walk out on Helmer.

In *The Wild Duck* the dark shadows of the past begin to be unravelled very slowly with subtle hints and innuendoes. Ibsen, as a deft craftsman of plot-making, meticulously unravels the events of the story to the suspense and interest of the spectators mounting with every passing moment. Like all great dramatists as Shakespeare, Ibsen does not work with elaborate plot-structures; rather, the story is introduced and then developed at a gradual, easy pace. Towards the end the pace doubles leading to a frantic, heightened emotion. In the plot of the play the ominous shadow of the past hovers over Ekdal's family; Hjalmar reveals his fear to his wife, Gina, who had been a housekeeper in the Werle household some years before. He asks Gina in Act IV:

“Is it true – can it be true – that there was something between you and Mr. Werle while you were working in his house?”

Gina reaffirms that there was not anything at that time though the members of the house always suspected something. Gina further informs that because of the fuss that was made, she quit her job. But she also adds to Hjalmar's query that there grew a relationship after Werle became a widower and since he, in her words, "He wouldn't give up till he had his way" she had to give in. This is the moment of revelation that slowly corrodes the heart of the story and the characters who suffer along with it. Hjalmar gets dismissed and he starts losing his piece of mind. He is not pacified by the fact that Gina, after all these years of "apathetic calm" did never show any emotion or remorse for past events. Rather, he grows restless over the idea that she "like a spider" had been weaving "this web of deceit" around him! Gina does not react in the same agitated tone as Hjalmar does. She is shown to be a cool, confident woman who has taken many upheavals of practical life evenly. The pragmatic approach towards life perhaps has saved the household all this while because as she informs the audience, she took care of the Ekdal household with firm hands as Hjalmar is shown to be lacking in enterprise and vigour. But as now she says he had improved his home and family. So Gina did not have time to look back to all the years and events which had happened.

The theme of the "claims of the ideal" is worked into the very structure of the play. The innate delusion of Gregers Werle as the one who undertakes to show the truth of life below the visible surface propels the character into the role of the dangerous intruder in the 'happy' family of the Ekdals. Grown into a thwarted youth, Gregers, to sublimate his frustrated unhappy childhood, takes up the mission of life to uncover the dissembling and to show up the naked truth about life and relationships. So his excessive obsession with the 'ideal' (as against the 'life-lie') entraps vulnerable men and women, Gina, Hjalmar and Hedvig, who falls an innocent victim to the foolhardy action of the adults.

The Wild Duck also deals with the theme of innocence versus experience. The events of life and emotions arising out of the relationships collide and clash clearly in this battle of good and evil, the innocent against the experienced, even illusion against reality although nowhere in the play are we able to pinpoint where good resides and where evil does so. Outlines between the conventionally 'good' and the conventionally 'bad' are smudged and blurred. The so-called 'awareness of Gregers or his 'ideal', working at

the level of experience, leads him to the extremity of intervention in the lives of Hjalmar, Gina and Hedvig. The members of this family in different states of innocence accept what is thrust upon them by Gregers' ideal or the reasons for rearranging of their lives.

The innocence of Hedvig is most poignantly or painfully abused and exploited. First, by Hjalmar's callous behaviour and attitude, and next by Greger's diabolic suggestion that Hjalmar would reconsider and embrace Hedvig back into his fold as a father if she were ready to sacrifice her most loved 'wild Duck' for Hjalmar. Being the most naive and unspoilt among the characters, she is convinced by the power of this sacrifice and on the spur of the moment, in over-enthusiasm, she shoots herself.

3.5 CHARACTERISATION

Gregers

Gregers' reservations regarding the Ekdals from the beginning is shown as something ominous or suspicious. Gina is always suspicious about his intentions and her approach towards him pointedly signify Gregers' inherent nature and his capability to intervene which has disturbing potential to disrupt the peace and integrity of the story/plot. Gregers is presented by Ibsen not in the substantial light of the explicable but as representative of something hidden and inexplicable. He, like the wild duck, probes or pokes deep into the bottom of the sea and plucks weeds out of it. He introduces the significance of the 'Ideal' into the minds of the characters. His dialogues signify a sense of the mysterious level which is yet to be unravelled from an apparent layer of existence. This aspect in him becomes pertinent when Gina, embittered by Hjalmar's charge of her past relations with Werle, bursts out in exasperation:

“Oh, why did that nasty creature have to come poking his nose in here for!”
(Act IV)

Though Gregers' position in the play is not unequivocally diabolic, traces of evil are still apparent in his persona. His “claim of the ideal” which Relling accuses him of destructively forwarding, and he carries unabridged in his back pocket, seemingly works at various levels. With this in his mind, he is out to accomplish the mission of opening the eyes of Hjalmar, about the

corruption of his marriage with Gina. As if like a messiah he tries to protect the sanctity of marriage in this world because from his experience he has not found a true marriage in existence. He is the first to throw the hint of ‘stench’, a ‘swamp’ and other unholy and polluted states of the Ekdal household. He, like a conventional idealist, attempts to spread the message of purity and cleanliness in and around Hjalmar’s relationship. His endeavour is to expose the reality behind the facade of happiness from Hjalmar’s mind and let him see the reality. So he is unusually and even unnaturally delighted to find Hjalmar and Gina facing each other in dark gloomy recognition in the shadow of the past – he moralizes on the necessity of exposing the real at the risk of solace and peace of mind.

SAQ

Does Ibsen see his characters as products of an oppressive past who are unable to deal with the claims of the present on that account ? (70 words)

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But that hope for the ideal seems to come from a personal obsession of his – to avenge the hatred he bears against his father, Werle. Intolerant of his father’s laxity in behaviour, he leaves the household and takes up a room on rent in Ekdal’s house. The alienated son and the father meet and Werle makes his confession that he intends “to open Hjalmar Ekdal’s eyes.” So he takes it upon himself to divulge the truth of his past to Hjalmar. He takes Hjalmar for a walk just after his mind has been fixed upon the father, and after Hjalmar comes back from the walk the seeds of the calamity are sown.

The meeting between the son and the father plays a very significant role in the unravelling of the story which then puts various elements of the whole narrative into place. In this conversation the heinous role Werle played in conspiring to oust old Ekdal from military service comes to light. With a shivering sensation the reader/spectator listens to them as the hopeless

condition of Gregers is driven home. Gregers evokes sympathy as it is made known that he too is a suffering soul who has been a victim of a 'guilty conscience' (as he tells his father). The cynical Relling terms his condition "a severe case of inflamed integrity". [p.46, Act III] This vain sense of irresponsibility and self-image in Hjalmar makes him undertake the mission of his life too seriously. As he instigates/induces Hjalmar to explore past relationships and thereby confront truth, in the same manner he tries to sort out the complications with Hedvig. Unsettled and confused over her father's strange behaviour towards her, she readily agrees to compensate by sacrificing her wil duck or even sacrificing herself which is always hinted at by Gregers in her conversation with the dejected Hedvig who is seeking ways to please her father and restore love between them.

Gregers and his deliberate or wilful hints of malice towards all the persons in the play need not be read as a study of deliberate diabolism. At moments in the play, there is revealed an uncanny awe about him. More than once he reflects upon and refers to his position as a number thirteen, a subtle association with a diabolic element in the universe. It is as if Gregers, without his conscious knowledge has to bear the burden and pain of someone who is destined to probe, poke and find completeness in conducting duties as a loyal citizen of God.

There is immense scope to study his character from the psychological point of view. His betrayed and lonely state aggravated by the trivialities and irresponsible acts of his father have to be compensated for; he has to purge his guilty conscience through his sermons, and lessons of life and thought to the people.

SAQ

Is Gregers a character full of inner contradictions? Or does he stand for unmitigated evil ? (50 + 50 words)

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Relling

As against Gregers' idealism, Dr. Relling's pragmatism provides a contrast. In some ways he is an echo of Dr. Rank of *Doll's House*, in his conversation and his loyalty to the Ekdal family. Practical, observant, responsible and forthright, Relling seems to stand as a bulwark against the stormy assaults on the household. He defends the Ekdal household and has great concern for everybody's welfare. He is a contrast to Gregers who, on more occasions than one, feels at daggers drawn with him. Apathy and criticism seem to rise instantaneously between them. But he has genuine concern for Gina, Hjalmar, and Hedvig. He loves them truly. His relationship with Mrs. Sorby is revealed in Act IV when she happens to come to Ekdal's house to say goodbye to Gina before setting off with Werle as his wife.

Hjalmar

Ibsen's views, like all great dramatists, seem to be unequivocally clear, transparent, and unbiased. Hjalmar's character is very deftly portrayed. He is shown to be a simple, complacent, happy-go-lucky fellow, now desiring nothing else other than happiness. The garrulous streak in him softens his stand and makes him vulnerable before Gregers' deliberate agenda of disclosing truth to him. As Gregers advises him to confront truth, he probes into his wife's past and turns up dirt and mistrust. His worry grows and delivers him to painful conflict in his heart that has been betrayed by his unfaithful wife who concealed from him her relationship with Werle. The question of Hedvig too is tackled in the most callous manner.

But along with this revelation of truth/acceptance of truth, he embraces unrest, tumultuous heart and suffering. He says, "I have lived through the bitterest hour of my life." (Act IV, p.51) But Ibsen portrays a sense of helplessness in the whole process. He suffers but observes with wonder that it is not he but Werle, who had hurt the Ekdals, was going to have a true marriage achieved between himself and Mrs. Sorby. That is so because there is no deception between the husband and wife. Both of them by confiding and disclosing past acts to each other have attained stability and equilibrium in their life. Their marriage, according to him, is one "built on full confidence, built on complete and unconditional frankness on both sides." They have achieved such a state because they sweep nothing under the carpet, nothing is hushed up between them". (Act IV, p.56) It seems to be

assertively endorsed by Ibsen who believes in this kind of “mutual forgiveness of sin”.

SAQ

Hjalmar is obviously not the familiar ‘tragic hero’. How should we label him ? Does Ibsen, by showing tragedy as the fallout of a concatenation of circumstances, revise the genre itself ? (40 + 80 words)

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He feels the sense of justice being offended by such imbalances. In these dialogues Hjalmar seems to become the true spokesperson for Ibsen who believes in “the dark side of existence”, and who portrays on many occasions ‘Nemesis’, that mysterious and inexorable power which possesses control over life and deeds.

The way Hjalmar’s character is drawn ensures a complex response to his tragic situation but also enters comic responses to situations/events. The ingenuity of a heart, affected by harsh, difficult revelations or truth can be comprehended by all, but the manner in which Hjalmar fuses the trivial with the serious makes the situation comic. For example, the heart-touching shock with which he leaves the house is apparently weakened over the days he spends outside without the cosy comfort of home. So at moments his resistance to Gina falls apart and he practically focuses on Hedvig as the butt of his animosity. The cruelty he showers upon her is most irrational and obstinate that a parent could exhibit and for the final catastrophe he has to bear a major portion and responsibility. With obstinate callousness he resists the loving heart of Hedvig and the poor child, out of compassion chooses the immature version of Gregers who, like Hjalmar, presents an image of impracticality and restlessness.

Compared to the men-folk, Gina and Mrs.Sorby are presented in a more sober and reasoned light by Ibsen.

Werle

Old Werle's role is not overtly shown, it is a little diagonally put – he is the man of the past. His role could have been ended then and there but the ghost of the past is invoked by Gregers – his compulsive involvement and intervention in the present home of Hjalmar, Gina and Hedvig seems to be out of place, unnecessary but compulsive instinct to do something for the sake of truth works out as the propeller.

Werle is not innocent, he is shown to be involved in incidences and eventualities; his relationship with Gina before her marriage with Hjalmar is overtly hinted at and it was he who actually saw to it that the marriage took place. Without following any clear logic, deductions are made and Ibsen resorts to enough individual hints to suggest the ambivalence and the lack of clarity in that matter. Hedvig's affliction of the eye is a pointer to Werle's disease of moral blindness, of declining vision. Ibsen creates a sufficient amount of suspicion for the confusion and loss of peace in Hjalmar's home over the past affair of Gina.

Gina

The characterization of Gina appears to be Ibsen's concern with the foil for the character of Hjalmar. Hjalmar's petty foibles are clarified through the practical sobriety displayed by Gina. Her commitment to her accepted role of providing for the family's living necessities does not conflict with her past difficulties of being Werle's prey. Ibsen does not seem to condemn or moralize on a woman's sexuality – something that totally destroys Hjalmar sense of moral balance. Gina is shown to be forthright in her confession of the past; she accepts even Hjalmar's condemnation of her surrender to the advances of Werle. But even she fails to anticipate the final destruction of Hedvig. Her moral failing, perhaps, is that she is not equipped with the psychological insight that would have revealed Gregers' inner motive to her. In that sense, she is too complacent regarding her present home. She is a contrast, on this point, to Relling who often seems to anticipate Gregers' jaundiced views. It would seem, in this play, that Ibsen has put behind him the question of the 'New Woman' to explore, in its stead, the implications of what a new emancipation might bring for other members of the family who must adjust to a new social equation.

Hedvig

We first see Hedvig in Act Two, at first with Gina, her mother. The Act opens with a homely scene showing mother and daughter at home, in a contrast to what has just been shown to us—the materialistic world of money, men, marital discord, broken relations and social apprehensions regarding sexual relationships. From what we have been given to know of Gina's probable attractions for old Werle and its disruption of the Werle household on that account, the dramatist shows her to be presently content in her relationship with Hjalmar.

Hedvig is swiftly allied with whatever is symbolised by the wild duck. As Gregers is shown the 'wild duck', a prized presence in the Ekdal household, Hedvig, the most precious member of the circle claims, contesting her grandfather—"My wild duck. Because it belongs to me." How far this symbolic identification can be taken is to be seen against what old Ekdal remembers about this kind of a wild duck: "Always do that, wild duck. Stick at the bottom. Deep as they can get, my dear fellow. Bite hold of the weeds and the tangle – and all the rotten stuff down there." The wild duck represents something of the untamed, undomesticated and therefore, the imaginative. It is rare, and innocent. In these terms, Hedvig is similar. But here the identification ends. Hedvig does not carry the same ethical values that the wild duck seems to symbolise in holding fast to the tangle of rotten weeds at the bottom.

The child's perspective is always a corrective to the normal view of things in the adult world. We can enquire what the child-artist in *The Wild Duck* would require in terms of stage-craft. In this play the tragedy is the loss of innocence that Hedvig's final shooting stands for. The last scene in which Relling confronts Gregers is meant as an underlined statement of Hjalmar's moral blindness as much as of Gregers' who persists with his own line of convictions. Perhaps the most tragic part of Hedvig's death is that it brings about no change in the two men who led her to her oblivion.

3.6 SYMBOLISM

In *The Wild Duck* the symbol of the wild duck evokes a variety of associations. As a potent symbol it brings to the fore the elusive presence of innocence, naivety and also purity of thought. The bird in itself may elude

concrete substantiality as it hardly appears as an object in our vision. When contextualised, however, it is inseparable from Hedvig’s harmless curiosity regarding life’s diversely manifested contents and conflicts. Through the symbol of the bird Ibsen seems to introduce the notion of the ‘ideal’ which is the life-force for the people.

For Hjalmar, the bird prevails in a completely different reality – whether it represents the illusory spectacle of the ideal which contributes glamour and intensity of emotion to living but which again is sustained or retained along with the conflicting principles at the level of judgment.

SAQ

What does the wild duck mean to Gregers? (50 words)

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The Tragedy of Innocence? – Hedvig compared with Cordelia

The tragic predicament of Hedvig is identical to Ophelia’s naivety or even Cordelia’s incorruptible forthrightness. In the case of Cordelia in *King Lear*, the egocentricity of the old king acts as a stumbling block or a hindrance to the mutual rapport and correspondence between the aged father and his fond daughter. Cordelia’s unexplained obstinacy plays a pivotal role in the redirecting of Lear’s filial emotion which then begins to flow away from her. Because Cordelia’s exclusively private intimate nature prevents her from showcasing emotions in public, it becomes her fatal blunder that destroys all her hopes of happiness. But here in Ibsen’s play Hedvig’s vulnerability springs from her innocence and age. Unable to comprehend the source of and to endure the complexity of adult behaviour, she suffers from the pain of confused emotion. Rebuffed by the callousness of Hjalmar and not finding the necessary solace in Gina, the poor child Hedvig takes the fatal decision of ending her life. In her suicide too the tinge of pathos is inextricable from its double associations with futile tragedy since it is not, for her, an attempt to destroy or to end her life on a voluntary impulse; rather, it is an act of sacrifice undertaken in order to achieve the equilibrium of fulfilling the lack of love and care on her father’s part.

Hedvig is also the scapegoat sacrificed in Greger's vacillating quest for self-identity. Hjalmar's extreme possessiveness regarding the child's love not only weakens his resolve but also makes him irrational. The vagueness of emotion, paired with a sense of self-abuse and insecurity, make him doubly resisting and oblivious of his parental responsibility. Ibsen's mature vision not only here but in other plays also, tends to reaffirm a certain human limitation on the part of adults. The adults, in a pathetic failure to sustain a maturity compatible with age, fail to meet the demands of the situations and instead of providing refuge for children they, in their time, tend to seek from the children a mature vision and affirmation of their deeds. Experience matures the child but sadly, the father remains the novice as always. Much is lost in the process.

Ibsen's capacity to create suggestion beyond the realistic representation, and bourgeois naturalism, turned him into a symbolist who touched the created space or object, and the characters or personae, with multi-dimensional attributes. This characteristic of Ibsen's stagecraft prompted Virginia Woolf to remark – "A room is to him a room, a writing table a writing table, and a wastepaper basket, a wastepaper basket. At the same time, the paraphernalia of reality have at certain times to become the veil through which we see infinity."

We are led through the oeuvre of realism to a different plane of 'reality' – symbolic or even psychological reality. Of all those noted critics who spared Ibsen the evaluation of a stereotyped mimetic verisimilitude, James Joyce recognised in Ibsen's drama a "soul-crisis" or what he called a "life in life", epiphany, a momentous revelatory truth arising out of a dialectical conflict. The modernist criticism of Ibsen's plays gives us a vision to pierce the bourgeois realism of solid substance with, and hands to us the key with which to gain access to the unspoken or the hidden.

The play has often been termed "a superb example of the tragicomic genre in the modern realist style". The realistic and domestic tone of the play also foreshadows what is overtly symbolical in the play. The play can be read as a story with visual and verbal imagery from Christ and Christianity. But the greatness of the play does not undermine or compromise or even inflate the Christian narrative. It still remains in simple interpretation, a narrative of a domestic scene, interspersed with the consequences of a telling past which actually precedes devastation.

Check Your Progress

1. Examine the view that *The Wild Duck* is concerned with the self-delusions of both Hjalmar and Gregers.
2. Explore the symbolism of the wild duck showing how its positive connotations are offset by its negative ones.
3. Explain the association of desire with the 'attic' in *The Wild Duck* and show that the extinction of the one is the extinction of the other.
4. Evaluate those aspects of *The Wild Duck* that align it with the movement of 'modernism' in Europe in the late nineteenth century.

3.7 SUMMING UP

You have read above quite an extensive commentary on Ibsen's play, *The Wild Duck*. You should now be able to understand the play from various points of view and explain those aspects which have been given importance in our discussion. However, you should also be able to find out more about those subtle ideas present in the play to which we have not been able to give much attention. So far, at least, you would have understood why the play is a 'modern' tragedy and how Ibsen works out his themes. Your understanding of the play also should be clear as far as the characters and themes are concerned. But no discussion can stop at just these levels only. Your reading thus should grow on from here to explore new ideas.

3.8 REFERENCES & SUGGESTED READINGS

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Block 3

Italian Drama

Block Introduction

This block, entitled *Italian Drama*, brings to you one of the seminal playwrights of the European world in the first half of the twentieth century – Luigi Pirandello. It is hoped that, as part of the course on Modern European dramatic works, this block will allow you to make an entry into the extremely vibrant and happening realm of Modern European drama.

You have to be aware of the fact that it is always very difficult to define what is ‘modern’ in Modern Drama. The movements in art and literature had a major share in the developments of various ideas and movements surrounding Modern drama. There had been political and philosophical interventions too. As result there had been experimentations at various thematic, intellectual, theatrical, structural levels at different parts in Europe. In Norway, Ibsen was at pains to use the stage as a space of photographic reality; whereas in Germany Brecht tried to use the theatrical stage as a space for the play between what is real and what is represented. At another pole, we find playwrights like Beckett, Ionesco, Pinter being influenced by existentialist philosophy and absurdity.

The text that you are going to encounter, *Six Characters in Search of an Author*, was first performed in 1921 at the Teatro Valle in Rome, not to an encouraging reception. What the audience shouted as “Manicomio!” (“Madhouse!”) had to be performed in the next few editions in 1925 with a forward by Pirandello clarifying the structure and ideas contained in the play. Pirandello, being part of a movement called theatricalism or anti-illusionism, rejected realist drama and believed that realism could not depict the inner life of human beings. Instead, he emphasised on the dreamlike, the expressive, and the symbolic.

Six Characters in Search of an Author is the tale of the fate of a group of characters who are left unrealized by their author. The characters desperately want to come to life, and interrupt the rehearsal of another play (by Pirandello himself) and request the director and cast to enact their story. Pirandello composed two more plays based on the theme of theatricality, called *Each*

His Own Way (1924) and *Tonight We Improvise* (1930), and later on he grouped these three plays as trilogy of ‘the theatre in the theatre’. Through the deeply self-referential or meta-theatrical works, this trilogy worked upon the relations between all aspects of a theatrical performance – the director, actors, characters, spectators, critics, spectacles - and tried to explore every possible conflict. It will be novel experience to you read this play as a meta-text.

This block is divided between two units; the first unit will provide you with a brief history of Italian drama with an overview of the important movements and milestones. At the same time, it will try to contextualize Pirandello and his *Six Characters in Search of an Author* in the history of Italian drama as well as Modern European drama at large. The second unit deals with the play. It is hoped that the reading of the block will encourage you to explore the field of Modern European drama with the enthusiasm that goes beyond the purpose of examination.

This block contains the following units:

Unit 1 Italian Drama

Unit 2 Luigi Pirandello

Unit 1

Italian Drama

Contents:

- 1.1 Objectives
- 1.2 Introduction
- 1.3 A Backward Glance
- 1.4 Some Important Milestones
- 1.5 Situating Modern Italian Drama
- 1.6 Theatre & Performance
- 1.7 Summing up

1.1 OBJECTIVES

This unit is intended to help you to connect the play given to you for study, Pirandello's *Six Characters in Search of An Author*, with its background of 'race, moment, and milieu' (Taine). After working through this unit you should be able to

- *evaluate* the play itself in terms of its author's national background
- *explain* those aspects of the play which set it apart from English texts
- *develop* your own critical analysis of Pirandello's work

1.2 INTRODUCTION

Probably the first important fact that you should remember while reading this unit is that you should learn as much of the Italian background of *Six Characters* as necessary for a clear understanding of the text. When a writer writes, the context – the probable reader, the social flux, the literary conventions of the community, the cultural trends – is all too present for the writing to turn away from it. Thus, Luigi Pirandello would have written for his times, - the Italian-European society with which he was familiar. Let us remember that in the 1920s, when Pirandello wrote his play, Italy itself was

facing its own share of political turmoil. Undoubtedly, then, some of this ever-present reality would have made its way into the texture of the play. Again, as students of English literature, it is clearly an obligation for you to make a distinction between an 'English' play and an 'Italian' work. It is with these points in mind that you must go through this unit.

Stop to Consider

The evolution of "Italy"

If we look back into European history, we find that literature emanating from Italy in the 14th century dominated Europe in the following centuries. This was the rise of the Renaissance and three names stand out: Dante, Petrarch, and Boccaccio. The 15th century saw the rise of a new conception of man due to the recovery of classical knowledge and also a new combination of political circumstances. Italian rulers competed with each other to patronise learning. Thus the cultural revival came to be centred around these centres of learning: Florence (under Lorenzo de' Medici), Naples (under the Aragonese kings), Milan (the Visconti, and then the Sforza families), and Rome.

If we look at the Romantic movement in Italy, we find it being limited to essentially only one place – Milan. (We should note that Romanticism in Italy was short-lived even though nineteenth-century travellers in Europe found Italian Romanticism attractive enough to make them visit the place.) The word, "Italy", was to be a "geographical expression" until 1861 when it became a "unitary and independent nation-state". From our Indian perspective, you should not find it difficult to envisage all the issues involved in these political facts. They lead us to the understanding of the roots of the cultural history that we today call "Italian". But looking at the case of Milan, we find that in the second decade of the 19th century, it was cosmopolitan and the centre of the publishing trade in Italy.

1.3 A BACKWARD GLANCE

Around the mid-15th century, Latin began to give way to Italian as the language of literature. If you recall, this was the period of humanism when the new conception of the human led to a rejection of earlier medieval ideals. (You can read about this in the first Block of Paper I which you have already studied in your Previous year.) One of the first grammars of Italian

came out in 1525, written by Pietro Bembo of Venice. There were some debates on Italian as a literary language around this time which continued into the next century. Another point of interest is that Italy as a place with its own history was the focus in *Storia d'Italia* (1537-40) by Francesco Guicciardini, the historian, who first wrote this Italian national history set within the larger context of Europe.

The first Italian tragedy, written in the vernacular, was *Sofonisba* (1514-15), by Gian Giorgio Trissino, based on Greek models but it was Giambattista Giraldi (Cinzio) who adopted Seneca as a model and wrote nine tragedies and tragicomedies. He was an important influence on European drama, especially on Elizabethan English drama.

The Italian comedies of the sixteenth century may be looked upon as the beginning of modern European drama. These comedies were based on Latin models but they had greater artistic value and can be regarded as presenting a closer picture of contemporary life. There were comedies by Ariosto and Machiavelli, by Cardinal Bernardo Dovizi da Bibbiena, Pietro Aretino, as also by Giordano Bruno, the famous Italian philosopher. In our times, it is now considered that Angelo Beolco (“Il Ruzzante”) was the most powerful dramatist of the sixteenth century.

The seventeenth century in Italian drama is to be associated with the rise of the music drama and the opera. A culture of the popular and of entertainment began to pervade the opera houses such that the propriety of stage conduct came to be disrupted particularly towards the end of the century. It was against such a direction of “bad taste” that the Accademia dell’Arcadia was founded in Rome in 1690. This institution had many followers of Descartes who upheld rational principles and classical norms. The reform of the tragic theatre may be said to have been signalled by Francesco Scipione Maffei’s tragedy, *Merope* of 1713. The next important name to come to light is that of Vittorio Alfieri who wrote *Saul* in 1782. Pietro Metastasio and Paolo Rolli wrote *melodrammi* or librettos set to music, sometimes performed as plays in their own right. Carlo Goldoni’s (1701-1793) name is of importance from the point of view of the fact that – “Throughout the 17th century the commedia dell’arte – a colourful pantomime of improvisation, singing, mime, and acrobatics, often performed by actors of great virtuosity – had gradually replaced regular comedy, but by the early 18th century it

had degenerated into mere buffoonery and obscenity with fixed characters and mannerisms. The dialogue was mostly improvised, and the plot – a complicated series of stage directions, known as the scenario – dealt mainly with forced marriages, star-crossed lovers, and the intrigues of servants and masters. Goldoni succeeded in replacing this traditional type of theatre with written works whose wit and vigour are especially evident when the Venetian scene is portrayed in a refined form of the local dialect.”

The 19th century is remembered in Italy in terms of the “Risorgimento” or ‘national revival as the struggled was for the unification and the freedom of the nation from foreign domination. Many eminent writers were involved in this political ferment and the writings that emerged from this period are now ranged among other valuable contributions to the national heritage. There were many disputes engaging most Italians regarding language, literature and politics. In this time, the name of Ugo Foscolo stands out

In the early nineteenth-century a heated debate ensued, in Milan, on behalf of Romanticism. A Romantic periodical, *Il Conciliatore*, was published with many important contributors on its rolls. In the post-Unification period we hear of Alessandro Manzoni, the chief exponent of Italian Romanticism who wrote a novel *I promessi sposi* (*The Betrothed*) which caught the imagination of the public and ultimately helped to solve the language problem. His genius, however, found its finest expression in his poems. Giacomo Leopardi stands out as the greatest name of the age by virtue of his poetry as well as his philological and philosophical writings, *Operette morali*.

SAQ

Under which foreign power did Italy suffer domination? (20 words)

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Italian Romanticism combined with the heavily patriotic spirit of the Risorgimento. Of the times of this nationalist struggle a name which comes to mind is that of Giosuè Carducci although he was opposed to Romanticism. He was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature for 1906. Francesco De

Sanctis was connected politically with the Risorgimento but he is remembered chiefly for his critical writings.

Risorgimento writing thus came to be characterised by two simultaneous strains: patriotism and sentimental romanticism. This led to a reaction – more seriously from the *scapigliati* (or, the “libertines” or “bohemians”) and the movement of *verismo*.

1.4 SOME IMPORTANT MILESTONES

The reaction to conventional Romanticism in Italy in the form of *verismo* – “realism” — was first theoretically expounded by Luigi Capuana in 1872. Its theoretical foundations tied up with determinism and positivism, and drew inspiration from the French Naturalist writers. This movement turned to empirical data or observable phenomena, not to noble sermonizing. Giovanni Verga stands as the best-known name among *verismo* writers. His short story of 1880, “Gramigna’s Lover” (“L’amante di Gramigna”) contains in its preamble his theory of the relations of art with reality.

Stop to Consider

Theatre & Romanticism

Referring to the period of Romanticism in Italy, the focal point was provided by Milan.

Milan had a “strong theatrical culture, centred on the Teatro all Scala. Theatre, in fact, became the main battleground of the polemic between Romantics and anti-Romantics in Milan.” The periodical, *Il Conciliatore*, continuing on the lines of its predecessor *Il Caffè*, and edited by Silvio Pellico, provided the forum for the Romantic assault on classical theatre. As we gather, the “theatre – rather than the novel, still as yet relatively unestablished in Italy – continued to be seen as the social medium par excellence, the place where a common, ‘popular’, cultural identity might be forged. There was a distinct progression in the drama theory expounded in the thirteen months of *Il Conciliatore*’s existence. Initially it took the form of a straight attack on the convention of the theatrical unities (whereby the action of a drama must be restricted to twenty-four hours, one place and a single ‘action’) on the grounds of the arbitrariness of the rule and more importantly the distortions

(to factual or psychological truth) which the rule forced the poet to make of his material.”

We can observe here that this is a dispute familiar to us from Samuel Johnson’s *Preface to Shakespeare* (1765). The most admired of the Italian dramatists who had upheld the adherence to such rules – Vittorio Alfieri – was also the focus of the Romantics’ esteem. However, on the grounds provided by the example of Shakespeare, whose drama had shown the expediency of going beyond the rules to achieving the value of content rather than of form, the argument (backed by Romanticism) came forth that the national history of the Italian people as a whole and the core of the national consciousness should be the matter of a national theatre. It is at this point that we see the entry of Alessandro Manzoni into the literary dispute as the leading figure of the Romantic school in Milan.

The beginning of the 20th century saw a new unified Italy struggling to come into its own as a modern state. Gabriele D’Annunzio is easily named as the figure standing tall in these years – “It was in this prosaic and pragmatic atmosphere that the middle classes - bored with the unheroic and positivist spirit of former decades - began to feel the need for a new myth. Thus it is easy to understand how imaginations across the political spectrum came to be fired by the extravagant personality of Gabriele D’Annunzio - man of action, nationalist, literary virtuoso, and (not least) exhibitionist – whose life and art seemed to be a blend of Jacob Burckhardt’s “complete man” and the superman of Friedrich Nietzsche.”

In intellectual terms, the name of Benedetto Croce is important in this period for the modern orientation that he gave to contemporary thought. The monthly journal, *Le Critica* (1903-44), carried many of his works even through the days of Fascism despite his implicit condemnation of this ideology. *Le Critica* continued, through the darkest days of Fascism, to inspire many intellectuals.

An interesting feature of the post-Unification period is the need that Italians generally felt, to travel to different parts of the new country, in order to familiarize themselves with those regions and places to which they had never travelled before owing to poor infrastructural support in terms of expenses, etc.. Inevitably a new category of writing developed spurred indirectly by a magazine culture and photography.

The Unification of Italy which took place in 1861 inevitably brought up the question of a national language bound up with the issue of regional dialects barring Tuscany and some sections of Roman society. The question of literacy was also brought to the fore since, despite figures varying sharply over different regions; the general populace was largely illiterate. We may note with some surprise that the first king of Italy was not conversant with Italian while French was the lingua franca for the first government that met in Turin. With Unification, Italy gained the chance to modernize itself at par with the rest of Europe. Industrialization, in the history of Italy, comes later than what we see in the history of France and England, and then it emerged around Lombardy and Milan.

From our perspective, we may also attend to the fact that the Unification had a pronounced impact on some cities like Milan, Turin and Rome. This was due to this new impetus to modernization through the expansion of the railways, and the pattern of urbanization based on demolition and building and the growth of official culture. We can differentiate this history of modernizing from what we have seen elsewhere, in France and England. As historians tell us, Italy did not experience “the hegemonic pull of a single city.” We should note that at Unification Italy had a comparatively large number of towns. Owing to such a situation, it was not surprising that within ten years of unification, the national capital relocated twice, from Turin to Florence, and then to Rome.

Stop to Consider

The scapigliatura

Following Unification, Milan became the centre for the renewal of Italian culture. There was a felt need to shake off provincialism, and to adapt to the new realities of a unified Italy combined with a nostalgic glance at rural life and the life of the family and community. It was in the spirit of these times that the literary movement, the *Scapigliatura*, came into its own. The members of the movement believed in breaking with the creeds of the past and with the restrictions of past generations. They tended also to break the status quo simultaneously going beyond Italian literary culture to figures abroad. Thus we have the turn to the names of Edgar Allan Poe, Mary Shelley, Camill Hoffman, and Théophile Gautier, besides Charles Dickens, Eugène Sue, Heinrich Heine and Baudelaire.

Before the first great war of 1914, literary life centred on famous reviews: *Leonardo*, *Hermes*, *La Voce*, and *Lacerba*, edited and founded by small groups. Two main literary movements are visible at this time, *crepuscolarismo* and *futurismo*. The first of these “favoured a colloquial style to express memories of sweet things past” while the second expressed “loathing of traditional art and demanding complete freedom of expression . . . [was led by] Filippo Tommaso Marinetti, editor of *Poesia*, a fashionable cosmopolitan review.” Both these movements looked beyond Italy to “a complex European tradition of disillusionment and revolt, the former inheriting the sophisticated pessimism of French and Flemish “decadents”, the latter taking part in an episode in the history of western European avant-garde developed from the French poets Stéphane Mallarmé and Guillaume Apollinaire to the Cubist, Surrealist, and Dada movements. Both shared a feeling of revulsion against D’Annunzian flamboyance and rhetoric, from which they attempted to free themselves”. You might find it equally interesting to know that an anti-D’Annunzian dislike was also felt by Pirandello.

It is in the context of this post-World War I period that we begin to see the pre-eminence of Luigi Pirandello. The Fascist dictator, Benito Mussolini, who was prime minister from 1922-43, led the country through a Fascist period during which literary creativity came to be stifled although not completely snuffing it out.

SAQ

Which writers in France and England do you identify with Realism? (60 words)

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1.5 SITUATING MODERN ITALIAN DRAMA

Pirandello’s name stands for the modernity of Italian drama. He founded the Teatro d’Arte in 1924 with financial support from the Fascist Party. This theatre company survived until 1928 and was involved in some

experimentation with plays. It adopted radically new methods of stage-lighting and new modes of scene-setting. Although Pirandello is better known to the non-Italian audience as a playwright, he saw and distinguished himself as a novelist, especially with *Il fu Mattia Pascal* (*The Late Mattia Pascal*), which is seen as one of the great European modernist novels. In the preface to *Six Characters* Pirandello described himself as one of those “writers who are more properly philosophical” yet it was also the case that the philosopher and critic Benedetto Croce (1866 – 1952) expressed severe condemnation of the playwright.

The critics, Malcolm Bradbury and James McFarlane, writing on ‘The Name and Nature of Modernism’ offer a close description of what modernism expresses – a high degree of experimentation. They point out that the modernist artist (we have to include Pirandello within this set) is always self-consciously engaged in searching out a “style and a typology”. In other words such an artist explores what it means to be ‘modern’. So, as our critics point out, “Modernism is less a style than a search for a style in a highly individualistic sense; and indeed the style of one work is no guarantee for the next.” (p.29) For us, this can also mean that we may not find affinities of one modern work with another. Reading further through the page named above, our critics stress this element of innovation as a hallmark of the modernist: “The qualities which we associate with painters like Matisse, Picasso and Braque, with musicians like Stravinsky and Schoenberg, novelists like Henry James, Mann, Conrad, Proust, Svevo, Joyce, Gide, Kafka, Musil, Hesse and Faulkner, poets like Mallarmè, Valéry, Eliot, Pound, Rilke, Lorca, Apollinaire, Breton and Stevens, with dramatists like Strindberg, Pirandello and Wedekind, are indeed their remarkably high degree of self-signature, their quality of sustaining each work with a structure appropriate only to that work. The condition for the style of the work is a presumed absence of style for the age; and each work is a once-and-for-all creation, substituting less for its referential than its autotelic constituents, the order and rhythm made for itself and submerged by itself. Modernism in this sense is indeed an international tendency, and we can predicate origins and causes for it and reflect on its significance. But it is hard to convert it into a universal style or tradition, despite the fact that its environment is not simply the work of individuals but of broader movements and tendencies.” You can see from this passage (which I have quoted at length) that even

while we read Pirandello's play, *Six Characters*, as a 'modern' play and an Italian one, we also have to relate it to the larger European context of Modernism and to see both 'international' elements in it as well as strictly 'Pirandellian' ones.

We should also refer here to what the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* (drama in the modern movement and Pirandello's significance) summarizes us for us:

"Modern European acting began with the Italian commedia dell'arte, the earliest mention of which is in 1545. Until then, the actor was limited to illustrating the text by means of a narrow scheme of gesture and rhetorical speech. But in the commedia dell'arte the actor used only an outline, a plot; he improvised the play, giving free rein to the actor's art, developing his own characters or masks that he repeated in each play. Each character became an extension of the actor's own personality but elastic enough to respond to innumerable dramatic situations; thus, actors began to develop the distinctive stage character of the theatre, whereas previously the emphasis had been on its literary aspects. Since this demanded high skill, the actors joined into companies - in which, incidentally, women began to take major roles for the first time, female characters having traditionally been portrayed by men. The actors became professional, and, by doing so, they stimulated the development of modern drama."

SAQ

In what way does *Six Characters* reflect the post-war mood of the 1920s? (80 words)

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1.6 THEATRE & PERFORMANCE

Turning over the inner, less visible layers of theatre provides the basis of modernist drama. You should see the progression of modern drama in tune

with its endeavour to embrace greater complexities than would have been possible by a simple application of set rules. While traditional criteria often worked well in the achievement of the dramatic illusion, - the 'reality' on the stage – dramatists like Ibsen moved beyond the symmetry of enactment to the surrounding realities of the age. This gives rise to the oft-repeated remark that the “most important event in the history of modern drama . . . was Ibsen’s abandonment of verse after *Peer Gynt* in order to write prose plays about contemporary problems.” (John Fletcher and James McFarlane).

Peer Gynt comes in the year of Pirandello’s birth and half-a-dozen years after the unification of Italy. Ibsen’s *Ghosts*, in 1881, set him up as the properly European dramatist. There were reasons for this – his self-exile from Norway for twenty-seven years had led him all over Europe as a sensitive observer of many of its momentous events: “the Dano-Prussian and Franco-Prussian wars, the Paris Commune, the growing power of Germany, the unification of Italy, the spread of industrialization, the proliferation of capitalism, the emergence of the European political left-wing, the growth of communications, the changing standards of morals, the new preoccupation with the ways of the unconscious mind.”

If we observe closely what modern drama tries to achieve, in keeping with the exploration of the more complex, subtle dimensions of theatre, we can appreciate how Pirandello ventures forth with this kind of enterprise in mind. Fletcher and McFarlane emphasise both the divergent tendencies of modern drama as well as its exploratory aesthetics:

“With some exaggeration, one might label Modernist dramaturgy ‘the aesthetics of silence’. Never before had the fragmentary, the low-key, the inarticulate, even the incoherent and the frankly non-verbal tendencies of theatrical intercourse been so audaciously developed.”

This (above) point should help us to place Pirandello within the modernist frame. Our critics here name this “meta-theatre”. To understand this, we should see that the modernist playwright was making the attempt to break with the tendency of traditional drama to achieve a high degree of ‘illusion’ on the stage. Where dramaturgy earlier had depended on the power of words to enable this illusion-supporting tendency, modernist drama breaks off from the effort to hold up in place a ‘reflection’ of the world off the

stage. You should connect this to what the critics (Fletcher and McFarlane) offer as a defining characteristic of modern drama: “Within this characteristically Modernist concept of meta-theatre, the role of the ‘life is a dream’ motif is of unifying importance.” The term, ‘meta-theatre’, may be of use in describing what dramatists in the modern era tried to do.

By tracing out the dominant concerns of modern drama, we can come to the essence of what the dramatists of Europe in the modern era were trying to do. Compare what we have outlined above with what Pirandello himself says in “Spoken Action”:

“The greatest difficulty an author has to overcome is fusing the subjective individuality of a character with his function in the plot or finding the word which expresses the whole of a character’s being while answering the needs of an immediate stage situation.”

You should appreciate here the fact that Pirandello is referring to the problem of setting ideas in the context of contemporary dramaturgy.

It may be practically useless to narrate the history of modern drama, as also Italian drama, without getting into the details of what was required on the stage, for enactment. As a dramatist, Pirandello was sensitive to the limitations of established conventions in theatre both in Italy and in Europe at large.

1.7 SUMMING UP

In this unit you will have received a very brief summary of Italian literary history. This should help you in framing the drama created by Pirandello. While the English translation would have persuaded you to align this drama with other European literary works, the awareness of an Italian heritage will reveal to you facets of the play not easily foregrounded in translation. So you should now be somewhat knowledgeable about the terms, *commedia dell’arte*, Italian Romanticism, Risorgimento, Unification, and so on. You would have seen also how an ‘Italian’ drama comes into existence – not just a Tuscan, or a Florentine, or a Milanese, one. Our perspective here has been that of setting the work within its cultural frame – Pirandello as both Italian and European. Perhaps this will help you to understand fully why he adopts the methods he finally does.

Unit 2

Luigi Pirandello

Contents:

- 2.1 Objectives
- 2.2 Introduction
- 2.3 Pirandello and His Works
- 2.4 The Historical and Theatrical Context
- 2.5 The Play on the Stage
- 2.6 Reading the Play – Major Themes
 - 2.6.1 Reality/Illusion
 - 2.6.2 Idea of the Author
 - 2.6.3 Use of Masks
 - 2.6.4 Violence
 - 2.6.5 Medium of the Theatre
 - 2.6.6 The Audience
 - 2.6.7 Idea of the Self / Existentialism
- 2.7 Critical Reception
- 2.8 Summing up
- 2.9 References and Suggested Readings

2.1 OBJECTIVES

This unit brings to you the additional knowledge that should help you to understand Luigi Pirandello's play and to help you with reading it in such a way that by the end of the lesson, you should be able to

- *explain* Pirandello's central concerns in the play
- *connect* *Six Characters* with the traditions of Western theatre
- *elaborate* clearly the different aspects of the play

2.2 INTRODUCTION

Six Characters is one of the most extraordinary plays of the 20th century. The play resists a complacent reading of it and frustrates any attempt at coherence of meaning. It is therefore a play which raises more questions and gives fewer answers and it reflects conflict and contradiction as it posits actor, director, critic, and characters as its characters. We shall discuss some issues regarding the play and try to investigate its problem areas. Go through the play and try to formulate your own reading of it, also familiarizing yourself with different strains of movements in drama, such as realism, naturalism, expressionism, symbolism, absurd, etc., and see how the play shares affinities with them.

It is interesting to note that the play has, at its core, another play which could well have been written in the Ibsenian mode. The narrated/enacted story of the six characters is a potential realistic drama of material and sibling relationships, breach of trust and an ensuing family tragedy. As you go on reading the play, you will begin to understand that the play is less about this tragic story of the characters and more about how this story could be authentically represented on stage. The problem of mimesis then, constitutes a central concern in the play. 'Father's' cynical view about the efficiency of theatre's mimetic project is distinct at many points in the play. The daughter, aggressively antagonistic towards the Father as she is, nevertheless shares similar views about theatrical mimesis.

Pirandello dramatizes the main concept of mimesis. The 'Reality' of the six characters' felt life is never external to them. Their perpetual intervention in the actor's rehearsal of the episode at Madame Pace's parlor signifies that imitation of reality is bound to be imitation of imitation.

At last, what the play questions is the idea of 'reality' itself as the six characters are not 'real' in the way that actors are real. But you can notice how our initial disbelief at their 'real' existence gradually subsides when their conflictual assessment of certain traumatic events of their life attains a substantial vigour. In fact, this happens right from the entry of the six characters on the stage.

Stop to Consider

Think about the play's performance on the stage. It demands naturalistic acting in the Stanislavskian mode. For instance, the conflict between Father and Stepdaughter has a tremendous dramatic force and the actors are moved by their conflicts. What may be the possible consequence in terms of dramatic effect and meaning, if the Brechtian mode of acting is adopted?

David Magarshack on "Stanislavsky" –

"Truth on the stage, however, must be not only realistic, but also artistic. The actor,.....must remember that it is impossible to create artistic truth all at once, but that it is created in the course of the whole process of the gestation and growth of his part. In concentrating on the main inner features of his part, investing them with a correspondingly beautiful stage form and expression, and getting rid of anything that is superfluous, the actor, guided by his subconscious, his artistic flair, his talent, sensibility and taste, makes his part poetic, beautiful and harmonious, comprehensible and simple, and ennobling and purifying to all those who watch him. All these qualities help the stage creation to be not only right and truthful, but also artistic.

The actor must . . . avoid everything that is not in his powers to express and is contrary to his nature, logic and common sense. For all that leads to distortion, violence, overacting and falsehood. The more frequently these appear on the stage, the worse for the actor's sense of truth, which becomes demoralized and perverted by untruth. . . .

Stanislavski points out that the germs of all the human vices and virtues are to be found in the actor himself, who must use his art and technique for the discovery in a natural way of all those germs of human passions and then develop them for any of his parts. The 'soul' of the character represented on the stage is in this way composed of the living human elements of the actor's own 'soul', of his own emotional memories, etc. What the actor must do first of all is to find the methods of extracting this emotional material from his own soul and, secondly, the methods of creating out of them endless combinations in the human souls of his parts..."

- *The Theory of the Modern Stage*, pp.251-55

2.3 PIRANDELLO AND HIS WORKS

Although predominantly a dramatist, Pirandello also wrote many short stories and novels and started his literary career as a poet. Born of a well-to-do family, his early life was much easier compared to his life after marriage. Familial trouble and personal unhappiness, however, proved no burden to his career as a writer. His most famous novel was *The Late Mattia Pascal* (*Il fu Mattia Pascal*, in Italian) which brought him a literary reputation.

Pirandello was an unhappy man and this fact was revealed in his autobiographical sketch. But unlike what happened in writers like Charles Lamb, writing for Pirandello was not a remedy or a site for imaginative compensation for private misery. Bitterness and self-deception, which dominated his experiential world, also loomed large in his creative world. (You must, however, note that we cannot do justice to his works if they are exhaustively read solely through his biography. Still, connections may be possibly traced between the man and his works.)

Pirandello started writing plays in the latter phase of his career, while the initial creative phase included his novels, short stories, poems, etc. His more creative period was between 1916 and 1925 during which time he founded his own theatre in Rome. His works have been translated into many languages. We have added some of this contextual information below.

His most creative period was between 1916 and 1925 during which time he found his own theatre in Rome. Later he became widely famous in the Americas, Europe and Japan and his works were translated into many languages.

Behind all Pirandello's works especially his plays, there lies a certain comic attitude that is manifested in his perception of the 'illusory' nature of the supposed by essential and profound event. Actions and events are portrayed but counterpoints are also suggested to question their authenticity. Therefore conflict is basic to Pirandello's theatre, not merely a dramatic tool. In fact, his whole vision of life itself is conflict-ridden.

Stop to Consider

How Pirandello figures in Italian literary history

Some of the details of the person should be known to you: Pirandello was born on June 28, 1867 and died on Dec. 10, 1936. His birthplace was in Sicily, Italy, while the place of his passing away was Rome. He wrote plays, novels, short-stories and was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1934. He is known for inventing the “theatre within the theatre” in *Six Characters* (1921) which made him an extremely important figure in modern drama. Pirandello studied in both Rome and in Germany, in Bonn. Early in his career, in the late nineteenth century, he published verse but his significant work was in the short story.

Pirandello’s preoccupation seemed to have lain with the problem of ‘realism’ and the the human personality’s capacity for change. The *verismo* (“realism”) of two Italian novelists of the nineteenth century, Luigi Capuana and Giovanni Verga, influenced Pirandello’s early narrative style. This influence can be seen in his early novels. It is his third novel, *Il fu Mattia Pascal* of 1904, that is considered his best. Pirandello shows his abiding interest in the psychology of his characters even in this novel. The influence of his readings in psychology can be seen in his long essay *L’umorismo*, or *On Humour* (1904), just as it is visible in his short stories. It is worth noting here that Pirandello’s interest in human psychology pre-dates his knowledge of Freudian psychology. Pirandello was of the idea that the subconscious part of the human psyche actually made up more of the person than what such a person really knows or believes he or she knows.

Pirandello wrote more than 50 plays; his first attempt at the theatre was in 1898, - *L’epilogo*. In 1917 came success with *Così è (se vi pare)* [translated as *Right You Are (If You Think You Are)*] and the succession of plays which brought him world-fame. The predominant theme of this play – the relativity of truth – anticipates the theme of his two great plays, *Six Characters* and *Enrico IV* (1922, *Henry IV*).

Six Characters helped to spread Pirandello’s name as it was produced in Paris in 1923 and cast its influence on French theatre. “Pirandellianism” cast its hues even onto the plays of dramatists like Jean Anouilh, Jean-Paul Sartre, Eugene Ionesco, Samuel Beckett, besides T.S.Eliot. The success of *Six Characters* led Pirandello to tour the world with his own theatre company, the Teatro d’Arte.

Behind all of Pirandello's works, especially his plays, there lies a certain comic attitude that is manifested in his perception of the 'illusory' nature of the supposedly essential and profound event. Actions and events are portrayed but counterpoints are also suggested to question their authenticity. Therefore, conflict is basic to Pirandello's theatre; it is not a mere dramatic tool. In fact, his whole vision of life finds conflict basic to it.

Yet, the comic in Pirandello does not imply easy laughter, attended as it is with some metaphysical/existential anguish. He explores in his plays the mystery of life and human personality. His characters act desperately in an absurd and chaotic world. Very often, and not without reason, his plays are termed enigmatic and cerebral.

SAQ

How far would you be prepared to consider Pirandello as 'Italianate' rather than modern and cosmopolitan? (70 words)

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2.4 THE HISTORICAL AND THEATRICAL CONTEXT

In the play, the 'Father' and the 'Stepdaughter' insist that the 'director' should take up their story and enact it by means of his actors. The director asks for the script when Father retorts: 'Here. in me. The drama is in us. The drama is us. And we need to act it out, the passion inside of us drives us to perform it.' Eventually, however, attempts are made to dramatize two problematic episodes of their lives. Such an understanding may seem queer to you. To 'enact' something on stage without a written text is never a common theatrical practice. Yet, even without a text, these episodes (one at Madame Pace's parlour, the other in the garden) ultimately become dramatically effective, and this is because of improvisation.

The roots of such a practice lie deep in the tradition of Italian theatre namely, the tradition of the *commedia dell' arte*.

Stop to Consider

Theatre provides us with the scope to sketch the lines of demarcation between performance on the stage, the cultural context of the actor/acting, the 'fixed' text of the play which the dramatist supplies to the theatre company or the director and actors. The reason we seem to apply the term, 'meta-theatre', with such ease and facility to Pirandello's *Six Characters* is probably to be attributed to the kind of play that it is.

In purely dramaturgical terms, we are surprisingly confronted with two sets of actors – one set belonging to the 'Comedy in the Making' (the 6 characters), and the other set of actors belonging to the company. We normally tend to conflate the two terms, actors and characters, and see the two as identical. Here, the dramatist invites us to see that there is a possible lack of fit here. As the Italian reviewer, Domenico Vittorini, points out we have a multiplicity of 'selves' through the dramatic technique adopted here. The meanings of words are dislodged by being passed through many levels of existence. It is with good reason that Bernard Shaw called *Six Characters* a most original play.

The *commedia dell'arte* is a theatre of improvisation, which originated in 16th century Italy. It professes the idea of a dramatic performance without falling back on a written text and through the improvisation of a scenario. What are 'scenarios'? These scenarios were from some plays written by eminent dramatists. Actors improvised from original plays and these plays therefore lost much of their original identity, but a new form and vigour could be achieved by way of such improvisation. There were certain troupes of *commedia dell'arte* who prospered in Italy until the mid-19th century.

The troupes of the *commedia dell'arte* always had some stock characters. For instance, there were the 'zannies' who embodied the comic spirit. Another stock character was 'magnifico'. 'Gratiano' was a gullible old crony of the 'Magnifico'. These characters were given specific names and they persisted howsoever the production and play varied. Masks were used and important actors could wear them. As for costumes, it is obvious that they served the purpose of rendering distinguishable the characters but these were never exotic and splendid, unlike in the Elizabethan theatre. Therefore, the performance of a company was an exercise in the interplay of actors because they improvised dialogues.

Though Italy was the place of origin for the *commedia dell'arte*, this form did not remain confined to Italy alone. Troupes often went abroad to stage their plays, to countries like England, Spain, Germany, and France. The imprint of this dramatic form was left behind in the places of enactment. This influence can even be seen in the works of playwrights like Shakespeare, John Chapman, Middleton, John Marston, Molière, and others.

Realism v. the Stock Character:

Stock characters are character types. They are a part of conventions of a particular literary genre. These types recurrently appear in the genre, the clowns in Shakespeare's plays for instance. In *commedia dell'arte*, interestingly, such a stock character in a particular troupe was given a name which did not change although the play varied. It could often happen that the actor who played such a role throughout his career was commonly known by the character's name. These actors, because they adhered to the type throughout his career, very soon acquired expertise as the scope for improvisation was immense. You should note here that in the tradition of the *commedia dell'arte* 'characters' were fixed roles and what was represented was done through the use of masks worn by the actors. No script was used, only scenarios (a sketch of the scene) within which the actors improvised their representations. The Italian playwright of the eighteenth century, Carlo Goldoni, made attempts to change this tradition by introducing character-based roles. But the attempt was not successful in persuading actors to abandon their masks for more 'characterization'.

Stock characters of the *commedia dell'arte*

A list of these stock characters includes Harlequin (Arlecchino, or a clown), Pantalone (whom Harlequin might serve), Brighella, Il Capitano, Colombina (female counterpart of Arlecchino), Il Dottore (the doctor), Innamorati (the lovers, usually the children of Pantalone or Dottore, never played in mask and often named 'Isabella' and 'Flavio'), Pantalone (the 'old miser'), Pedrolino (the faithful servant), Pulcinella (disfigured and pitiable, also sly, also called 'Punch'), Scaramuccia (roguish but a buffoon, braggart and coward, with a black velvet mask and black trousers, also called 'Scaramouche'), and Tartaglia (short-sighted and stuttering).

2.5 THE PLAY ON THE STAGE

There is an empty stage to start with. The theatre group enters the stage and starts rehearsing a play entitled, *The Game of the Rule* by Pirandello. After a short while, when the rehearsal is yet to gather momentum, a group of six characters appears on the stage. They include Father, Stepdaughter, Son, Mother, a boy and a girl. They explain that they are looking for an author and the director, finding the whole thing absurd turns aside with a dismissive gesture. The Father insists, nevertheless, on their search and seeks to convince him about the plausibility of their existence as characters. He further explains that the author who created them lost his will to integrate them into a work and what they now want is that the company put their incomplete play on stage. The director, if dismissive about them right from the start, begins to develop an interest in their story unwittingly.

The stepdaughter begins an elaboration saying that her poor father died two months ago and that she cannot stand her widowed mother's anguish for her legitimate son. She also indicates that something had taken place between her and her father. The director is now confused to see that the father is alive on stage yet she has called her mother a 'widow'. The stepdaughter explains that although the father was the legal husband, the woman had developed a relationship with a clerk at her husband's office. The husband, having come to know about it all, sends his wife off with the clerk. Driven by poverty after the death of her lover, the woman had shifted to the town and the stepdaughter started working as a prostitute at Madame Pace's shop. The moment that she is dying to relive through the theatre shows how she, as a prostitute, encounters her father as a client. As regards the son, the father sends his son to the country and had him brought up in care of a foster-mother. The father desired to see moral and intellectual health in his son, but got frustrated when after his wife's departure, he entered his father's home with a different moral/intellectual make up.

After the ominous encounter at Madame Pace's shop, the father brought the poor family back to his home, but life for the stepdaughter was never easy. She was contemptuously alienated by the son. She makes her family feel foreign to the household. However, the son also has his own predicament. As he had been separated from his mother right from the beginning, after his return home, he finds it difficult to accept the newly-arrived woman as his mother. And he cannot tolerate the stepdaughter claiming his father as her own.

SAQ

1. I have said that Pirandello plays are termed ‘enigmatic and cerebral’. You can assess the statement from your own reading of the play. If you find the statement valid, what may be the probable reasons behind the play being so - is it because of the use of conflict? Or is it inevitable because Pirandello uses ‘theatre’ as a game? (80 + 70 words)

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2. What makes for the ‘enigma’ in the play? What standards being applied here to call the play ‘cerebral’? (50 + 60 words)

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The director takes an interest in the story revealed through the characters’ conflicting assessments and the opinions of their traumatic past. He declares a tea break and then rehearsal of the scene at Madame Pace’s parlour begins. But right from the start, displaying their grievances and disappointment over the whole arrangement, including the stage-setting, and choice of actor/actress. Virtually, they start unwittingly usurping the position of the director. The father arranges certain stage-props to create a necessary ambience for Madame Pace to enter. The scene between Madame Pace and the Stepdaughter starts in inaudible voice, and the Director tells them to make themselves audible. Then suddenly the Mother, unable to stand the lady, rushes towards her and tears off her wig and this makes Madame Pace exit from the site of rehearsal.

They skip the scene with Madame Pace, and the Father and the Stepdaughter start enacting part of the scene between them at the parlour, without much interruption of others. But, when the lead man and woman start rehearsing the same scene, interruptions from the Father and the stepdaughter are almost constant. Again, their clash with the Director is inevitable, because whereas they are seeking authentic representation of

their lived life, the director is insisting on necessary modifications and adaptation for theatrical viability.

Rehearsal for the second scene, i.e., the scene at the pond begins. The scene necessitates the involvement of the Son but he refuses to co-operate. The Stepdaughter and the Father desperately assert his need. It leads to a confrontation between the Father and the Son, when the son brings him down with a blow. Finally, however, on the perpetual instance of the Director, he tells how the girl was drowned at the pond and the boy remained staring at her, without doing anything for her rescue. Then suddenly a gunshot is heard from behind the trees. It leads to a chaotic situation: confusion regarding whether the boy shoots himself in reality, or whether it is only a role being played out in the enacted drama, is never cleared.

Now, coming to the question of the character, you will see that all the characters in the play are not equally important, although not one of them is superfluous. The director, the father and the stepdaughter are most prominent characters who figure in the play. Throughout the play, the director embodies a fair amount of theatrical knowledge which, however, has been perpetually contested by the Father and the Stepdaughter. It is because their 'lived' experiences do not coincide with the knowledge that the director gathers from theatrical practice. On the other hand, the revenge-motive is a dominant trait in the character of the stepdaughter. All the time she desperately wants to enact the scene of incest with her father so that he is disarmed morally. As for the Father, his usual stance is that of self-defence and self-justification through a complex route of philosophizing and theorizing about life and reality.

SAQ

Through how many play-divisions (Acts/scenes) does this sequence of events develop? What is the 'story' that is finally projected by the playwright? (60 + 60 words)

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2.6 READING THE PLAY: MAJOR THEMES:

2.6.1 REALITY / ILLUSION

“Verisimilitude” – the neoclassical concept - (I have given a brief note at the end) has been often linked to the concept of the three unities. The assumption is that an illusion of reality is achieved when the play displays unities of action, time and place. Look at our play and see how in the first place this ‘unity’ has been achieved. The stage is the place of action, the garden in Madam Pace’s Parlour, being only two different settings constructed on the stage. There is also no substantial time-gap in the play’s narrative (except for the tea break which the director declares in the middle of the play and the somewhat abrupt shift into the garden scene). At the end, after the confusion followed by the boy’s shooting himself, the director says, “A whole day lost”. It implies that the action does not cover more than one day.

When we enter a theatre we know that the stage-actions are not real, in the sense that an accident at a market, for instance, is real but it does not normally impede our being attentive to the stage in the theatre. It is because the ‘real’ depicted on the stage has been taken for granted, although temporarily. However, the stage also must employ certain means (e.g. stage-direction, portrayal of life-like character, use of dialogue/speech that suits a character’s moral/psychological make up, etc.) to create this effect of the ‘real’.

See, for instance, the beginning of the play. The stage is bare except for some chairs which lie scattered around. Then a short, informal exchange between the technician and the stage-manager. Actors enter and they start doing things trivial or insignificant and unrelated to rehearsing, until the director announces the beginning of the rehearsal. There is a cumulative effect of all these; they create the ambience for the informal beginning of a drama rehearsal.

But is this idea of the ‘real’ consistent throughout? The arrival of six characters problematizes it almost at the beginning. We know that ‘character’ is an actor in a performance. Therefore, apparently, the idea of characters confronting a group of actors on an actual stage is logically not possible. But Pirandello portrays them as real human beings, with their own predominant emotions and views. Interestingly, therefore, their reality (i.e. existence on stage) does not take much time to acquire a certain degree of authenticity.

The question of reality and illusion, however, is slightly different from the idea of verisimilitude. What is verisimilitude in simple terms? Verisimilitude

implies accurate correspondence or coincidence between an object and its representation. For instance, the Father and the Stepdaughter constantly demand from the actors the 'exact' representation of what they 'experienced'.

But the perception of something being real not only on stage not merely implies fidelity to the original, it has other implications too. To say that something is 'real' also implies that 'something is engrossing'. This is the reason why the six characters are able to convince the company to enact their story. Except in the particular scenes (at Madame Pace's and in the garden), the characters self consciously 'enact' their story, yet unconsciously they make use of certain dramatic devices like conflict, emotional speech, etc. At times their conflicting discourse on their traumatic life achieves heightened theatrical effect. It is not surprising, therefore, to hear the lead man say, *this is some performance*.

Of course, although their discourse achieves a certain realism, the drama company is at pains to create an illusion of reality. However the very term 'illusion' is disturbing to the Father, because the lived experiences of their traumatic past cannot be reduced to a game. They also claim that they are more real than actors. Isn't the paradox interesting? We as readers know that characters are ideally not real people, whereas the actors are. In this play the characters emerge from an incomplete drama-text, therefore their experiences are not part of empirical reality. See the director, he is of real people in the world, the world of Pirandello's text. But because he is real, he is changing all the time, and the reality that he perceives is in constant flux. In this process of perpetual change, experiences are bound to lose their authenticity, as their contact with the subjects' perception is momentary. Therefore his reality is constantly being relegated to the domain of 'illusion'. On the other hand, a character is 'fixed'. He cannot change as his existence is reduced to certain 'fixed' and limited incidents and experiences. His/her reality has already been 'grasped'. Hence, what is seemingly illusory is 'real' and what is normally seen as 'real' is illusory.

Pirandello wrote that the two fundamentally distinct levels of reality are juxtaposed. Reality created in 'Madame Pace's Parlour' scene and in the 'garden' scene (both are plays within the play) is nothing but an illusion, whereas reality outside them is not. This demarcation of illusion and reality is what the play negates. In the end, for instance, the boy shoots himself,

denying the spectator a clear understanding of whether the death takes place within the ‘play- within-the-play’ or outside it and what ultimately ensues is chaos.

Stop to Consider

Normally, our idea of ‘reality’ and ‘illusion’ or ‘truth’ and ‘false’ is not taken to be problematic. For instance, suppose you have seen a man lying ‘dead’ on the stage when a performance is underway. You have also seen another man lying dead on a street. The distinction is clear: one is feigning to be dead, while the other is really dead. The first example refers to a certain illusion, and the second one indicates a ‘real’ fact. At the end of the play, the girl gets ‘drowned’ and the boy ‘shoots’ himself. This is followed by confusion amongst actors whether the boy has really committed suicide or he is only ‘acting’. What, do you think, is/are the probable objective(s) behind this deliberate confusion of reality and illusion?

The critic, Eric Bentley, stresses the point that Pirandello, unlike Ibsen, does not make a neat picture of the stories of the characters. This tends to upset normal notions of time and place in a literary work. “Plays without what are called individual characters, with characters labelled The Father and the like, are no new thing. They were the usual thing in the Expressionist plays of the second decade of the century, the decade during which the ideas for *Six Characters* came to Pirandello. Is this an Expressionist play, then? . . . The word Expressionism is not the clue we need.

What is ? Perhaps the phrase: *dream play*.”

Check Your Progress

1. How would you respond to the view that Pirandello’s *Six Characters* is better termed a ‘tragicomedy’ rather than a comedy? Highlight those elements of the play that upset a clear-cut categorization and attempt to justify their employment by the dramatist.
2. Attempt to justify the comment that “All through the play one feels that Pirandello is contrasting the strength of reality with the unreality of acting.”
3. “The drama is in us, and we are the drama. We are impatient to play it. Our inner passion drives us on to this.” Discuss the features of meta-theatre in the play that allow Pirandello to project some of his major concerns.

2.6.2 IDEA OF THE AUTHOR

The ‘characters’ have been abandoned by an author and they are looking for another author. Let us look at certain implications of this situation in relation to the idea of the author.

Usually, author implies a position of power from which to control interpretation and production of meaning. In the context of theatre, however, neither meaning nor authorial position remains constant. Shifts and changes in the play are natural when it moves from actual time writing to its enactment on stage. A director can interpret a play in his/her own way. Actors can also give a certain inflection to a play’s meaning. Therefore, in a performance, authority/ authorship shifts from the author to the director and actors themselves.

In this play, however, the clash is between the director and the ‘characters’. The character’s grievance is that they have been marginalized (as they have not been integrated into a complete work of art). Notice that these ‘marginalized’ ‘characters’ eventually usurp the position of the director leaving him marginalized. Immediately after Madame Pace’s exit, the Stepdaughter tells the Father to come and do the scene with her. Here, the character’s aspiration is quite clear. ‘Hang on who exactly directing here – you or me?’

Of course, you cannot read the group of six characters as ‘one unanimous voice’ as there are major disagreements amongst themselves. The most prominent voices are represented by the father and the stepdaughter, both via for certain kind of authorship. If she seeks to establish her story that can best express her peculiar torment, the father has also reshaped the story in order to justify his position. On the other hand the son’s final gesture (ie. When he hits father) is significant, because he refuses to act according to his father. We can say that resists being scripted by his father.

Stop to Consider

Author, character and the creative process

Writing on the great actress, Eleanora Duse, Pirandello makes the point:

“As a play passes from the mind of an author through the mind of an actor, it must inevitably undergo some modification. No matter how hard the actor tries to

grasp the intention of the writer, he will never quite succeed in seeing a character just as the author saw it, in feeling it just as the author felt it, in recreating it just as the author willed that it should be. How many times does the unhappy playwright, present at a rehearsal of his work, feel like exclaiming to the actor, 'Oh, no! No! Not that way!' writing in torment, disappointment, grief, or even rage, at seeing a character of his translated into a material reality which must perform be something else! But in the presence of such a protest on the author's part, the actor will be just as much disturbed. He sees and feels the character in his own way and he has a right to regard the attempted imposition of the author's will as an act of gratuitous violence cruelly inflicted on him. For the actor . . . must see the character in his own way and feel it in his own way."

In the essay titled "Spoken Action", Pirandello expounds the notion of the free, individual character who has an individual personality independent of the author's. The commonly held belief that character does not have an intrinsic essence, or unique mode of existence, because it emerges from the necessity of plot and action, is undermined in Pirandello's scheme of things. He asserts – "A play does not create people, people create a play. So first of all one must have people – free, loving, active people". Once a character is born in the author's mind, it disengages itself from the originator. Now that a character is born a free individual, the author follows its lead. In other words, in the creative process, the author has to 'follow' his characters and not 'control' them.

The six characters are independent and they crave for 'completion' of their story. Therefore, a search for an author might suggest the creative process itself.

All of the above might conflict with the notion today that "character" essentially amounts to the net effect of a collection of words on the page. But you have to remember here that in theatre, where the enactment or the staging of a narrative structure with the means of real people who adopt appropriate gestures, etc., to give 'life' to the role to be played, 'character' impinges on the very concrete situation where one person steps out of the 'natural' person to 'step into' the shoes of 'someone' with whom there is no actual connection. Pirandello appears to be harping on this point that adopting a role in real life, too, is 'acting'. Contrariwise, 'acting' is 'natural' but what becomes a problem is the scope for conflict within the same 'self', of more than one sequence of events – a story.

2.6.3 THE USE OF MASKS

What happens when we wear a mask? Our facial expressions, which are susceptible to change as we encounter new experiences and emotional stimuli, are reduced to one fixed pattern. A mask hides a face by giving it a fixed expression suggestive of a particular emotion for instance, if you put on a laughing mask. In this play, however, Pirandello does not use any ‘physical’ mask, but he uses the underlying principle of the mask – the principle of fixing of character.

1. Characters are not given a name; instead, they are identified in terms of the ‘role’ they play in their story (either in the play itself or in the play-within the play).
2. Look at the stage direction when the six characters first appear on stage. Their facial expressions are different, as they signify different predominant emotion, remove, revenge, scorn, etc.

The ‘characters’ are at war with each other throughout the play. They are unable to arrive at consensus; no one is able to listen to the voice of the other. In fact, they are wearing masks of sorrow, scorn, etc. in which they are ‘trapped’. But the paradox is that they feel ‘true’ to themselves only in these masks.

Their predominant emotions and obsessions spring not from themselves, but from their specific situations. They are more ‘real’ because they are wearing masks, and fixed through certain limited circumstances – which is also their tragedy.

SAQ

“Each of us when he appears before his fellows is clothed in a certain dignity. But every man knows what unconfessable things pass within the secrecy of his own heart. One gives way to the temptation, only to rise from it again, afterwards, with a great eagerness to re-establish one’s dignity, as if it were a tombstone to place on the grave of one’s shame, and a monument to hide and sign the memory of our weaknesses. Everybody’s in the same case. Some folks haven’t the courage to say certain things, that’s all!” Try to discuss these lines with reference to the

context. Also attempt to analyse how such lines extend the concept of 'masks' to social realities. (75 + 80 words)

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Stop to Consider

The Stepdaughter's revenge motive is consistent throughout, so is the son's scorn. Mother is sorrowful. Link these emotional dispositions with their situations in the family story. Would you rate the father as a much more complex being? Is his initial remorse consistent throughout, keeping in view the intellectual and philosophical interpretations he offers, of his predicament?

2.6.4 VIOLENCE

As you go on reading the play, you will find certain gripping moments when there is sudden outburst of a particular character's inner turmoil. Theatrically speaking, they are also 'effective' moments, because they give a 'jolt' to audience/reader's complacent perception of what is going on in the (performance) text.

Towards the end of the play, the director wants a scene between 'mother' and 'son' which according to 'son', did not actually happen. The Father insisted on his doing the scene, and this insistence immediately becomes an order "You will do it, Yen will obey me". The sequence is that the son comes to blows with his father and throws him to the ground. This is manifestly a stance against father's authority. This act of violence, although sudden, is not absurd. You may notice that the son has been marginalized in two ways:

1. In the play's narrative itself, he has been denied a voice until the moment when his participation in a scene with mother is sought.
2. In the 'characters' narrated story, his position is curious, as he has been marginalized by his father by way of detaching him from his mother, letting

him grow in an isolated way in the country, and then bringing him back home only to confront some ‘outsiders’.

In the final enigmatic scene, the girl is drowned in the pond and the boy shoots himself. There is certain ambivalence in the girl’s death. You cannot say for sure whether she commits suicide or it is an accident. However, you can interpret these deaths in more than one way. In a scene, there are ‘silent’ but bitter comment on what their elders did to them. At another level, we can say that their extremely intolerable predicament has no easier resolution.

SAQ

1. Besides these instance of physical assault and death, can we talk of psychological violence in the play? (80 words)

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2. Do you think that the play, commonly seen as a family tragedy, has a sub-text of violence? Substantiate your views with particular reference to step daughter’s revenge motive. (80 words)

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2.6.5 MEDIUM OF THE THEATRE

What, then, is the play about? The question may appear to be name and simplistic to you, now that we have dispensed some more crucial issues relating to the play. But I think you should now go back to this seemingly easy, yet basic question. Is it only about incest, revenge, dislocation – all culminating in a moving tragedy? Or is it about a theatre company’s extraordinary experiences at a drama rehearsal? I have suggested earlier that

had it been about the family tragedy, the play would have been differently focused, closer, perhaps, to Ibsenian theatre. Paradoxical situations arise and problematic issues regarding truth, reality etc. prop up because the play is about ‘representation’ of the family tragedy. The implication is that the medium itself constitutes the ‘characters’ life is never seen except through theatre.

The question is, can theatre represent like in any authentic way? Can there be exact correspondence between life and theatre? In fact the play shows many points of incongruity between them. These incongruities are reflected in the continuous clash or contradiction between the director and the ‘characters’, chiefly father and step daughter.

SAQ

How is this incongruity between ‘life’ and the medium of the theatre brought out? Would you consider this to be the overriding point of the play?
(70 + 50 words)

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When we talk of theatrical medium, we must also look at how certain ‘conventions’ operate, both at the level of presentation and audience’s reception. For instance, certain things are not allowed in theatre. In the Madame Pace episode, the Step-daughter does not feel hesitant to reveal the fact that father asked her to undress. Even in the mode of ‘involved telling’, she goes on revealing further what he did to her. The director thinks that this cannot be enacted on stage, because it connotes perverse sexual violence, and it would violate the norms of acceptability.

Although the question of representation of the family story is a common concern for both the director and the ‘characters’, their preoccupations are different. While they are ‘caught up’ in these situations within the family story, the director is not concerned about their individual situations and predicaments *per se*.

If you carefully go through his responses to their story, you will see that he refrains from making any value-judgement. He does not tell who is right or wrong and who is responsible for the tragedy. If he is interested in the story, it is because of its immense theatrical potentiality. He does not deny their predicament, but he has to 'adapt' the story to an effective theatrical form in order to achieve a balance or symmetry on stage.

Throughout the play, consciousness about the medium of theatre is pervasive. Even when the characters find themselves engaged in a conflict-ridden discourse about their past, the actors qualify them as performance.

“Lead man: This is some performance

Lead woman: A bit melodramatic is not it?”

Theatre has to fulfill certain technical condition for an effective performance. In the scene between Madame Pace and stepdaughter, they converse quietly. It is not without its logic, the peculiar situation compels them to speak, inaudibly. Theatre does not allow this naturalism, because they must be audible to the audience. It is only natural that the director tells them to speak harder.

2.6.6 AUDIENCE

Whenever there is the question of theatrical performances, audience is a key concern. The six characters are in search of an author, but audience is no less an urgent target. In the theatre company, they find the audience for their initially unconscious performance. A good audience is the director himself, who finally takes up their story for performance. The characters, especially the Stepdaughter, are confident about their play's audience's reception. She says: “We'll make you a lot of money”. The audience's point of view is crucially important in the play, otherwise the whole mechanism of the theatre would collapse. After the initial spurt of conflicts amongst the characters, the director walks down into the auditorium and watches the stage from the audience's point of view. Besides, 'actors' themselves become 'audience' when 'characters' become 'actors'. When I say actors become audience, the implication is that they must be emotionally affected by the 'character's 'drama'. Look at the role the actors play, especially their responses to the character's conflicting discourse on their past, until

practically, a rehearsal of it is undertaken. You will see that at certain moments, an actor's emotional responses (astonishment, horror, exclamation etc.) are indicated in the stage direction. In fact, actor, director, audience, critic – these are some 'fixed' positions and the play shows its people constantly shifting their positions. What is a director, then? A director is one who seeks to control an actor's movements, indicate settings, interpret situations, for actors. In other words, he seeks to control theatrical language on stage, therefore his voice is necessarily authoritative. Within the same view, an audience must have a certain degree of gullibility.

The most gullible audience is the mother. She faints when, in a passionate speech, the Step- daughter says that "she is the mother of three bastards". Similarly, in the scene in Madam Pace's parlour, the Step-daughter confronts Father as a customer, and she takes off her head. The mother watches the scene, "she follows the words and actions with a changing expression – sorrow, contempt, anxiety, horror. She hides her face. She moans."

Check Your Progress

1. Show how the idea of the 'author' is adumbrated through the play as the established categories through which reality is apprehended by both actors and audience.
2. Attempt an analysis of the juxtaposition of the idea of comedy with horror (the Step-Daughter's speech in Act II). Bring out methods by which Pirandello projects the shifting grounds of familiar terms through the experiences of the 'characters'.
3. Discuss the method by which Pirandello foregrounds the blurred lines between art and life, representation and reality in *Six Characters*.
4. Attempt an analysis of *Six Characters* with regard to the idea of self/selves in the play and the problem of categorizing the play as either tragedy or as comedy.

Think about the actual performance of *Six Characters*, where a real audience would watch 'actors' and 'audience' alike. See how the situation is interestingly complex: 'real' audiences looking at 'characters' (father, step daughter etc.) unwittingly becoming actors and 'actors' (lead man, lead woman etc) are posited as 'audience'. Will the 'real' audience's responses/reactions coincide or tally with those of audiences 'within' the play?

2.6.7 IDEA OF THE SELF / EXISTENTIALISM

At a particular moment, Father says: “I have always striven to achieve a certain moral standard”. Later on he reveals: I still had needs the torment of physical needs”. These are contradictory positions. How then, can we define the self? The father is a divided self where there is the clash between the moral and the biological. Stepdaughter’s ideal concept of moral and rational self is at variance with the father’s idea of fragmented self.

The ‘self’ also is not static, it is in a process of ‘being’. The son ‘becomes’ somebody who fundamentally differs from the image that the father envisages him as. The Father wants him to grow up in a moral and rational atmosphere in the country, but at last he turns out different. The Father’s is, then, an essentialist and deterministic project. He prioritizes moral ‘essence’ which would determine his son’s future existence. But the reverse has taken place – son’s existence precedes what he ‘essentially’ becomes.

Again, the six characters are separate unitary selves, with their own predicaments. The problem is that no one is listening to the voices of the others. Father is blaming his wife, while stepdaughter is cynical about both of them. Son’s grievances regarding his father is manifested in his refusal to do the scene with his mother, and, of course, culminates in his physically assaulting his father. Again, the father’s articulated notion of fragmented self is negated by the stepdaughter as acts of self-justification. In fact, besides the problem of representation, communication is also shown to be a huge problem. The possibility of arriving at a consensus or some ‘shared consciousness is negated. Therefore the father says: “We think we understand each other – we do not really.”

In fact, there is an over-tone of existential anguish. The six characters, part of a family as they are, are really separate individuals with no communication between them.

2.7 CRITICAL RECEPTION

Much good commentary on Pirandello’s *Six Characters* exists in Italian – with which you are not likely to be familiar. However, the Italian commentary relates the play clearly to the traditions of theatre in Italy within which Pirandello did his work. For instance, the Italian theatre director, Luigi

Squarzina, in 1966, talks of his experience with directing Pirandello's plays. He makes a very important distinction between the Absurd theatre's idea of "nonsense" which dealt with the emptiness of communication, and the 'non-sense' words used in Pirandello's plays. This distinction crops up due to the difference in the situations of the two kinds of theatre. As Squarzina says, in Italy Pirandello did not confront a "mass society" as did the dramatists of the Absurd.

An important interpretation of Pirandello's drama comes in English with Raymond Williams's *Drama from Ibsen to Brecht*. Williams's concern in this survey of drama in the modern era is to understand the manner in which the traditional conventions were uprooted by these dramatists to pave the way for a new meaningful theatre suited to its times. Williams makes the clear connection between Pirandello innovations in dramaturgy and the existing Italian convention which he successfully overturns. Williams also stresses the significance of what Pirandello does; his "experiments were not, primarily, theatrical". This shows the depth of Pirandello's concerns with the larger idea of 'experience' and therefore, judgment.

The eminent drama critic, Eric Bentley, in 1968, writes an extremely lucid and illuminating essay on *Six Characters*. This piece of criticism should form part of your main references on *Six Characters* along with Williams' work. As with Williams, Bentley's criticism is sharp and incisive and has the support of the wide and sweeping knowledge of Western theatre traditions that makes the criticism itself so enlightening. For instance, in this essay ("In Search of 6 Characters In Search of An Author") you are allowed into the understanding of how Pirandello controverts Expressionist methods. Bentley also clarifies the central point of the play – the coalescing of the problems of time and experience without the restrictions of naturalistic thinking.

2.8 SUMMING UP

Through this unit (2) and the previous one (Unit 1), you have received some information regarding how to read Pirandello's work adequately. The first unit on Italian literature with an extremely compressed reference to its main hallmarks should have given you an informative glance at the important issues and achievements in Italian literary history. Such background knowledge should make it clear to you that no literary work is created in a

vacuum; it always contains within itself numerous, subtle and even not-so-subtle references to the history from which it emerges. So when Pirandello mentions D'Annunzio in his essay, "Spoken Action" or on Eleanora Duse, you should not be taken by surprise at all.

The unit on *Six Characters* should make clear to you some of the most prominent questions that the play deals with: fact/fiction paradoxes, the illusion-versus-reality problem, the limitations of conventional theatre which Pirandello challenges, the idea of multiple 'selves' within a seemingly unitary personality, and so on. Nothing, of course, can compensate for the personal reading that you should give to the play itself, in lieu of an enactment.

2.9 REFERENCES AND SUGGESTED READINGS

1. Williams, Raymond. *Drama from Ibsen to Brecht*. London: Penguin Books, 1968.
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3. "Father's Day: In Search of 6 Characters In Search of An Author", *The Drama Review, TDR*, Vol.13, No.1, pp.57-72, 1968 (Autumn)
3. Caesar, Ann Hallamore and Michael Caesar. *Modern Italian Literature*, Cambridge: Polity Press, 2007.
4. Bradbury: Malcolm and James McFarlane (ed). *Modernism: A Guide to European Literature 1890 – 1930*, London, UK, 1976, 1991

Block 4

German Drama

Block Introduction

This is the fourth block of Paper XIX. It brings to you *Mother Courage and Her Children*, one of the most celebrated and discussed Modern German plays by Bertolt Brecht. The block is designed in a way to provide you an outline of the history of German drama with special emphasis on Bertolt Brecht and his theatrical world. The play *Mother Courage and Her Children* will work for you as an effective window to look into the works and ideas of Brecht against the backdrop of the larger context of Modern European drama.

Mother Courage and Her Children, which is undoubtedly one of the best plays of Brecht, has been considered by many critics to be the greatest play of the 20th century. This work attempts to project a gloomy and dreadful image of war and with the idea that virtues are often not rewarded in the corrupt world. *Mother Courage* is one of the nine plays that Brecht composed with the political motif to counter the rise of Fascism and Nazism, largely in response to the invasion of Poland (1939) by the German armies of Adolf Hitler.

However, the play is not set in his contemporary times and incidents but during the Thirty Years' War of 1618–1648. The tale is on the fortunes of Anna Fierling, a wily canteen woman with the Swedish Army. Nicknamed as “Mother Courage”, she is determined to make her living from the war. In course of time, she loses all three of her children, Swiss Cheese, Eilif, and Katrin, in the same war from which she sought to earn her livelihood.

Mother Courage and Her Children is expressive of Brecht's use of Epic Theatre and ‘estrangement effect’ (*Verfremdungseffek*). This effect necessitated an alienation of the spectator from the spectacle that would reveal to him the social relations underlying the incidents on-stage. His motif was to make the audience focus on the issues being displayed on the stage rather than getting emotionally involved with the characters and their stories. It was a novel experience to the theatregoers of his times where he tried to achieve the estrangement effect through the use of placards revealing the

events of each scene, actors changing characters and costume on stage, the use of narration, simple and symbolic props and scenery.

The units following this introduction will allow you to have some basic information on German drama in the larger context of European theatre. The unit on the play will help you with enough insights to read the text with its related ideas and contexts. It is expected that you will felicitate this knowledge with more and more readings on the subject.

This block contains the following units:

Unit 1 German Drama

Unit 2 Bertolt Brecht

Unit 1

German Drama

Contents:

- 1.1 Objectives
- 1.2 Introduction
- 1.3 Socio-historical Context
- 1.4 Major Trends and Influences
 - 1.4.1 The 'Reformation'
 - 1.4.2 Neo-Classicism
 - 1.4.3 Enlightenment
 - 1.4.4 Sturm and Drang
 - 1.4.5 Naturalism
 - 1.4.6 Expressionism
- 1.5 Important Playwrights and their plays
 - 1.5.1 Georg Kaiser (1878–1945)
 - 1.5.2 Arnolt Bronnen (1895–1959)
 - 1.5.3 Bertolt Brecht (1898–1956)
 - 1.5.4 Fritz Hochwalder (1911–86)
 - 1.5.5 Tankred Dorst (1925–)
 - 1.5.6 Gunter Grass (1927–)
 - 1.5.7 Volker Braun (1939–)
- 1.6 Production Houses and Histories
- 1.7 Major Preoccupations
- 1.8 Summing up
- 1.9 References and Suggested Readings

1.1 OBJECTIVES

This is the first unit of block 1. In this unit attempts have been made to acquaint you with the background of German drama. Your knowledge about German drama, I believe, will help you to contextualize Bertolt Brecht in

the traditions of German drama. However, after the end of this unit, you will be able to-

- *gain* a fair idea of German dramatic traditions
- *locate and identify* the various socio-historical forces in German drama, and
- *relate* Bertolt Brecht to the traditions of German history of drama

1.2 INTRODUCTION

It is very interesting to see how German drama evolved out of the fragmentary Easter plays of Muri and the St. Gall Passion Plays which led to the subsequent popularity of the morality and miracle plays. Such plays were the parts of the campaigns led by the churches to instruct and inspire the lower orders. By the beginning of the 15th century, there began to appear popular drama for secular entertainment in the form of carnival plays. These farcical comedies became very popular and famous in the subsequent periods.

While the earlier German drama, had always inclined to comedy, in the 16th century, there could be seen a noticeable shift towards tragedy. The comic element was not, however, entirely banished; for farcical episodes were ingrained in tragedies, especially through the introduction of peasants speaking their own uncouth dialect. Comic interludes were now made into regular under-plots. A change also took place in the choice of subjects. For example, secular topics were given more importance and ancient myths and Roman, medieval and modern stories were sought to be dramatized. Simultaneously, there developed various types of characters such as parasites, braggarts, soldiers, peasants and witches. The subsequent interest in medicine and psychology led to the representation of various temperaments like that of the melancholy man. In the construction of the plot, the excitement was enhanced by retarding the climax. Though all these apply more immediately to Latin dramas, yet the changes in these exercised an influence on German plays also.

Another interesting feature about German drama was its indebtedness to Saxon and Norman mimes from which German actors learned a variety of tricks and traditions. Henceforth, Hans Wurst, the familiar boorish clown

who was imported to Germany, became an indispensable character in every play designed to gratify the low demands of the vulgar. However, the prevailing grossness and ribaldry, the tastes and sympathies of the educated classes held them aloof from the theatre. This continued until the outbreak of the 'Thirty Years' War' (1628-1648) and the stage was left to the guardianship of marionettes. Consequently, the development which had begun in German drama was interrupted at its most promising phase. All the hopes cherished with regard to German drama were wrecked by the war and also by the lack of an appreciative and artistic audience.

The conditions and prospects of German drama became even worse than as the higher classes came to despise their native tongue. As they had formerly looked to Latin as the proper language of scholars and the only fit medium of discourse on important subjects, they now considered the use of French as the distinguishing mark of modern elegance and culture.

Hence, it is possible to say that unlike the traditions of English drama, German drama has a peculiar historical background. Consequently, the placing of Bertolt Brecht in such a dramatic tradition is like inviting critical considerations of his stand as a German dramatist in the modern world.

1.3 SOCIO-HISTORICAL CONTEXT

An enquiry into the cultural contexts of German drama would tell us that the dominant literary works in Germany during the early middle ages were written in Latin. The problematic relationship between 'German' and 'Literature' in German literary history is discussed in Block 4, Unit 1 of this course. You will do well by recollecting these while reading this unit. Here, I would like to restrict myself to the analysis of the socio-historical incidents in Germany which have affected its dramatic traditions.

In order to discuss the socio-historical context of German drama we can turn to 15th-century humanism which cast its influence in the field of drama and revitalized the dramatic tradition. In contrast to the courtly renaissance there existed a new humanist element in German literature after 1450. German humanism took a different turn after 1480 as a strong patriotic and political strain was evinced in the cultural history of Germany. A lively dramatic tradition was even established as a part of the university courses. Roman

comedies and Latin plays were used as moral instruction. Such plays were a direct contrast to the medieval dramatic types resulting in the proliferation of German drama in and after the 16th century. Later, this Latin drama was turned to the service of the Reformation.

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

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

1.4 MAJOR TRENDS AND INFLUENCES

German literature in general, began to take its actual shape through the various processes like- the Enlightenment, Neo-classicism and Romanticism. But Neoclassicism and Romanticism are often considered to be the greatest

epochs of German literature because during that age, Jonathan Wolfgang von Goethe went beyond the Enlightenment's substitution of science for religion, and insisted on the value of 'feeling' in place of 'reason.' Although we do not find any major literary trend before the 19th century in Germany, the trends of the 19th century, on the other hand, can be found in the form of Realism, Regionalism and Naturalism. Similarly, the 20th century Germany saw the rise of Impressionism, Expressionism, Post-expressionism and Social-Realism. Since our concern here is to discuss German dramatic history, it will be pertinent to refer to only those significant trends which influenced German drama both thematically and technically.

1.4.1 THE 'REFORMATION'

In the above section, I have already mentioned that humanism had a tremendous impact on the developments of German drama during its early phase. However, German drama had to undergo tremendous changes as part of the 'Reformation'. The 'Reformation' that began as a vehement protest against ecclesiastical abuses affected life in Germany. The Protestant Reformation, as it was so called, was a Christian reform movement in Europe which tried to reform the false doctrines and malpractices within the Catholic Church, particularly the teaching and sale of indulgences. Another major contention was the practice of buying and selling church positions which was seen at that time as considerable corruption within the Church's hierarchy. Consequently, under Martin Luther, the exponent of the Reformation, such concerns had to play a vital role in modifying the nature of the various cultural activities like drama in 16th century Germany. Martin Luther believed that drama had already been represented in the *Old Testament* and thought that the books of *Judith* and *Tobit* were originally plays, the former a tragedy, the latter a comedy. Consequently, under Luther's influence German drama turned towards spreading evangelical truths and it became serious and moderate in tone, not farcical and misleading as it had been under the papacy or the Catholic Church.

1.4.2 NEO-CLASSICISM

Neo-classicism in German drama came through the efforts made by Gotthold Ephraim Lessing for whom "classic" meant Greek art and literature rather

than French pseudo-classicism. However, Lessing's own exposition of the Aristotelian theory of tragedy was filled with the moral pre-occupations of the Enlightenment. Consequently, he looked to England rather than to France for the regeneration of the German theatre. His own work, *Miss Sara Sampson* (1755) was a bourgeoisie tragedy based on the English model. Similarly, he based the content of his other comic play *Minna von Rarnhelm* (1767) on George Farquhar. In *Emilia Galotti* (1772), Lessing re-modelled the 'tragedy of common life' in a form that came to be accepted as the 'Sturm and Drang.'

1.4.3 ENLIGHTENMENT

The German Enlightenment projected the theatre as the place for entertainment and instruction. This was what the bourgeois revolutionary aesthetics of French Denis Diderot and German Gotthold Ephraim Lessing, whose theoretical and critical writings were remarkable for their often witty and ironic style, tried to establish. Their intention of looking at a thought from different angles and searching for elements of truth even in the arguments made by his opponents added to the revolutionary impulse. The tremendous upsurge of the European theatre during the Enlightenment altered many of the traditional notions of German drama. Pure amusement, provoked even by tragedy, seemed to Diderot as utterly hollow and unworthy unless it added something to the spectator's knowledge.

1.4.4 STURM AND DRANG

You must have recollected the fact that the 'Sturm and Drang' is that phase in the history of German Neoclassicism and Romanticism which, in a way, established German national theatre. With the 'Sturm and Drang', German drama entered a new phase. The most famous dramatist of this phase was Friedrich Schiller. His tragedies were more skilfully adapted to the exigencies of the theatre than those of his predecessors. Thus permanent theatres were established in places like Hamburg, Mannheim, and Gotha.

1.4.5 NATURALISM

Naturalism in Germany was projected mostly as ‘scientific objectivity’. The principal model of German naturalism was however, Emile Zola in France. The most famous dramatist of this trend was Gerhart Hauptmann. His play *Vor Sonnenaufgang* (1889) is memorable for its novel technique of doing without a hero or a proper plot.

1.4.6 EXPRESSIONISM

Expressionism is perhaps the most significant and influential movement in German drama during the twentieth century. It basically emphasized the inner significance of things and not their external forms. Anticipating a world war, expressionist writers sought to depict the disintegration of the contemporary world and proclaimed a quest for the ‘New Man’. The dramas of Frank Wedekind were the fore-runners of this style. For example, the plays constituting what is commonly known as the ‘*Lulu Tragedies*’ had criticized bourgeois morality and had deviated from the dramatic conventions. The first full-pledged expressionist drama was Johannes Reinhard Sorge’s *Bettler* (1912, *The Beggar*) in which characters appeared as abstract functions in each other’s life.

Check Your Progress

1. Briefly sketch the major periods in the history of German drama.
2. Write a short note on the significance of the ‘Sturm and Drang’ movement in German drama.
3. Give a brief description of the importance of the Lutheran influence in the history of German drama.

1.5 IMPORTANT PLAYWRIGHTS AND THEIR PLAYS

Erich Heller, the British essayist, known particularly for his critical studies in German-language philosophy and literature of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, spoke of the modern mind as being beholden to the hegemony of the German cultural spirit. Germany, he wrote, having been defeated in two World Wars had invaded vast areas of the world’s consciousness. Citing

Marx, Freud and Nietzsche as Germany's most illustrious personalities, Heller claimed that 'the modern mind speaks German'. For the immediate purpose you would not need to be provided with a detailed description or analysis of the German playwrights and their plays. Nonetheless, the following is an attempt to acquaint you with those twentieth-century dramatists whose contributions to drama have gained a distinctive voice and has made Germany the focus of modern European culture.

1.5.1 GEORG KAISER (1878–1945)

Georg Kaiser was the most prolific and possibly the most representative of the German expressionist dramatists. He began his career at an early age, but his career can be said to have begun with *Rektor Kleist* in 1905. Georg Kaiser's best known plays include *The Burghers of Calais* (1913), *From Morn to Midnight* (1912), and a trilogy, comprising *The Coral* (1917), *Gas* (1918), *Gas II* (1920). Kaiser's early work is indebted to the theme of the clash between body and mind. However, the play which brought him fame was *Die Bürger von Calais*, *The Burghers of Calais* written in 1913 but performed four years later. Kaiser, from this play onwards, began to be increasingly identified with the expressionist tendency to concentrate on pure essence, on absolute vision. The anti-war theme of this play also illustrates the expressionist emphasis on idealism and the realization of the highest human potential.

In between 1920 to 1933, Kaiser became the most frequently performed playwright on the German stage, although a mechanical quality is apparent in many of his works. Of the more memorable plays, *Hölle Weg Erde* (1919), *Der gerettete Alkibiades* (1920), *Gats* (1925) and *Zweimal Oliver* (1926) are worth mentioning. The performance of *Silbersee* in 1933 prompted a Nazi demonstration and Kaiser, whose themes included self-sacrifice, ecstatic awareness of humanity and regeneration beyond national self-interest, was expelled from the Prussian Academy of Arts and was forbidden to write.

The period of his 'self-exile' during 1938 following a further threat from the Nazis, also saw the writing of several plays dealing with purification and idealism. His other successful plays include *Rosamunde Floris* (1936), *Der Soldat Tanaka* (1941) and *Das Floâ der Medusa* (1942). Kaiser's

reputation suffered after his death, but the interest in expressionism in the 1960s brought his name once more to the fore.

1.5.2 ARNOLT BRONNEN (1895–1959)

Both a dramatist and a novelist, Bronnen was one of the most talented writers who made the opening years of the Weimar Republic a fascinating and often disturbing experience. His play *Vatermord* (written in 1915, performed in Berlin in 1922) was the first of many scandals that surrounded his name as the portrayal of brutal violence and uninhibited sexuality which outraged the audience. His *Die Geburt der Jugend* (1922), on the other hand, is a chaotic description of anarchic youth with the story of a son murdering his father and then rejecting the incestuous advances of his mother. In his comedy *Die Exzesse* (1923) the erotic desires of the woman, Hildegard, find satisfaction in contemplation of intercourse with a goat. *Katalaunische Schlacht* (1924) looks back to the war as a time of frenzied (and erotic) ecstasy. Bronnen's exultant cult of violence and primitivity led him to greet National Socialism with enthusiasm. *Rheinische Rebellen* (1925) is an overtly nationalist play; while *Ostpolzug* (1925), a monodrama, fuses the ancient and the modern in its portrayal of Alexander the Great. During the Second World War, Bronnen joined the communist opposition in Austria and briefly became mayor of Goisern (Oberösterreich).

1.5.3 BERTOLT BRECHT (1898–1956)

Brecht was one of the group of young dramatists who emerged during the early years of the Weimar Republic and whose works created theatrical scandal with their outspokenness and reluctance to conform to accepted standards. Through collaboration with Feuchtwanger and others, Brecht, with his undeniable talent, kept abreast of the modern techniques of a man like Piscator and produced a corpus of work which was to mark a watershed in Weimar theatrical history. As a part of Berlin, Brecht deliberately rejected all the manifestations of bourgeois culture, particularly the naturalist's 'well-made play'; he also scorned the formless pretentiousness of much expressionist writing, although certain of the anti-illusionist techniques were derived from playwrights like Georg Kaiser.

An influential practitioner of twentieth-century German drama, Bertolt Brecht made tremendous contributions to dramaturgy and theatrical production. From the late twenties, he remained a committed Marxist who, in developing the combined theory and practice of his 'epic theatre', synthesized and extended the experiments of Erwin Piscator and Vsevolod Meyerhold. Thus he tried to explore the theatre as a forum for political ideas and the creation of a critical aesthetics of dialectical materialism. However, in contrast to many other avant-garde approaches, Brecht had no desire to destroy art as an institution; rather, he hoped to 're-function' the theatre towards a new social use.

Stop to Consider:

In this context, I would again like to draw your attention to what Brecht had remarked in the notes to the opera *Aufstieg und Fall der Stadt Mahagonny* (*The Rise and Fall of the City of Mahagonny*, 1930), that the 'object of the investigation' in his epic theatre is 'man' who is presumed to be 'changeable and changing'. Since, man is constituted as man only through the relationships into which he enters, Brecht's plays have shown how the theatre has a prime role to play in exposing different kinds of relationship which determine and produce different types of men. The object of investigation in the epic theatre is thus more precisely expressed as relationships between men.

Brecht's modernist concern with drama-as-a-medium led to his refinement of the 'epic form' of the drama. This dramatic form is related to similar modernist innovations in other arts, including the strategy of divergent chapters in James Joyce's novel *Ulysses*, Sergei Eisenstein's evolution of a constructivist 'montage' in the cinema, and Picasso's introduction of cubist 'collage' in the visual arts.

Brecht was a strong participant in the aesthetic debates of his era particularly over the 'high art/popular culture' dichotomy vying with the likes of Theodor Adorno and Georg Lukács and developing a close friendship with Walter Benjamin. Brechtian theatre also articulated popular themes and forms with avant-garde formal experimentation to create a modernist realism that stood in sharp contrast both to its psychological and socialist varieties.

1.5.4 FRITZ HOCHWÄLDER (1911–86)

Hochwälder was a dramatist who eschewed modernism and based his work firmly on the classical tradition. His early plays like *Jehr* (1932), *Liebe in Florenz* (1936), *Esther* (1940)) met with little success but fame came with *Das heilige Experiment* (1943). This is a drama of ideas without any female characters and is set in eighteenth-century South America. He showed that a realm of love and justice have no place in a world dominated by politics.

1.5.5 TANKRED DORST (1925–)

In his early work the influence of the marionette theatre and the *commedia dell' arte*, of Beckett, Ionesco and Giraudoux is clearly visible. In *Gesellschaft im Herbst* (1960) a stately home is transformed into an asylum for waifs and strays during the search for a non-existent treasure. In *Die Kurve* (1962) two men profit from accidents on a mountain road and in *Freiheit für Clemens* (1962) a prisoner accommodates himself to his confinement. *Große Schmäherei an der Stadtmauer* (1962) approaches Brecht in its handling of the 'play within-a-play' device in a Chinese setting. His play *Merlin* (1980), consisting of a prologue and two parts lasting for almost ten hours, demonstrates the catastrophic consequences of the misplaced people.

1.5.6 GÜNTER GRASS (1927–)

Although known more for his extraordinary fictions, Grass's early plays *Hochwasser* (1957), *Onkel, Onkel* (1958), *Noch zehn Minuten bis Buffalo* (1959) and *Die bösen Köche* (1961) can be associated with the theatre of the absurd. In *Die Plebejer proben den Aufstand* (1966), he presents in the figure of the Chef, whose rehearsal of a version of Shakespeare's *Coriolanus* is interrupted by workers hoping for his support in their demands for reform, a portrait of Brecht at the time of the uprising of 17 June 1953 in East Berlin.

1.5.7 VOLKER BRAUN (1939-)

Braun's early dramas adapt the forms and themes of Brecht to similar historical situations or to the problems faced by the workers in the industrial process after the transition to socialism. In *Guevara* (1978) the story of Che is told in reverse. His continuing debt to his literary predecessors is evident in his other plays like *Dmitri* (1982), a Brechtian reworking of Schiller's last incomplete play on the Russian pretender, *Übergangsgesellschaft* (1987), based on Chekhov, and *Transit Europa* (1988), based on Anna Seghers's novel *Transit*.

SAQ

Attempt to identify the major themes in twentieth-century German drama.
(70 words)

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1.6 PRODUCTION HOUSES AND HISTORIES

If you consider the history of German production-houses you will find it interesting to consider the fact that all the elements for the highest form of drama actually existed in 16th-century Germany. In Strassburg there existed, besides the academy-theatre, a play-house of mastersingers. At Kassel, a city in Germany, circumstances were most favorable for the development of the drama. Kassel had a historical significance. In 1558, the first German observatory was built in Kassel which was followed the *Ottoneum*, the first permanent theater building built in 1604. Since 1955, the *documenta*, an international exhibition of modern and contemporary art, has been held regularly in Kassel. It was also the place where the first court theatre in Germany was established. The actors were selected from the pupils of the court school who had acted classical plays, among which the *Antigone* was most prominent. However, with the advent of the English artists, translations and imitations of English plays were added to the repertoire, and thus even the Shakespearean plays were transplanted in German soil.

However, the German dramatists did not entirely give up their connection with their native land. They brought Marlowe's *Faustus* to Germany and along with them several of Shakespeare's plays, including *Romeo and Juliet*, *Hamlet*, *King Lear* and *Julius Caesar*. They also appropriated many features of German dramatic art. The collection of English comedies in German, published in 1620, offers numerous examples of lively and truly dramatic prose dialogue.

Referring to German theatre studies, the literary historian and theorist of theatre studies, Max Herrmann argued, 'Theatre and drama are, I believe, originally such extreme opposites that their symptoms will always reveal themselves; the drama is a linguistic-artistic creation by an individual; the theatre is something achieved by the audience and its servants.' Herrmann's emphasis, unlike that of the theatre critics, is on the notion that it is not the drama which makes theatre an art, but performance; that it is the performativity of theatre which fundamentally differentiates it from literature or the fine arts. Hence, there is no harm in saying that in European theatre, as Herrmann himself had explained, drama and performance often went hand in hand. However, what Herrmann had advocated vehemently, later emancipated theatre studies from German Studies.

Performance history of Brecht's *Mother Courage and Her Children*

In 1940, Brecht left Europe for America and in the following year the *Zürcher Schauspielhaus* staged his *Mutter Courage und ihre Kinder*. (*Mother Courage and her Children*). This was to be the play with which the *Berliner Ensemble* opened in 1948 and has remained in the repertoire ever since and has been staged by the leading theatres throughout the world. It provides an excellent example of 'epic theatre', that form of theatre which eschews Aristotelian forms of drama and concentrates instead upon a 'Fable', a tale which narrates and offers a nucleus for possible discussion. The importance of 'alienation' is found here in the choice of historical subject, in the encouragement to the actors to 'imitate' and 'represent' their parts, rather than identifying with them, and by the use of songs to interrupt the action and drive the several points home. Each of the twelve scenes is supposed to stand as a self-contained unit, but a cumulative effect is undeniable, and there are moments that are conventionally dramatic, which enthrall, rather than alienate, the audience. At the climax of Brecht's creativity, characters are brought to life through performance.

(A Companion to Twentieth Century German Literature, Page 43)

SAQ

What were the major features of German borrowings from English theatre?
(60 words)

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1.7 MAJOR PREOCCUPATIONS

One of the major preoccupations in German drama is the notion of identity. In her introduction to *History of European Drama and Theater*, Erika Fischer Lichte writes that the notion of ‘identity’ which developed in the eighteenth century and which dominated European discourse, lasted till the twentieth century. But this view has now become obsolete as fields like social anthropology and feminism have so far developed different concepts of identity which not only presume change, but actually understand change as a precondition to individual biography and to the creation and functioning of communities. It is because social anthropology focuses on the study of social statuses and roles, groups, institutions, and the relations among them and the consequent discussions of identity while feminism deals extensively with the problematisation of female identity in a man made world. Considered in terms of theatricality, such an analysis can be examined both from the perspective of the actors and the observers. Through actions carried out by the actors, the actors stage aspects and scenes which the spectators perceive and understand as representative of society. This consequently, help the observers gain an insight of their relative identities.

Another major concern in German drama is the notion of the ‘new man’ who remains unknown and hidden. For example, Brecht’s theatre starts with man in the existing bourgeois situation and demands that the ‘new man’ must change ‘the world’ through dialectic processes of mediation which he actively carries out between reality and processes on stage and vice-versa. That is, he must create the social conditions which would enable man to stop being a wolf to other men and allow him to enter into authentic human relations—the condition underlying the birth of a new man. Brecht’s epic dialectic theatre for the scientific age is—and it is this which is so very new about him—in a radical sense, a theatre of the spectator.

Stop to Consider

Brecht's *Lehrstücke*

Long before Brecht worked out his theory of 'epic theatre' in any detail, he 'instinctively' attempted to keep the spectator at a distance in order to give him the possibility of actively developing the 'new' man from the actions and attitudes performed on stage. However, the audience rejected Brecht's plays or reacted without any understanding. There was certainly no productive reception in the Brechtian sense, so that Brecht felt the productions had no effect on society. The *Lehrstücke* seemed to indicate a way out of this dilemma. They excluded the spectator altogether and concentrated on the changes experienced by the actors. *Lehrstücke*, on the other hand, also encouraged the players to look critically at the roles and attitudes they were being asked to perform. In trying out these attitudes in a critical way in the play, the player was exposed to the possibility of either developing new attitudes and ways of reacting other than those determined by the fixed conditions of the play, or to the conditions. The result of the experiment is in no way fixed beforehand. If, according to Brecht, the *Lehrstück* has the task 'of creating, on the widest and most vital basis, even only for minutes, counter-balance to the collectives which forcefully tear apart the people of our age' (*Gesammelte Werke*, vol. 17, p. 1028), then the 'liquidation of individuality' by the masses can hardly be the desired result. An appropriate new relationship between the individual and the masses needed to be created. With the *Lehrstück*, the centre of interest shifts from the processes represented and the reaction of the spectator to them, to the side of the actors. The experiment is carried out with them and its aim is to change them: the act of performing should open the actor to the possibility of developing a 'new man' in himself, or out of himself, as part of an all-embracing, social process. If one considers the performance history of the *Lehrstücke*, it is hard to estimate whether the performances actually did function as 'exercises' towards changing those who played them or whether they were planned as a provocation against the bourgeois institution of professional theatre and its audiences.

1.8 SUMMING UP

After reading the various sections of this unit you have found that the conditions and prospects of German drama were influenced by various socio-historical and intellectual upheavals. The elite classes of Germany

came to despise their native tongue because they had looked to Latin as the proper language of scholars and the only suitable medium of discourse on important subjects. They even regarded the use of French as the mark of modern elegance and culture. Such was the feeling and utterance of Frederick the Great when Voltaire, when residing at his court, declared that he found himself much comfortable in Paris. German, he said, was a language for servants and horses. Still, German dramas continued, and being influenced by various trends and movements, succeeded in gaining a definite status of its own in the subsequent periods.

However, seen in terms of the 20th century, considerable contributions to German drama came from Bertolt Brecht, who with his extraordinary plays, succeeded in popularizing contemporary German drama in the literary world. Since, you are going to read in details about Brecht's play *Mother Courage and Her Children* in the next unit, your acquaintance with German dramatic history will not only help you in acknowledging the significance of German dramatic traditions but also in placing Bertolt Brecht in those traditions in a more meaningful way.

1.9 REFERENCES AND SUGGESTED READINGS

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Links:

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

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

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

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

Unit 2

Bertolt Brecht

Contents:

- 2.1 Objectives
- 2.2 Introduction
- 2.3 Historical & Theatrical Context
- 2.4 Brecht and his Works
- 2.5 Brecht and English
- 2.6 The play
- 2.7 Reading *Mother Courage and Her Children*
- 2.8 Brecht and the Critics
- 2.9 Summing up
- 2.10 References and Suggested Readings

2.1 OBJECTIVES

This unit brings you close to Brecht's play, *Mother Courage and Her Three Children*. By the time you finish working through the unit, you should be able to

- *connect* Brecht's over-arching philosophy with the various aspects of the play
- *outline* some details of Brecht's own innovations in modern theatre
- *discuss* the various aspects of Brecht's Epic Theatre
- *analyse* Brecht's play from more than one point of view

2.2 INTRODUCTION

Brecht is such a familiar name in the world of twentieth-century drama that we now tend to identify his name with what we think of as "modern drama". The two terms are almost as one just as we tend to think of 19th-century

realistic drama, - the problem play, in particular – in the terms that Ibsen set for it. You have already read of the course of German drama in the previous unit and would have traced some lines that continue into the Epic Theatre of Brecht.

Brecht is too easily thought of as simply a ‘Marxist’ playwright who put the ideology into dramatic form. As we do this, we also tend to restrict our conception of what this may mean, into a stereotyped image of the ‘agit-prop’ kind of theatre that goes with the term, “ideology”. But while this may hold true only in a limited way, we enjoy Brecht’s plays because he gave his reading of Marx’s philosophy a powerful form that gets encapsulated in what he called Epic Theatre.

Mother Courage is one of Brecht’s best-known plays but it would be most meaningful if you could compare this work with his other famous plays.

Stop to Consider

Theatrical influences on Brecht

Brecht’s early career started in the 1920s when German theatre was undergoing much experimentation. Brecht accepted neither the tradition of romanticism deriving from the classics by Goethe and Schiller, nor the idealism or subjectivity of German Expressionists like Ernst Toller and Kaiser, nor even Ibsenian naturalism as in Gerhart Hauptmann’s drama.

Neue Sachlichkeit: Brecht has often been linked to Expressionism and the new movement of the mid-1920s, the “Neue Sachlichkeit”. He was much closer to this latter than to Expressionism in the sense that the figures among the Expressionists (Franz Werfel, Johannes R. Becher, Ernst Toller) were distant from him in many ways. Among the movement’s originators were the names of Georg Grosz and Max Beckmann. The core group of this movement included a ‘Red Group’ of ex-Dadaists like Grosz, Rudolf Schlicter, and John Heartfield.

“This Red Group of ex-Dadaists formed the nucleus of the more socially-critical element in *Neue Sachlichkeit* — New Objectivity as it is sometimes called, or New Sobriety, New Matter-of-factness – the trend which became established by a painting exhibition held at Mannheim under that title in 1925 and thereafter was held to have supplanted Expressionism as mid-Europe’s guiding principle in the contemporary arts.in this utilitarianism, as in many other respects (clarity of expression, use of montage, participation in Hindemith’s musical experiments,

preoccupation with the city and with technology, use of documentary material, addiction to sport and the Anglo-Saxon myth, not mention aversion to capital letters), Brecht remains a product of the movement and the time”.

Georg Buchner: Brecht noted in his personal papers, that the “historic line of the epic theatre” passed through the Elizabethans, through J.M.R.Lenz, the early Schiller, Goethe, Christian Dietrich Grabbe, and Georg Büchner. Brecht wrote that “The line is strongly marked and easy to follow”.

Frank Wedekind, Max Reinhardt, and Erwin Piscator are important in all considerations of Brecht’s drama in the light of the influence they had on his work either through association or through collaboration.

2.3 HISTORICAL & THEATRICAL CONTEXT

Brecht had been writing continuously since 1918 and in 1931 had produced his theory of the ‘epic form of the theatre’. Raymond Williams considers Brechtian drama to be the most important and original in Europe since Ibsen and Strindberg. Brecht strove to depart from the dominant naturalist drama in Europe that came into being after Ibsen. He mounted an attack on the core essential of naturalist drama, the “illusion of reality”. In this kind of drama, the power of verisimilitude completely draws the attention of both dramatist and audience. As Williams observes, “What Brecht seized on was the exclusion, by particular conventions of verisimilitude, of all direct commentary, alternative consciousness, alternative points of view.”

Stop to Consider

The aims of complex seeing

With regard to traditional drama, Brecht objected to the way in which the spectator was required to suppress critical thinking and lose the capacity to act; the way in which the spectator is drawn into the experience presented; the way in which one scene depends for its existence on another so that there is an element of inevitability and then also how the human figure is seen as given or inevitable. Brecht wanted a theatre in which the spectator is an observer and thus finds the scope to study and decide as the prelude to an action. The spectator should be confronted with a view of the world which s/he can study. The human character

that the spectator is presented with should be seen as involved in developing and producing himself or herself.

Raymond Williams explains: “What is being basically attacked here is the central naturalist thesis of the ‘illusion of reality’, in which an action is created that is so like life that the verisimilitude absorbs the whole attention of both dramatist and audience. It is not true to say, of course, that this is necessarily uncritical: the observed reality can shock, by its concentrated power, and has again and again done so, in the naturalist theatre. What Brecht seized on was the exclusion, by particular conventions of verisimilitude, of all direct commentary, alternative consciousness, alternative points of view.” Thus, as Williams shows, Brecht calls for the restoration of the “conventions of chorus, narrator, soliloquy; or, in more complicated movements, the achievement of a dramatic design which was more than the design of the action.”

Brecht aimed to show “men in the process of producing themselves and their situations, as opposed to discovering themselves in a given situation”. He did this using methods with which “to confront an audience with a performance, a deliberate action in a theatre, often with the machinery of effects visible and with the passing of time and place conventionally indicated rather than assumed and recreated: a continual and explicit contrast with all those means to a suspension of disbelief before an illusion of reality.” (R.Williams)

2.4 BRECHT AND HIS WORKS

Brecht’s evolution & chronological development

In retrospect, Brecht’s aversion to war can be seen in his writing in support of pacifism when in 1914 World War I broke out. Brecht was then around sixteen years of age. Among his friends at school was Caspar Neher, later to become famous as painter and stage-designer, and who collaborated with him all through his career. It did not take long for Brecht to disown his upper-middle class background and cast himself as a rebel who found common cause with the common people, especially the underdog. Brecht joined medical studies in Munich University in 1917 and on account of the Bavarian revolution became a member of the Augsburg Workers’ and Soldiers’ Council.

Brecht's first play was *Baal* (1918) followed by *Drums in the Night* (1919). Around this time, he associated with the writer Leon Feuchtwanger who gave a fictional account of Brecht in a novel, *Success*. Brecht was a theatre critic for the socialist paper in Augsburg, *Volkswillen* at this time. In 1922, *Baal* was published, *Drums in the Night* achieved stage success, while his new play, *In the Jungle of the Cities* (1921) was accepted for production. The same year he received the Kleist Prize, a matter of great prestige since it established him as the best young drama personality in Germany. He was also appointed a 'dramaturge' to the Munich Kammerspiele (Chamber Theatre).

Brecht's foray into his 'epic theatre' was with his adaptation of Christopher Marlowe's *Edward II* in 1924. Now Brecht moved to Berlin where he met the great actress, Helene Weigel, and also Max Reinhardt, the eminent producer. Taking a keen interest in sports, in vogue in Berlin then, he wrote an article, "How to apply the principles of good sports promotion to the theatre". His unconventional play, *Man is Man*, was produced in 1926. Erwin Piscator, who was famous in Berlin theatre and had much experience with left-wing 'agitprop' (agitation + propaganda) productions, hoping to create an "epic theatre", was Brecht's collaborator in 1927 in the production of *The Good Soldier Schweik* based on the anti-military novel by Jaroslav Hašek. Brecht divorced his wife, the opera singer Marianne Zoff, at the end of 1927. He had also brought out his first collection of lyrics by this time, *Book of Family Devotions*.

Brecht's *Threepenny Opera*, brought over into German (by Elisabeth Hauptmann) from John Gay's eighteenth-century English *Beggar's Opera* was an instant success when it premiered in 1928. The stage design was by Caspar Neher while the music was set by Kurt Weill. The play shows both Brecht's increasingly Marxist convictions as well as his distinctive style of 'epic' theatre which included slogans on placards, sub-titles, projections, half-curtains, visible lighting, and songs. It was a satirical attack on bourgeois society as was the later *Rise and Fall of the City of Mahagonny* which exposed capitalist society's lust for money.

In 1929 he married Helene Weigel while continuing his friendship with Elisabeth Hauptmann and Margarete Steffin, both of whom assisted him with research and translations. Against a background of rising Nazism,

Brecht devised his “learning plays” (*Lehrstücke*). Yet another Marxist play, *Saint Joan of the Stockyards*, came out in 1931, while his dramatization of Gorky’s *The Mother* followed in 1932. Among the political plays were *Badener Lehrstück* (1929) and *The Measure* (1930) meant for amateur proletarian groups and schoolchildren.

Brecht had to flee from Nazi Germany’s pursuit of Hitler’s political opponents such as left-wingers and communists, on 28 February 1933, after the Reichstag was set on fire and the communists were denounced. Travelling to other European capitals and then to America, in 1933 Brecht produced the ballet *The Seven Deadly Sins of the Petite Bourgeoisie* in Paris together with Kurt Weill. The Nazis at home burnt Brecht’s books and stripped him of German citizenship in 1935. Brecht’s writings continued in emigré periodicals as he even co-edited one such periodical, *Das Wort*, in 1936, published from Moscow. Committed to anti-Nazi propaganda, he oversimplified his argument in plays like *The Roundheads and the Longheads* (1936) but was realistic in plays like *Fear and Misery in the Third Reich* (1938).

Señora Carrar’s Rifles (1937) came of his support in the Spanish Civil War while his experiences with the stage got recorded as *The Messingkauf Dialogues*. With the threat of war growing in Europe, Brecht moved with his family from Denmark to Sweden and then to Finland, finally to America via the Soviet Union in 1941. His most remarkable plays belong to this period: *The Life of Galileo* (1938), *Mother Courage and her Children* (1939), *The Good Woman of Setzuan* (1940) and *Mr. Puntilla and His Man Matti* (1941). Another anti-Nazi play, *The Resistible Rise of Arturo Ui* (1941) caricatures Hitler as a Chicago gangster.

Brecht’s life in the USA was not easy and one of his best plays written during his American exile, *The Caucasian Chalk Circle* (1944) did not receive the expected acceptance. In 1947 he was questioned by the House Committee on Un-American Activities, spurring him to depart soon thereafter. He stayed in Switzerland for some time and then in the autumn of 1948 he came to East Berlin. Brecht’s theories of theatre are brought together in his *A Short Organon for the Theatre* (after Bacon’s *Novum Organum*) (1948). He died on 14 August, 1956.

2.5 BRECHT AND ENGLISH

John Willett, the well-known translator and critic of Brecht's works, remarks that Brecht had a substantial involvement with English literature. A biographical reason that he considers important to explain Brecht's preferences is the fact that he had "grown up as a writer in that particular climate of Germany in the 1920s where everything Anglo-Saxon was fashionable". Willett notes that "besides the American settings which one finds in several of his works starting with *In the Jungle* in 1923, his whole conception of the theatre quite early began reflecting English influences and models." Willett suggests that "It is true that he took virtually nothing from the contemporary English theatre. But without the English *heritage* there would have been no 'epic theatre'." From the work of Shakespeare Brecht seemed to have learnt that a linear narration could be used to represent even complex situations without the tight structure of a contrived plot. His knowledge of Shakespearean drama was substantial while he also read widely among works by Arnold, Newman, Macaulay, Wordsworth, Lytton Strachey, Hemingway and Steinbeck, not to mention many others. Brecht even attempted to write in English, as in the case of some lines of *Galileo*. Brecht also worked at an adaptation of Webster's *Duchess of Malfi*. Other important connections with the literary world of English came, for Brecht, through the associations with Elisabeth Hauptmann, Charles Laughton (the actor), W.H. Auden, H.R. Hays, especially after 1933 when he had to go into exile. His play, *The Caucasian Chalk Circle* was however, published in English and not in German, in 1948.

James Schevill records that Brecht himself hardly spoke any English but "he had an instinctive ear for rhythms that bridged language barriers".

2.6 THE PLAY

Mother Courage and her Children stands as probably the most famous anti-war play of the last century. Whether it was prophetic or whether it was a warning depends on what we accept as the date of its composition. Brecht claimed to have written it before the second world war began but this differs from what his English editors, John Willett and Ralph Mannheim, conjecture as the most plausible date of writing — between September and early November 1939.

According to Eric Bentley, the name of the protagonist was taken from the sixteenth-century work *The Life of the Arch-Imposter and Adventuress Courage* by Hans Jacob Christoffel von Grimmelshausen. “What Brecht took from Grimmelshausen was not a structure, nor yet a story, nor yet a protagonist. He took a name, and he took atmosphere. He entered Grimmelshausen’s world and carried some of it away with him. He carried away, especially, Grimmelshausen’s sense of death - death on a tremendous scale and all a result of man’s inhumanity to man.” Another source of inspiration may also have been Grimmelshausen’s picaresque novel, *Simplicissimus* (1669). As the work of a man who had himself served in the Thirty Years’ War, this novel remains a grim testimony to the horrific experiences of the times.

Brecht noted, while referring to the play, that the Thirty Years’ War was one of the first large-scale wars waged by capitalism over Europe in the name of a war of religion. We should note that the view of the war presented in Brecht’s masterpiece gives more place to the question of economics, money, commerce and material production. Besides the protagonist’s constant concern with commerce, we are made to feel almost acutely the logistical anxieties that beset everyone affected by the war - food, shelter, provisions, etc. Brecht’s treatment thus clearly points to the economic factors at work in a war mostly remembered in standard histories for its vicious deployment of religious politics. It is more appropriate, from the Brechtian point of view, not to focus on the personalities (Tilly, King Gustavus, Richelieu, or Wallenstein) but rather to project those characters who provide the means to wage the war — the soldier, the cook, the chaplain, the scrivener and other sundry folk. From Brecht’s Marxist viewpoint, war resulted from the economic exploitation of capitalist societies which use war to conduct ‘business by other means’. And yet, the Thirty Years’ War had been proclaimed to be a war of religion by those who sought to justify it.

2.7 READING *MOTHER COURAGE AND HER CHILDREN*

Scene 1 :

Listen carefully to the conversation between the recruiting officer and the sergeant. From the narrative provided at the top, we learn that it is the spring of 1624, the place is Dalarna (a peaceful province of Sweden), and the Chancellor, who had taken over the command of the troops after the

death of King Gustavus Adolphus of Sweden, is preparing for a campaign in Poland. You should see here that recruitment for a war itself is one of its effects: as the recruiting officer tells his colleague, he has to gather enough soldiers for four platoons. He complains of disloyalty and faithlessness. This is echoed by the sergeant who is of the opinion that war will bring order and discipline.

What is the kind of inversion taking place here?— “You know what the trouble with peace is? No organization.” Similarly, note the contradictions in the thought, “no organization, no war!” — equating war with orderliness.

Compare Mother Courage’s arguments in favour of war. She has travelled from Bamberg in Bavaria for the reason, “I can’t wait till the war is good enough to come to Bamberg.”

How does Anna Fierling lose Eiliff? What are the qualities in each of her children that Mother Courage is afraid of? How does she miss the moment of Eiliff’s going away with the recruiting officer? (Because she was busy bargaining.)

SAQ

1. What do we learn of (i) Mother Courage?
 - (ii) Her three children?
 - (iii) Mother Courage’s business acumen?
 - (iv) Common people’s sentiments regarding the war?
2. What is the ironic meaning of “Courage” to be found here in this scene?
3. How would you name the theme of Mother Courage’s entry song?
 - (a) Food and War
 - (b) Food Before War
 - (c) Business, Not War
 - (d) Business by War
4. For which side are soldiers being recruited? What methods are used for recruitment? How effective is such recruitment, presumably?
5. How would you gauge the meaning of the sub-title of the play, “A Chronicle of the Thirty Years’ War”?

Short summary

The protagonist is introduced; the play's tragic theme is introduced as the possible outcomes of the war are forecast. Mother Courage's weakness for profit is brought to the fore ("Get her involved in a business transaction!") although she also hopes to save her children from the war. Her manoeuvres to outwit the recruiting officer and the sergeant through the game of prediction with blanks and crosses, project to the audience the potential for destruction and all-pervading doom that the war promises. The first loss for Mother Courage is Eiliff's recruitment and this is going to be a recurrent pattern throughout the play as each of the children are sacrificed one by one. Brecht shows us the central conflict in the terms of this clash between the maternal instinct and the profiteer's motives. To some extent, this scene contains the seeds of what the rest of the play will bear out.

Scene 2:

It is now the time following upon the earlier scene — 1625 and the next year. Mother Courage has travelled (in the course of the Polish campaign of the Swedish army) with "the baggage train of the Swedish army".

We must note the "Thunder of cannon" in the background. This is another phase of the war. The Swedish commander's cook is quarrelling with Mother Courage who is trying to sell him a capon for sixty hellers. The price, we find, gradually gets lowered to thirty hellers but goes for one gilder finally because the commander, happy with Eiliff's cunning defeat of enemy peasants, has brought him over to dine with him and gives no time to the cook to bargain. The cook, left with no time, gives in to the price Mother Courage asks of him.

capon: a cock castrated and fattened for eating

hellers: a German coin, small-sized, a hundred of which, Brecht assumed, made a gilder

chaplain: priest or clergyman attached to an army regiment

Note that there is a siege on. As the cook explains, the Swedish army has laid siege to the enemy town and Mother Courage describes the effects of the siege.

Why is she confused regarding who is under siege ? (Because she is a business woman who knows no nationalist or ideological divisions. To her, both parties to the war are her customers or potential market.)

What kind of a war is it? It's a religious one. (In Scene 3, the chaplain says: "This is a war of religion. Not just any old war but a special one, a religious one, and therefore pleasing unto God.") The commander exults, "You've played a hero's part, you've served the Lord in his own Holy War, *that's* the thing!" But the commander is obviously far from being a man of religious faith. He also pokes fun at the chaplain: "The shepherd of our flock here just looks on, he only preaches, he hasn't a clue how anything gets done." As you would already know, clergyman are traditionally referred to as "shepherds" and the congregation as the "flock". Christ was known as the 'Good Shepherd'. In contrast to this reference, Eiliff is called a 'soldier' of God ("a soldier that still believes in God").

Stop to Consider

The Thirty Years' War

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

Although the struggles that created it erupted some years earlier, the war is conventionally held to have begun in 1618, when the future Holy Roman emperor Ferdinand II, in his role as king of Bohemia, attempted to impose Roman Catholic absolutism on his domains, and the Protestant nobles of both Bohemia and Austria rose up in rebellion. Ferdinand won after a five-year struggle. In 1625 King Christian IV of Denmark saw an opportunity to gain valuable territory in Germany to balance his earlier loss of Baltic provinces to Sweden. Christian's defeat and the Peace of Lübeck in 1629 finished Denmark as a European power, but Sweden's Gustav II Adolf, having ended a four-year war with Poland, invaded Germany and won many German princes to his anti-Roman Catholic, anti-imperial cause."

“Meanwhile the conflict widened, fueled by political ambitions of the various powers. Poland, having been drawn in as a Baltic power coveted by Sweden, pushed its own ambitions by attacking Russia and establishing a dictatorship in Moscow under Wladyslaw, Poland’s future king. The Russo-Polish Peace of Polyanov in 1634 ended Poland’s claim to the tsarist throne but freed Poland to resume hostilities against its Baltic archenemy, Sweden, which was now deeply embroiled in Germany. Here, in the heartland of Europe, three denominations vied for dominance: Roman Catholicism, Lutheranism, and Calvinism. This resulted in a Gordian tangle of alliances as princes and prelates called in foreign powers to aid them. Overall, the struggle was between the Holy Roman Empire, which was Roman Catholic and Habsburg, and a network of Protestant towns and principalities that relied on the chief anti-Catholic powers of Sweden and the United Netherlands, which had at last thrown off the yoke of Spain after a struggle lasting 80 years. A parallel struggle involved the rivalry of France with the Habsburgs of the empire and with the Habsburgs of Spain, who had been attempting to construct a cordon of anti-French alliances.”

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

— *Encyclopædia Britannica*

King Gustavus Adolphus of Sweden assumed the role of champion of Protestantism during the Thirty Years’ War. Poland was Catholic, while Sweden was Protestant. His campaign against the Poles was waged in order to stave off the Polish Catholic claims to the Swedish throne as well as to advance his control over the Baltic region.

The little exposition by Mother Courage of the theme of traditional values and their inverted implications, brings into focus Brecht's principal strategy of breaking the theatrical illusion.

The Brechtian aim of 'alienation' or 'estrangement' prompted him to use the term, *Verfremdung* (alienation/estrangement) or *Verfremdungseffekt* (estrangement/ alienation effects). He defined this as shocking the complacency of the spectator into looking at things critically and not taking them for granted. This was the A-effect: "The A-effect consists in turning the object of which one is to be made aware . . . from something ordinary, familiar, immediately accessible, into something peculiar, striking and unexpected."

"The Song of the Fishwife and the Soldier" shows the difference in attitude to heroism between mother and son. Although she boxes her son on the ear for risking his life with his bravery, she does not think his trickery of the peasants something worth reprimanding.

Short Summary

We see Mother Courage doing hard-nosed business with her well-practiced skills of striking the right bargain at the right moment. The cook buys her capon at the price she names. The song Eilif sings reunites mother and son although we are also constantly made aware of the closeness of the possible destruction of the war. The speech by Mother Courage brings into the open the implications of values traditionally upheld while the veneer of 'holiness' of the war is ripped open by what the commander says. Yet again the future turn of events in the play is foreshadowed as Mother Courage sings the final verses of the song.

* * * * *

Scene 3:

The time is now a three years' advancement upon the last scene, around 1629. Remember that this is a "chronicle", a historical narrative. This alone should make us sensitive to Brecht's innovations in dramaturgy: his idea of the "epic theatre".

Stop to Consider

Epic theatre

The narrative mode

Largely on account of his experience of working with Erwin Piscator, whose concept of 'epic theatre' (or, a political theatre) revolutionized drama in the late 1920s, Brecht attempted to forge a new dramatic idiom which was radically different from the conventional Aristotelian, 'well-made play' with tight structure and neat ending. While Piscator strove to make theatre more scientific in keeping with the temper of a new scientific society, Brecht was also influenced by Japanese Noh theatre and rejected the illusionist 'realism' promoted by the Russian director, Stanislavsky.

Towards the end of his life, Brecht summed up his dramatic work with an allusion to Marx, "I wanted to take the principle that it was not just a matter of interpreting the world but of changing it, and apply that to the theatre". The influence of Marxist ideology is well embedded in Brechtian drama and is to be seen partly in the manner in which the audience is encouraged to a critical understanding of the characters and their situation. The scheme that he drew up in the 1930s, included in the series 'On a non-Aristotelian drama' showed the shift in focus:

Dramatic Theatre

Epic Theatre

plot	narrative
implicates the spectator in a stage situation.....	turns the spectator into an observer
wears down his capacity for action.....	arouses his capacity for action
provides him with sensations.....	forces him to take decisions
experience	picture of the world
the spectator is involved in something.....	he is made to confront something
suggestion	argument
instinctive feelings are preserved	brought to th point of recognition the spectator is in the thick of it,

shares the experience..... studies	the spectator stands outside,
the human being is taken for granted of inquiry	the human being is the object
he is unalterable	he is alterable and able to alter
eyes on the finish	eyes on the course
one scene makes another	each scene for itself
growth	montage
linear development	in curves
evolutionary determinism	jumps, leaps
man as a fixed point	man as a process
thought determines being thought	social being determines
feeling	reason

Brecht shows us the underhand businesses of war. The officers are as unscrupulous as their commanders. Mother Courage is a hard-headed business woman who can beat the corrupt officers at their own game of driving hard bargains.

What is the theme of Yvette Pottier’s ‘Fraternization Song’?

The ‘political’ discussion between Mother Courage, the cook, and the chaplain should be seen in the light of Brecht’s anti-heroic view of history. From the point of view of established ‘History’, war is the result of religious differences, territorial disputes, issues of prestige and power. It is described in terms of the extended interests of the top-level players and thus it is narrated through tales of heroism, etc. Brecht tries to drive home the point that Mother Courage expresses:

“To hear the big chaps talk, they wage war from fear of God and for all things bright and beautiful, but just look into it, and you’ll see they’re not so silly: they want a good profit out of it, or else the little chaps like you and me wouldn’t back ’em up.”

There seem to be three stages of the action in this scene. In the first part of the scene, we see Yvette, the case of another kind of business. Her concern for her daughter, Kattrin, shows the maternal depths of wisdom that Mother Courage has within her. Brecht seems to be adding to the breadth of experience that gives a multi-layered complexity to the characterisation.

The second part of the 'action' in this scene begins with the entry of the cook and the chaplain (both of whom we had seen in the last scene). The 'love'-angle already discussed between Yvette and Mother Courage (with reference to its potential for tragedy) now shows itself in a degraded form with this new turn of the cook's amorous interest in her which are undoubtedly based on survival-instincts.

The third part of the scene's 'action' shows the actual process of war in the way random destruction takes place combined with the uprooting of identity, settlement, or even of faith. Typically, the one-eyed spy symbolizes the dangerous intrigues of war. The sudden development in the course of war sends the characters on the stage into frenzy. Brecht catches up for the audience all the rough dissembling and switches of loyalty so essential for survival. As Mother Courage says, "When they cross-questioned me, I always asked where I could buy holy candles a bit cheaper. . . They didn't quite believe me but they needed a canteen, so they turned a blind eye. Maybe it's all for the best. We're prisoners. But so are lice in fur."

Stop to Consider

What kind of goods does Mother Courage carry in her wagon?

Where does she obtain them from?

Why do the two sons pull the wagon and not oxen?

Where would she and her family find shelter?

Is she an exile or a gypsy?

Which nation does she belong to?

Why is she allowed to cross borders in the war zones?

How does Brecht show these facts on the stage?

How regulatory are Brecht's stage-directions?

Why is Mother Courage not able to stop the tragedy of Swiss Cheese?

Which stage-prop is used to identify her?

Why does Brecht use the setting of the Thirty Years' War? How does he treat conventional history?

For Brecht, 'distance' between (subject) audience and object/character could also be achieved through 'historicizing'. From a Marxist standpoint, Brecht clarified, "Historical incidents are unique, transitory incidents associated with particular periods". This underlined the historical relativity of events. The audience had to adopt a more critical view of the events presented thus being induced towards a more relative view of the present itself. This formed the crux of the 'epic' theatre because events appeared in the form of a story which had occurred in the past. Brecht's approach is to be seen in the idea that art, where it reflects life, does so in a special way.

What kind of a response does Swiss Cheese's behaviour extract from us? He is both stupid and honest, two qualities whose combination leads to his death. How do we respond to the stance taken by Mother Courage? Does it deserve our sympathy? Such questions are important because Brecht builds his theatre on the enhancement of the audience's critical understanding. Rather than see Mother Courage as epitomizing 'heroic' virtues, we have to take into account her capacities for survival which includes strategic disowning of her son when her life depends on it. Yet, at the same time, she achieves tragic stature with her realization, "I believe - I haggled too long." The silent suffering (she does not move from her position) born of deep grief but kept under great restraint gives her a tragic dimension much beyond our expectations of the conduct of a poor trader.

'The Song of the Hours' is an adaptation from Michael Weisse of a seventeenth-century hymn. The chaplain sings of the suffering of Christ on the cross, and on the days leading up to his Crucifixion, implying a parallel with the fate of Swiss Cheese. Note that Jesus is called "simple", just as Swiss Cheese is a 'simpleton'. The qualities of a simpleton — stupidity and honesty — are weaknesses in a world full of cruelty, greed and cunning. Jesus, too, was 'stupid', incapable of dishonesty and cunning.

Short summary

We are shown a variety of things in this scene all of which emphasizes Brecht’s breaking with the tradition of theatre as ‘illusion’. Yvette’s presence is a reminder of the ravages of war, its certain moral depravity; religion is shown to be sectarianism and prejudices, the songs are reminders of social realities being the determinants of values.

Scene 4:

This scene is built around the idea of the ‘gestus’. It is a scene that seems to be disconnected as it does not seem to build upon the action we have seen so far. The message sent out through the scene is a particular one: the usefulness of the long rage against the uselessness of the short rage.

The young soldier and Mother Courage are both shown as capitulators: their rage did not last. But Mother Courage is more complex, better than the soldier as she is aware of her own weakness. So, even while our sympathy for her is restricted by critical contemplation, her very understanding gives her a special stature.

SAQ

What is the kind of ‘rage’ that Brecht holds up for our contemplation?
By the same token, what is the kind of ‘capitulation’ that we behold?
(50 + 80 words)

.....
.....
.....
.....

Short summary

The young soldier is a contrast to Mother Courage. After the previous scene, we see Mother Courage here, waiting to file a complaint with an officer about the soldiers’ spoilage and vandalising of her canteen together with a fine slapped on her on the suspicion of her relations with the dead Swiss Cheese. In the course of her exchanges with the young soldier she

reveals her own surrender to values she had originally thought to be beneath her. The song is interspersed with lines that connect the main narrative of the growth of an attitude with the realities of daily life, the life that Mother Courage had presumably experienced.

Scene 5:

The scene is set two years later, in 1631. The canteen has travelled a long way as the war has also spread over a wide swath of territory. We find a tussle between business and humanitarian service. Mother Courage is a contrast to her daughter, Katrin. But as audience, we also understand that she has to survive and to feed her dumb daughter as well.

Stop to Consider

Tilly and Magdeburg

In the annals of European history, the sack of Magdeburg in 1631 shocked Europe.

“During the Thirty Years’ War it successfully resisted a siege by imperial forces under Albrecht von Wallenstein in 1629 but was stormed in 1631 by Johann von Tilly, who burned and sacked the city and butchered about 20,000 of the city’s 30,000 inhabitants.” [From the *Encyclopedia Britannica*]

Magdeburg embraced the Reformation in 1524 and thence came under Protestant rule. The town is situated southeast of Berlin in Germany.

The military band is playing in celebration of General Tilly’s victory. What does victory mean for the common soldier and the people at large? The two soldiers who drink brandy at Mother Courage’s canteen cannot pay. They lost their chance to plunder the town. The first soldier calls it “a swindle” meaning that the soldiers were not given enough of a chance to carry off loot; they were given only one hour to rob and plunder. He speculates that the townspeople of Magdeburg paid (or bribed) the “Chief” so that they would leave early and not sack and loot for much time as customarily done. It hardly matters to the common people whether they follow any particular sect since they lose everything.

This is therefore an ‘anti-view’ of the official history. Mother Courage loses some valuable linen in the rescue of the injured. Compassion and kindness,

as Mother Courage so fully makes explicit, do not make for gain. But the scene overall gives us many perspectives on the war - from the standpoint of the soldiers, the chaplain, Katrin, Mother Courage, and the peasants. Each perception is different from the next one so that we need to adjust and re-adjust our own approaches to the horrors of war.

Short summary

The scene is designed to bring out the meaning of 'victory' for the common people. We see the hard-hearted business sense of Mother Courage who is forced to part with some of her best wares — shirts of fine linen for officers — and has to sell brandy to soldiers who cannot pay. She is a contrast to Katrin who is spontaneously warm and loving as she tends to an infant rescued from the ruins. The chaplain seems to recover some of his original priestly dignity as he saves people from the devastation.

Scene 6:

The year is now 1632, the year after the sacking of Magdeburg. One of the topics of conversation between the scrivener, the chaplain and Mother Courage is the possibility of peace and whether it will be of help to people.

In terms of theatre-presentation or dramaturgy, by now we will have seen that the wagon is being drawn by mother and daughter. Both should be looking more ragged, possibly, more haggard. When the actors play the parts in this scene, they cannot look as lively as they did when the play opened. The chaplain and the scrivener are playing a game of draughts which the chaplain loses as he embarks on a long speech.

What arrangements are being made for Tilly's funeral and how does it affect the army? Soldiers are getting drunk in an almost festive mood but not attending the funeral. Through the exchanges between the characters we learn of the devastation wreaked on the surrounding areas, the common soldier's plight in the hands of the ruthless, demanding commanders. As we learn, even their pay is not assured. We might find it even slightly comic to hear Mother Courage commiserating Tilly's death and the chaplain laughs at her. The view that she expresses regarding the mismatch between an emperor's grand ambitions and the "littleness" of the common soldier is

laughed at by the chaplain who picks out the blind reliability of the “common riffraff that only wants a jug of beer or a bit of company, not the higher things in life”. Emperors are even at the mercy of the common people and underlings like the soldiers who give actual shape to their vast ambitions. If they provide no support then no emperor can put into concrete form what he has in mind.

What has to be considered is the question of who wants the war – the emperor, or the soldiers, or people like Mother Courage? Will the war end with Tilly’s going? No, says the chaplain, “they’re sixpence a dozen. There are always heroes.” He further explains: “A war can come to a sudden halt – from unforeseen causes – you can’t think of everything – a little oversight, and the war’s in the hole, and someone’s got to pull it out again! The someone is the Emperor or the King or the Pope. They’re such friends in need, the war has really nothing to worry about, it can look forward to a prosperous future.”

War is, obviously, a useful mechanism lending support to the establishment. The chaplain’s words are given as an explanation of war: it “satisfies *all* needs, even those of peace”. So no true distinction can be found between war and peace. Both are phases of a larger process. In Brecht’s terminology this would be ‘capitalism’.

The effect of this long discussion of war and peace is to help Mother Courage to the decision of making new investments. War will bring in more business but for Katrin it means the impossibility of marriage as she had hoped to find a husband in peace.

Why does Katrin reject the red boots belonging to Yvette which she had earlier coveted? (How would this be shown on the stage? Stage-directions say, “*Katrin leaves the boots and creeps into the wagon.*”)

Stop to Consider

“Tilly, Johann Tserclaes, Graf von (count of) (b. February 1559, Tilly, Brabant, Spanish Netherlands—d. April 30, 1632, Ingolstadt, Bavaria), outstanding Bavarian general who was the principal commander of the Catholic League in Germany during the Thirty Years’ War.”

“In 1631 Tilly laid siege to Magdeburg, strategically the most important point on the Elbe River and the base from which he hoped to check Gustav Adolf’s advance

into central Germany. On May 20, 1631, Magdeburg fell and went up in flames. The destruction of the city proved disastrous: it deprived Tilly of a base and of a source of food and shelter for his army, gave Swedish propaganda a powerful weapon, and branded Tilly as the “butcher of Magdeburg.”

- *Encyclopedia Britannica*

Ingolstadt : Tilly had been wounded in defeat in 1631 at Rain am Lech when attacked by King Gustavus. But he died in Ingolstadt on his sick bed.

schnapps: popular German alcoholic drink

Kaiser: emperor, especially German Emperor, Emperor of Austria, or Emperor of Holy Roman Empire; here, the term as occurring in the soldier’s song, reminds us that Mother Courage is now with the Catholics. Before the time of the events in Scene 3, when they were attacked and Swiss Cheese was shot as a Protestant, Mother Courage had been with the Protestants. Brecht shows that where business is concerned, religious faith makes no difference.

Bohemia: “historic country of central Europe that was a kingdom in the Holy Roman Empire and subsequently a province in the Habsburgs’ Austrian Empire. **Bohemia** was bounded on the south by Austria, on the west by Bavaria, on the north by Saxony and Lusatia, on the northeast by Silesia, and on the east by Moravia. From 1918 to 1939 and from 1945 to 1992 it was part of Czechoslovakia”

be fruitful and multiply: taken from the Book of Genesis in the Bible, where it is a blessing of peace (Genesis 1: 28)

god-given talents: from the Bible, Matthew 25: 14-30, the parable of talents, the idea there being that natural abilities are divinely endowed and are to be improved upon

gift of tongues: referring to the day of Pentecost in Acts 2:4 - “And they were filled with the Holy Ghost, and began to speak with other tongues, as the Spirit gave them utterance”. The chaplain’s claim here carries an ironic meaning and could refer to the power of demagoguery, as in the example of Hitler.

SAQ

Explain with reference to the context: “It’s a historic moment to me when they hit my daughter over the eye. She’s all but finished now, she’ll never get a husband, and she’s so mad about children! Even her dumbness comes from the war.” (About 100 words)

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Short summary

In scene 5 we saw Tilly’s victory. Now it is one year after Magdeburg and Tilly has died. What this portends for the course of the war is a topic thought over by many people. Peace and further war are both possibilities and for the moment Mother Courage and her friends set themselves to consider their own prospects in the light of all this. The discussion itself shows to us, the audience, how we can regard the war objectively and critically, not as something given.

* * * * *

Scene 7:

We actually are shown (on the stage) now who pulls the wagon. The discussion of the benefits and losses of war is resumed. Listen to the song that Mother Courage sings – does Brecht show us a “gestus” here?

Compare the stance held by Mother Courage in the previous scene. Does her stance here fit in with her character? Or, would you say that she is being contradictory? We may speculate that she has even decided that a defaced Kattrin (who is already handicapped and does not possess captivating looks) is not going to gain a husband in peace, so war is a better option on the whole. Would you even say that Brecht here is trying to flesh out in full, her character, since human nature can be most contradictory? Would we be correct in saying that Brecht’s conception of human character is based on realism? All of these questions should be considered because Brecht did

try to deal with them. Some of his later interviews give recognition of these problems.

The case of Mother Courage's contradictory responses to the war brings home to us how people "capitulate" when profits are made. The necklace of coins that she wears is a symbol of this capitulation.

Short summary

This scene does not contribute to the "action" of the play. It offers a moment of critical contemplation through the device of the song.

Scene 8:

The opening caption of the scene shows poor prospects for Mother Courage: "THE PEACE THREATENS". The peace that had been talked about in Scene 6 is now temporarily here, in 1632.

Peace is welcomed by some and feared by others. It helps to promote some relationships, as for Mother Courage and the chaplain (who is now challenged by the return of the Swedish commander's cook) but it will ruin her business. Yvette reappears, having made it good during the war.

Eilif appears, under arrest, with permission to visit his mother for the last time. As with the earlier incidents, Mother Courage yet again loses her son while she is busy doing business. She remains unaware of the real situation in which Eilif is condemned to death.

Stop to Consider

Battle of Lutzen: "Nov. 16, 1632, military engagement of the Thirty Years' War in which King Gustavus II Adolphus of Sweden lost his life; it was fought by the Swedes to help their North German allies against the forces of the Holy Roman emperor Ferdinand II."

Shall I put my pastor's coat on again? The chaplain has been disguising himself (particularly the fact that he is a Protestant) with a cloak given to him by Mother Courage in scene 3. This had to be done because the group came to be on the side of the Catholics from that point onwards.

holding the baby: Mother Courage is showing regret for having followed the advice of the chaplain and buying up goods for her business. Now that peace had arrived she was left with the burden of selling these supplies while those who had advised her (the chaplain) are free of the difficulty.

he who sups . . long spoon: a proverb advising caution when dealing with those who are not known to be trustworthy. If we consider that Brecht had written this play on the brink of the second World War, the proverb sounds prophetic against the background of the ill-advised alliances during the run-up to the war.

beanpole: implying a person who is thin and tall

the straight and narrow: idiomatic phrase drawn from the Bible (Matthew 7:14 – “strait is the gate, and narrow is the way, which leadeth unto life, and few there be that find it”) meaning the path of virtue

the mills of God grind slowly: proverbial way of saying that divine justice will be slow in coming, but certain (“the mills of God grind exceeding slow, but they grind exceeding small”)

halberd: a weapon combining both spear and axe

provost : head of the military police

SAQ

Is the character, Mother Courage – “hyena of the battlefield” or a great tragic figure ? Give your views in about 100 words.

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Brecht is anxious to keep the audience in a critical frame of mind. Which devices achieve this effect?

Sympathy and the A-effect with regard to Mother Courage: What prevents Mother Courage from learning from her experiences? Does she learn at all?

Short summary

A temporary peace poses a problem for Mother Courage as she has bought up many wares and demand may now go down. However, in contrast to her attitude, other people welcome the peace. As the prostitute, Yvette, appears, well-endowed and happy to call upon Mother Courage, her old friend, the latter rushes off with her to make good her purchases by selling dear. Half-way through the scene the peace is shattered and Mother Courage rushes back to resume where she had left off. However, Eilif, her son, is not so lucky as his actions, prized for their destructiveness in war, are condemnable during peace. His execution (off-stage) is not prevented by the return of war and tragically, Courage does not learn of it.

Scene 9:

It is now the autumn of 1634. The narration at the beginning of the scene is a graphic description of the ravages of the war. Even more telling is the fact that the cook and Mother Courage are now begging.

As Mother Courage tells us, people are unable to pay for their purchases, and “Nothing grows any more, only thorn bushes”.

Utrecht: in the Netherlands

Saxony, Württemberg, Pomerania: states in Germany (central, southwest and north)

Perhaps Courage’s horrific visions are expressive of her dilemma: on the one hand, business must pick up so that she can survive and feed her family (or what’s left of it). But her very mode of survival is fraught with fear, acute uncertainty, risks and danger. Thus, her little speech is riven with despair and paradox:

“Sometimes I see myself driving through hell with this wagon and selling brimstone. And sometimes I’m driving through heaven handing our provisions to wandering souls! If only we could find a place where there’s no shooting, me and my children — what’s left of ‘em — we might rest a while.”

The Song of Solomon is more the Cook’s than Mother Courage’s. But it embodies commentary on what the play constantly brings out: that an immoral world endangers the virtuous.

Short summary

Several years of war, about sixteen years as the war began in 1618, have progressively worsened general conditions as people have taken recourse to desperate steps to survive. The Cook confronts Mother Courage with a choice that can rend her heart: leave behind Katrin and set up a good life with the Cook in Utrecht, or continue with her existing means but without the aid of the Cook. She decides not to abandon Katrin who, however, shows a depth of understanding that her mother probably cannot match.

Scene 10:

There has been a progressive worsening of social conditions. Read the legend at the beginning of the scene: Mother Courage and Katrin pull the wagon along roads which have already been traversed by “ever more tattered armies”.

The song sung by a voice offstage tells of an existence that Katrin and her mother are not likely to know.

‘The Song of the Shelter’ brings out the contrast between the plight of Mother Courage and Katrin and the unseen householder who is singing, with pride, of the possession of home and shelter. The wandering pair belong to a different world, the world of the dispossessed. The song is thus an example of a ‘gestus’, the social attitudes arising from the difference between the haves and the have-nots. In bringing out this attitude, the song functions like choric commentary in classical drama.

Short summary

The scene plays out a brief moment on the highway showing an unnameable desire in the hearts of the two characters. You can reflect on Brecht’s handling of dramatic techniques; he does not use a soliloquy which may have been a more traditional method of expressing a character’s individual desires, but lets the song by an unseen voice do the job of bringing out the critical distance between what is visible to the eye and what can be an alternative state of existence. Not only are we made to feel that Mother Courage and Katrin feel the harshness of what their lives are subject to but the audience

can also be more objective regarding the choices that Mother Courage has taken up.

Scenes 11 & 12:

Scene 11 shows the climax of the play as it plays out to its logical conclusion what has been seen so far. It is now 1635, the year following the time of the last scene. The town of Halle is about to be attacked by the Catholics, in the middle of the night. The legend at the beginning announces that “THE STONE BEGINS TO SPEAK” preparing us for a nearly miraculous occurrence. (You should refer back to Scene 3 where Mother Courage had said of Kattrin, “I like her when she’s a stone in Dalarna, where there’s nothing but stones.”)

The action in this scene is racy and gripping as Kattrin is shown to be determined in her chosen path to martyrdom. Consider the reactions of the peasants to the situation. Throughout the play Mother Courage loses her children one by one while she conducts her business and this remains an unremitting pattern. She has gone into town to buy up her goods at low rates thus being absent when this climactic scene takes place.

SAQ

Do you think that Kattrin more truly assumes the role of a “mother courage”? What kind of ‘logic’ explains her actions? (100 + 100 words)

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Short summary

The figure of Kattrin as the epitome of courage brings an ultimate ironic contrast to the figure of Mother Courage. In the penultimate scene, Scene 11, she saves the town of Halle by raising an alarm with beating the drum which she had brought in in Scene 6. None of those who are present – the peasant family and the lieutenant with his two soldiers – are able to prevent

her drumming on the roof-top. She is impervious to the threats and the stratagems of the soldiers and is finally killed for her deed.

Mother Courage, in her last embrace of the dead Katrin, is unable to recognize what her daughter has done and can only commiserate with the meagre sentiments available to her – “You shouldn’t have told her about the children.” – since she had known Katrin’s innate tenderness towards children and animals.

2.8 BRECHT AND THE CRITICS

Early studies of Brecht and works, as in Berthold Viertel’s essay of 1945, entitled “Bertolt Brecht, Dramatist”, base their assessments on Brecht’s use of the old and the new, and the significance of the new idiom that he was creating in those years. Viertel observes Brecht’s use of some familiar ideas and names, his borrowings from older predecessors including Villon, Kipling, Rimbaud, Wedekind, Buechner, and also Marx. Such a study makes clear as to how far Brecht departed from the known and how much he adapted. Another point that Viertel makes is how Brecht’s art had to rub against the prevailing enticements put out by the entertainment industry to contemporary audiences which drove Brecht to fashion works that made claims upon the spectator. Brecht’s idea of the Epic Theatre is an important topic of discussion for many critics. Henry Goodman, writing in 1952, comments on Brecht’s relation to traditional modes of dramatic presentation and finds that in the deepest sense he is “traditional” since he works on the premise that a play has to be written well. This position has found favour with many critics who find deep connections between Brechtian theatre and older classical forms of dramatic art.

The definition and description of ‘Epic Theatre’ continued to be the focus of commentary on Brecht’s works. Another aspect, connected with Brecht’s challenge to conventional drama, was the departure from and the redefinition of realism. We should remember that the influence of Ibsen and realistic theatre prevailed till well into the twentieth century.

Martin Esslin published in 1953 “*Brecht: The Man and His Work*” in which we find the reference to an issue which has remained central to all discussions of Brecht – his allegiance to Marxism and his differences from the official

Communist party line of thought. The tendency to identify Brecht with Marxism colours much minor criticism of Brecht's work. Brecht underwent the anti-Red witch-hunting of McCarthyism in America in the 1950s. That background did continue to haunt all evaluations of Brecht's artistic contributions. His images of America were taken from the mass media and books reflecting what the European view of the country was.

An aspect of Brechtian theatre that has provided a topic for debate is the didacticism of Brecht's plays. Brecht was in no doubt about the purpose that gave to his work their wider significance : the purpose of arousing the critical attitudes of his audiences. From this standpoint, the origins of Brecht's "Alienation-Effects" have come in for discussion among critics. Brecht's indebtedness to thinkers like the Russian Formalists has been noted recently in the research of Chinese scholars like Min Tian of the Chinese Academy.

Discussions of *Mother Courage and Her Three Children* have turned very often on Brecht's conception of the protagonist. In an interesting study by Angela Curran in 2001, Brecht's turning away from Aristotelian methods of characterisation which draw upon the spectators' empathy, the figure of Mother Courage is analysed to show that Brecht took seriously the idea of the "gest" – the gesture or action that shows the larger social context of the character(s) depicted. In this sense, the 'gest' works on the idea that the actions of the individual are often the outcome of the wider economic and political context and which can be directed through human conduct. In other words, this larger context is not to be understood as a given (which Aristotelian drama assumes) but as the plane of existence which is susceptible of human motivation. With the influence of feminism behind us, Brecht's portrayal of women characters in his plays has also come in for analysis and criticism. One such study can be seen from the late 1970s where it is shown that Brecht's portrayal of women, although limited in some ways to derived images, nevertheless pointed to their subversive potential. Brecht seemed to take sexual politics very seriously and attempted to extend his portrayal of women beyond the initial dependence on traditional notions. Interestingly, Brecht often used the figure of the mother in many of his plays.

From Eric Bentley's "Preface" (1962) to *Mother Courage and her Children*

"As we look back today upon the career of Bertolt Brecht (1898 – 1956) two periods of maximum creativity define themselves. . .Brecht had written some of his finest poetry, dramatic and otherwise, before he was twenty-five. The second came when he had perforce to withdraw from the hectic political activity of the Depression Years and lead the life of an exile during the later thirties and earlier forties. This is the period of *The Good Woman of Setzuan*, *The Life of Galileo Galilei*, *The Caucasian Chalk Circle*, and of what many regard as his masterpiece, *Mother Courage and her Children*.

In this play, and *Galileo*, Brecht withdrew, not only from Nazi Germany, but from the twentieth century, and it is not without interest that the century he took in exchange was, in both instances, the seventeenth. It is the century of greatness, a century that opens with William Shakespeare and closes with Isaac Newton. Brecht finds in that century the roots of his own philosophy of life, scientific humanism. . . .

For Germans, this is not 'just another war'. In the way it bore down upon whole cities and populations, it remained unique in German history until 1944-5. Since Brecht's play was finished before World War II began, this 'cross-reference' has a sadly prophetic character....."

".....She represents, one might say, an alternative to tragedy.

But she does not represent Marxist optimism except when a director – as in Moscow, 1960, I believe – changes the ending and has her become a pacifist. Of traditional tragedy, *Mother Courage and her Children* retains the sense of overriding fate, the sheer inevitability. Is this pessimism? That, too, is a matter of semantics. I think it makes good sense to say, No, and again to claim that Brecht's work comes as an answer to a problem formulated by Sir Herbert Read. "Or fatalism gives us sotal appearance, but it is not a genuine soticism." *Mother Courage* doesn't present a stoical appearance, but I think she does embody a genuine stoicism. Though her name is an irony, and she is, in the first instance, a coward, she also, in the last analysis, needs courage – needs it merely to continue, merely to exist, and this courage is there – inside her – when she looks for it. A human being, she has human resources.

To clinch the point one need only ask oneself what a naturalistic playwright would do with *Mother Courage* at the end of his play. Would he not kill her off, probably by her own hand? How grotesque this 'solution' seems to anyone who has inhabited the world of Brecht's drama"

2.9 SUMMING UP

Over the Unit you have just worked through, you have seen the diverse aspects from which Brecht's work can be approached and appreciated. Your earlier reading of the background history of German drama will have shown up some of the heritage that has surely seeped into Brecht's contributions. While reading the play, *Mother Courage*, you would have been constrained to measure the smaller details by which the totality of the Epic theatre of Brecht is realised. Thus you have surely attempted to explain what lies behind the making of the play. We have attempted to ensure that you do not read the play in a piecemeal, disconnected fashion. Also, we have tried to ensure that you are alerted to the significant, though easily passed over, elements that are essential to the overall effect. Brecht's work, after all, had a deeper thrust to it than what appears at the superficial level. So we have set in many questions to help you jog your understanding. The salient features of the Thirty Years' War are also included so as to complete your reading. You will surely arrive at a sensitive appreciation of *Mother Courage* if you thus follow all the steps in our presentation

2.10 REFERENCES AND SUGGESTED READINGS

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