

Block-1

**Unit 1: General Introduction to English Renaissance
Drama**

Unit 2: Introduction to Modern Drama

Unit 3: Modern Drama and the Absurd

Unit 1: General Introduction to English Renaissance Drama

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1.1 Objectives

This unit seeks to equip you with basic information about English Renaissance Drama. This general introduction should help you to understand and appreciate the plays in this unit and also to understand the importance of the context in the writing and production of plays.

With the help of this unit you should be able to

- *recognize* the value of the intellectual climate in which the plays were written
- *evaluate* the importance of the theatres and the acting companies in the actual production of the plays prescribed for you.
- *identify* themes and contemporary issues that are repeated in several plays.

1.2 Introduction-Origins of Drama in England

The early history of English drama is important because you will see how the drama of the Renaissance had its roots in Christian ritual, and learn a great deal about the workings of the popular imagination as it evolved through history. This history also throws some light on the themes and conventions of later drama, and shows how drama was an important part of the religious and daily

life of the people, right from the medieval age. Finally, the development of drama shows how this particular genre is closely interwoven with the life of the spectators.

1.2.1 Tropes to Liturgical Drama

Drama and religious ritual seem to have been bound up with one another in the earlier stages of all civilizations, while folk celebrations, ritual miming of such elemental themes as death and resurrection and seasonal festivals and folk activities like the maypole dance with appropriate symbolic actions can all be seen as the base on which drama developed.

With its two great festivals of Christmas and Easter, and its celebration of the significant points of Christ's life and career from birth to resurrection, the Christian Church itself was inherently dramatic. The beginning of drama can be seen in the

- Simple chanting between priest and the congregation or the choir which represented it.
- More elaborate acting out of a scene between two characters or sets of characters.
- The processions, the ritual of movement and the gesture of church ceremonies.

Stop to Consider

What do Tropes mean in Drama?

The ceremonies designed to commemorate special Christian events like Christmas and Easter naturally lent themselves to dramatization. These ceremonial dramatizations were known as tropes - simple but dramatic elaborations of parts of the liturgy - and they represent the beginnings of medieval drama.

The Quem Quaeritis? Trope is one of the earliest recorded tropes performed at Easter in the 10th century. It depicts a dialogue between the three Marys and the angel at Christ's tomb, and it is known as the "Quem Quaeritis?" Trope because it asks the question "Whom do ye seek?"

"Whom do you seek?"

"Jesus of Nazareth, who was crucified."

“He is not here. He is risen.”
The “Quem Quaeritis?” trope is often identified as the earliest instance of medieval drama.
The simple trope eventually grew into liturgical drama, which was drama arising from or developed in connection with church rites or services. Liturgical drama was fully developed in the 12th century. At first these dramatic renderings were presented in Latin and were played within the church. Liturgical dramas represented dimensions of the life of Christ. The first Passion Play developed in the 13th century.

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Stop to Consider

What is a Passion Play?
The passion play began in the Middle Ages and was originally a work depicting Christ’s passion or crucifixion. It was performed from about the 13th century onward. In its later manifestations, it came to include both Passion and Resurrection. The form gradually died in popularity after the 16th and 17th centuries, but it remains locally popular.
These dialogues developed into small plays and the staging of the plays became more elaborate making it difficult to confine them to their traditional area: the choir portion of the church. The performances left the confines of the church and moved to the porch and as they increased in popularity, they were presented in the vernacular. Eventually, dramatic representations moved out of the church altogether - and this simple move brought massive changes to the face of drama. First, they were produced in the churchyard itself and then later they moved into an even larger space, traditionally the marketplace of the town or even a convenient meadow.

SAQ

1. What can we infer regarding the interplay of the roles of priest and congregation in the origins of English drama ? (30 words)

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2. How does drama get linked to the Church ? (30 words)

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1.2.2 Miracle and Mystery Plays

Dramatic progress is connected with the development of the fairs, the increase of wealth, the rise of the burgher class and the development of the English language. Slowly drama severed its links with the church and the clergy who had initially provided all the actors. These changes became more apparent by the second half of the thirteenth century. The first plays in English were presented under Henry III.

Once outside the church, English ousted Latin and drama began to present the entire range of religious history. The Easter and Nativity cycles were united and performed together on Corpus Christi Day, which was less crowded with other events than Christmas and Easter, and which fell in summer (May or June).

Stop to Consider

Corpus Christi

The establishment of the feast of Corpus Christi in 1264 provided a suitable day for play presentation because plays were now presented outdoors and had become dependent upon on the weather and could no longer be acted on all of the different church festivals.

Corpus Christi also involved a professional observance with the Host carried about and displayed at various stations. The plays were generally presented on wagons or pageant carts, which were in effect moving stages. Each pageant cart presented a different scene of the cycle and the wagons followed each other, repeating their scenes at successive stations. The carts were often very elaborate, equipped with a changing room, a stage proper, and two areas which represented hell (usually a painted dragon's head) and heaven (a balcony). The stage machineries and the sound effects became integral parts of the plotting. The duration of the

performances varied with the number of plays in a cycle, but always extended over several days. In Chester, for example, where there were only twenty-four plays the performances continued for three days while at York where forty-eight plays were enacted, performances continued for a longer period.

When the plays moved outdoors trade or craft guilds - important in many ways to social and economic life in the Middle Ages - took over in sponsoring the plays, making them more secular. In fact, each pageant became the province of a particular guild.

The Liturgical drama, confined to the church and designed to embellish the ecclesiastical ritual, thus gave way to plays in English, performed in the open and separated from the liturgy though still religious in subject matter. Such early plays are known as miracle or mystery plays.

It is at this stage that elements from minstrel performances and older folk festivals began to be incorporated into what was originally Christian drama. These new elements provided vitality for a drama whose primary function was fast beginning to be entertainment.

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Stop to Consider

The religious drama had literary value because of its simple grandeur and the language that was employed. However the poets effaced themselves before their subjects. They had no freedom of invention or composition, and were debarred from discovering motives for action except within strict limits. Since the stories were known to everyone, the principal interest was in the spectacles. The intervention of the author was, therefore very limited.

You may note how the drama that was slowly developing was a part of the everyday life of the people. Since the guilds financed different plays, it ensured the whole-hearted participation of its members. This involvement can be seen in the drama of the Renaissance and the vitality of this form has its roots in the Middle Ages.

One cannot say that drama was fully developed in the fifteenth century, but this was the period during which most of the cycles of the Christian theatre were compiled and in which Miracle plays reached their climax. The transition from simple liturgical drama to

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miracle and mystery play can't be accurately dated or documented. It is believed that miracle plays developed rapidly in the 13th century; there are records of cycles of miracle plays in many regions of England during the 14th-15th centuries, even into the 16th.

The development of the dialogue and the action in these early dramas is relatively naive, simple, as is the story presented. As time passed, however, touches of realistic comedy were introduced.

Stop to Consider

It is in the comic scenes that English playwrights show most originality. Comedy in the Middle Ages often mingled with solemn themes. Authors were fully independent only in the comic parts of the play, in passages which owed nothing to Holy Writ. Sometimes the playwright enlivened secondary Biblical characters and sometimes he invented characters in order to provide comic relief. Authors often used the manners and speech of the common people for their characters. In later Renaissance drama Shakespeare and his contemporaries often did exactly the same thing - kept the tragic central pattern of their source intact and added to it a comic border of their own.

SAQ

1. Which elements become important once drama moves out of the precincts of the church ? (25 words)

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2. In what way does patronage or sponsorship affect drama ? (30 words)

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1.2.3 Moralities and Interludes

While the miracle plays were still going strong, another medieval dramatic form - the morality play - emerged in the 14th century and flourished in the 15th-16th centuries. The morality plays seem less alive and more artificially constructed than the miracle

plays, but they mark a necessary stage, and in a sense, a considerable advance in the progress towards the Elizabethan drama. The morality play differs from the miracle play in that it does not deal with a biblical or pseudo-biblical story but with personified abstractions of virtues and vices who struggle for man's soul. Simply put, morality plays deal with man's search for salvation. They are at their origin as much imbued with Christian teaching as the miracle plays but have a more intellectual character.

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Stop to Consider

The differences between miracle and morality plays

A miracle play was essentially a spectacle while the morality plays demanded greater attention to the written word.

The author of a morality play had more freedom to arrange his subject. He could analyze human qualities and defects and his character could be psychologically more believable.

Instead of the multiple moveable pageants of the miracle plays the moralities used a single unchanging stage.

The moralities had one plot.

Morality plays were dramatized allegories of the life of man, his temptation and sinning, his quest for salvation, and his confrontation by death. The morality play, which developed most fully in the 15th century, handled the subjects that were most popular among medieval preachers and drew considerably on contemporary homiletic (sermon, preaching) techniques.

Stop to Consider

Key Elements & Themes of Morality Plays

Morality plays held several elements in common:

- The hero represents Mankind or Everyman.
- Among the other characters are personifications of virtues, vices and Death, as well as angels and demons who battle for the possession of the soul of man.
- The psychomachia, the battle for the soul, was a common medieval theme and bound up with the whole idea of medieval allegory, and it found its way into medieval drama - and even into some Renaissance drama, as Dr. Faustus indicates.

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- A character known as the Vice often played the role of the tempter in a fashion both sinister and comic.

The earliest complete extant morality play is *The Castle of Perseverance*, which was written circa 1425. This was an elaborate play with 3650 lines and 34 characters, and its theme is the fight between Mankind's Good Angel and his supporters and his Bad Angel, who is supported by the Seven Deadly Sins. The action takes Man from his birth to the Day of Judgment. *Everyman* (ca. 1500) is perhaps the best known morality play. It depicts Everyman's journey in the face of Death. The hero is capably assisted to his end by Good Deeds.

Toward the end of the 15th century, there developed a type of morality play which dealt in the same allegorical way with general moral problems, although with more pronounced realistic and comic elements. This kind of play is known as the interlude.

The term might originally have denoted a short play actually performed between the courses of a banquet. It can be applied to a variety of short entertainments including secular farces and witty dialogues with a religious or political point.

SAQ:

1. Attempt to enumerate the different forms of drama from the thirteenth to the fifteenth century. (30 words)

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2. In what sense does the morality play mark a stage in the progress of English drama ? (20 words)

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Henry Medwall's *Fulgens and Lucrece* written at the end of the 15th century is the earliest extant purely secular play in English. He had already written a morality play entitled *Nature*. Medwall was one of a group of early Tudor playwrights that included John

Rastell and John Heywood, who ended up being the most important dramatist of them all. Heywood's interludes were often written as part of the evening's entertainment at a nobleman's house and their emphasis is more on amusement than instruction. Heywood's art resembles the modern music-hall or vaudeville sketch. The plots are very basic.

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SAQ

What makes the interlude a distinctively important form of drama?
(25 words)
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1.2.4 Classical Influences on Comedies and Tragedies

At the same time, classical influences were being felt, providing for a developing national drama new themes and new structures, first in comedy and then later in tragedy.

Taking its theme from the *Milos Gloriosus* of Roman playwright, Plautus, about 1553, Nicholas Udall wrote the comic play, *Ralph Roister Doister*. This play brings the braggart soldier for the first time into English drama. Udall's characters function both as traditional vices/virtues and as traditional characters in Latin comedy (for example, the Parasite, who also shows up in the plays of Ben Jonson). The plot is simple, but it does include a complication and a resolution, which shows a firmer grasp on structure.

Another comedy, *GammerGurton's Needle*, by "Mr. S.," probably William Stevenson of Christ's College, was written a few years later and produced at the college. Here, the themes and characters of Plautus combine with the comedy of English rural life. The plot is crude and comic: "Gammer" Gurton loses her needle and it is found sticking in the pants of her servant. However, the construction in five acts is effective.

It was not until George Gascoigne produced his comic play, *Supposes*, at Gray's Inn in 1566 that prose made its first appearance in English drama. Gascoigne's play is another comedy adapted from a foreign source, from the Italian of Ariosto. Gascoigne's play is far

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more sophisticated and subtle than *Ralph Roister Doister* or *Gammer Gurton's Needle*. In fact, it is the first of many witty Italianate comedies in English which includes Shakespeare's *Taming of the Shrew* and *Much Ado About Nothing*.

Although we rarely read any of these early works, they are important because they bring to English drama elements that would be further developed by its master playwrights. Moreover, Gascoigne's work indicates that the popular tradition of the English drama could be modified and enhanced by classical influences and by the needs of a more sophisticated audience.

At the same time that these changes were occurring in English comedy, the Humanist interest in Latin and Greek classics helped produce a new kind of English tragedy.

Stop to Consider

It is important to remember that there were no tragedies among the miracle or morality plays; in fact, there was nothing that could be called tragedy in English drama before the classical influence began.

SAQ:

1. How does 'reality' begin to make its appearance in drama ?
(30 words)

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2. How did classical influences affect the shaping of drama ?
(30 words)

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3. Try to outline the different categories of characters who appeared in the early plays till the 15th century. (40 words)

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The favorite classical writer of tragedies among English Humanists was not Sophocles or Euripides but Seneca, the Stoic Roman. Seneca's nine tragedies provided Renaissance playwrights with volatile materials: they adapted Greek myths to produce violent and somber treatments of murder, cruelty, and lust. Seneca's works were translated into English by Jasper Heywood and others in the mid-16th century, and they greatly influenced the direction of drama on the English stage.

Stop to Consider

Senecan Tragedy

Seneca's tragedies are bloody and bombastic, combining powerful rhetoric, Stoic moralizing and elements of sheer horror. There are numerous emotional crises, and characters are not subtly drawn but are ruled by their passions, being mixtures of sophistication and crudeness.

Seneca's plays were discovered in Italy in the mid-16th century and translated into English, where they greatly influenced the developing English tragedy.

Although Seneca's writing style did not provide a good model for developing English playwrights - it was polished yet monotonous - his methodology did. Like the sonnet, the typical Senecan tragedy was ordered and concentrated. It was a good proving ground for would-be dramatists.

Gorboduc, - also known as *Ferrex and Porrex*- written by Thomas Sackville and Thomas Norton and produced around 1561-2 is considered the first successful English tragedy in the Senecan style:

- It is divided into 5 acts,
- It follows the classical manner in avoiding violence on the stage (instead, it presents it offstage), and
- It is written in blank verse, the first English play to be so.

1.3 Drama And Society

It is no longer possible or desirable to read 'texts' as expressions of 'the point of view' of the author, or as a simple expression of the author's intention.

The works of new historicist critics like Stephen Greenblatt have made it

impossible to believe that the author is the source of all meaning. A dramatic discourse is composed out of a language that comes to the author deeply imprinted with ideology. You can refer to Stephen Greenblatt's *Renaissance Self-Fashioning: From More to Shakespeare*. [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980.]

The work done by scholars like Greenblatt and other new historicists show that we must be aware that the social milieu, cultural forms of genre and characterization as well as the collective endeavours and material realities of the companies and theatres shaped a dramatist's representation of the world in plays. These factors are as important as any point of view that he may have wished to express. As you read this section you will also have to be aware that 'history' does not guarantee 'truth' but can even be viewed as one kind of 'fiction' since we also acknowledge that no value-free, literal, or scientific historical narrative or account is humanly possible. This is not to deny that there is a real material history with which historians engage as they arrange their material into historical narratives. 'History' does not depend only on ascertainable facts but on the ideological premises of the writer as well as the questions that are asked and the categories that are constructed.

As we turn to the dramatic texts we must remind ourselves that they are usually structured around debates. The dramatic texts also offer a record, mediated through the dramatist, producers and actors, of the period's perception of itself, of events or series of events.

Having said this, we must now relate drama to a complex period that spans almost a hundred years. This was an age of radical change and you will find it extremely useful to consult a standard book on history so that you become familiar with actual historical events that took place.

SAQ

After reading the above, what can you say of plays which are based on history ? (30 words)

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1.3.1 The Condition Of England

Earlier accounts of the cultural history of the period celebrated the myth of Merry England ruled not by a mortal woman but by

Gloriana. This myth was a creation of writers of the period. Dramatists like Dekker in his *Old Fortunatus* (1599) celebrated this idea and scholars very often went along with the model of an England that was an orderly and well-governed society.

The model is of 'the Elizabethan World Picture' - a picture of a stratified, hierarchical society, which stemmed from the desires of the Renaissance elite to legitimize inequality by calling it 'order'. It was assumed that most men and women were happy about their place in it. The reality as presented in many plays of the period was different.

In many of the plays of Shakespeare and his contemporaries the reader will come across encounters between characters belonging to the nobility - those in power, and characters from the marginalized sections of societies. *The Jew of Malta, Measure for Measure, Henry IV Part I, King Lear, As you Like It, Hamlet* and many other plays provide such examples. These encounters become crucial because they show that although English society of that time was based on a system of institutionalized social inequality, it was being challenged and dismantled by other forces.

The hierarchical structure of Elizabethan and Jacobean England was based partly on wealth and partly on nebulous concepts of status. As the century progressed it became increasingly possible for men to buy status with new-found wealth. In 1611 James I institutionalized the practice by creating a new hereditary title, the order of baronets, and then the selling of these baronetcies for £1,095 each. Social change had diminished the prominence of the nobility.

Long before this, however, the apparently static social hierarchy of England had been undergoing changes. The sixteenth and seventeenth centuries saw a transition from an economy which was predominantly feudal in 1500 to one which was predominantly capitalist in 1700. The rapid development of capitalist enterprise was accompanied by an increase in the population. The rampant economic individualism (like Jonson's *Volpone*) brushed aside the regulations of craft guilds and the feudal order was threatened by the speculators.

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Stop to Consider

How would you link the discovery of the New World, the growth of towns and the Protestant emphasis on the primacy of the individual to the shift from a feudal to a capitalist economy during this period? Look at the plays of this period and see how playwrights deal with the new acquisitive spirit that is predominant in this age. Do they point out that the new mercantile capitalism tends to shatter an older tradition which emphasized the importance of human relationships and duties?

Do the plays satirize the personal excesses and selfish behaviour of characters who no longer believe in fulfilling traditional obligations or do they see this as an inevitable fall out of a changing society?

Until the sixteenth century, the national government was relatively weak in England and the important centers of trade and commerce were regional: York, Coventry, etc. In consequence English intellectual and artistic life tended to be dispersed. Actors travelled from town to town performing in great houses and inns. In the sixteenth century, things began to change. The Tudor monarchs - Henry VII, Henry VIII and Elizabeth - consolidated power in the hands of the central government at the expense of local or regional authorities. The effect of this was to concentrate power and wealth in London, England's commercial and shipping hub, and in Westminster, the seat of government, which adjoined London. During the later sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries there was large-scale migration of people from the provinces to London seeking economic opportunity. The theatre companies still went on tour but they began to concentrate their activities to London because that was where the paying audiences were.

SAQ

Attempt a broad description of English society at this time.
(30 words)

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Stop to Consider

“The University Wits”

There was a substantial increase in the number of university-educated younger or dispossessed sons of the ruling elite who were not members of the clergy. This led in the 16th century to a new literary phenomenon, the secular professional playwright. The first to exploit this situation was a group of writers known as the University Wits, young men who had graduated from Oxford or Cambridge with no patrons to sponsor their literary efforts and no desire to enter the Church. They turned to playwriting to make a living. In doing so they made Elizabethan drama more literary and more dramatic—and they also had an important influence on both private and public theaters because they worked for both. They set the course for later Elizabethan and Jacobean drama.

Some of the University Wits were:

- John Lyly (1554 - 1606) is best known for court comedies, generally for private theatres, but also wrote mythological and pastoral plays. *Endymion & Euphues*.
- George Peele (1558 - 98) wrote *The Arraignment of Paris* he began writing courtly mythological pastoral plays like Lyly's, and also wrote histories and biblical plays.
- Robert Greene (1558 - 92), who is said to have founded romantic comedy, wrote plays that combined realistic native backgrounds with an atmosphere of romance, as well as comedies. He is also well known for *The Honourable History of Friar Bacon & Friar Bungay*.
- Thomas Lodge (1557 - 1625) tended toward eupheistic prose romances. His *Rosalynde* provided Shakespeare with the basis for *As You Like It*. His most important work is his picaresque tale *The Unfortunate Traveller*, an early novel.
- Thomas Kyd (1558 - 94), founded romantic tragedy. He wrote plays mingling the themes of love, conspiracy, murder and revenge. He adapted elements of Senecan drama to melodrama. His *The Spanish Tragedy* (1580s) is the first of the series of revenge plays which captured the Elizabethan and Jacobean imaginations.
- Christopher Marlowe (1564 - 93) was the most impressive dramatist among the University Wits. His first play was the

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two-part *Tamburlaine the Great* (1587-88), which was important because it introduced his style of blank verse. He also wrote *The Tragical History of Dr Faustus*, *Edward II* and *The Jew of Malta*.

To sum up, Elizabethan and Jacobean society may be seen as a period in which a sense of permanence and stability was constantly being challenged by emerging forces of capitalism, which encouraged mobility. The interplay between these forces was complex, they sometimes appeared to be antagonistic, and at other times the old hierarchical structures came to terms with the new capitalism, internalized and used it for its own ends.

1.4 Playhouses And Players

Conditions of staging, acting and production underwent tremendous changes during this period; you will have to be aware of this as you study the plays. The period from 1558 to the end of the reign of Charles I was a period during which theatre in England was transformed beyond recognition. It would be unrealistic to look for a uniform dramatic tradition for such a long period of time. This account of the playhouses and players of this period will deal briefly with the changes and developments that took place in the theatres during the passage of nearly a century.

Stop to Consider

The only constant feature of the theatres up to 1642 was that all the actors were male. The professional companies in London had no actresses in them until after the restoration of the monarchy in 1660.

SAQ:

1. How do conditions of staging a play affect its mode of representation? (30 words)

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2. Try to sum up the major social and political events between 1558 - 1649. (40 words)

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1.4.1 The Arena Theatres

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A tradition of playing by adult groups of players and companies of boys was already established by the time Queen Elizabeth came to the throne. There was a tradition of acting plays in the Grammar schools and this led to boy companies providing entertainment at court during Christmas and Shrovetide. The plays had been staged in court from the time of Henry IV and Queen Elizabeth continued this tradition.

During the early years of Elizabeth's reign groups of players provided entertainment at court as well as in great houses. They performed more frequently in public in the square or rectangular courtyards of a number of inns in the city of London, as the galleries around the courtyards provided space for the spectators. The companies were all licensed by the patronage of some great lord to travel and perform, for if they were unlicensed they were, according to a statute of 1598, termed "Rogues, Vagabond and Sturdy Beggars". The civic authorities of London were hostile to the players because they saw them as responsible for promoting disorder and distracting people from their proper occupations. The common Council of London in December 1574 banned performances in taverns in the city unless innkeepers were licensed and the plays first subjected to strict supervision and censorship.

These restrictions stimulated entrepreneurs to borrow money and set up the first professional playhouse outside the jurisdiction of the city authorities. The earliest was the Red Lion, built in 1567 in Stepney to the east of London. This was followed by The Theatre (1576), The Curtain (1577) and The Rose (1587), the Swan (1595). The Theatre was dismantled and the Globe was set up in 1599. The Red Bull (1605) was the last open air theatre to be built apart from the Hope (1614) which also functioned as a bear-baiting arena. By this time, performances were being offered daily and the new playhouses offered spectators more comfort than the inn yards.

The city's attempt to restrain playing in inn yards actually had the opposite effect; it contributed to the development of professional companies playing regularly on most days.

These playhouses were all similar in their basic conception; they were all large open air arena theatres accommodating up to three thousand spectators. However, they did differ from each other in many

ways and over the years many structural changes were introduced as spectators became more demanding.

Philip Henslowe plastered and put ceilings into the Gentlemen's rooms at the Rose in 1592 and in 1595 he had a 'throne' made in 'heavens', probably a machine made to lower a throne and other properties on to the stage. The later theatres like the Swan, the Fortune and the Globe were more elaborately furnished than the earlier playhouses. The cover over the stage, which was perhaps initially a simple canopy, painted on the underside with a sun, moon and stars and designed to protect actors, properties and hangings from the worst of the weather later evolved into more permanent structures. In the Globe and Fortune the canopy was probably more substantial, and it may have been possible to use the space between the sloping roof and the ceiling for windlasses and machinery for lowering people and properties on to the stage. In the Fortune the area under the stage was known as 'hell'. The use of trapdoors made it possible for various startling appearances, like the devil that rises from the stage in scene 3 of Marlowe's *Doctor Faustus*. Some idea of these stage effects can be gathered from the prologue to George Chapman's *All Fools* (1599) written for performance by the Admiral's Men at the Fortune. It draws the attention of the spectators to the startling stage effects:

The fortune of a Stage (like Fortune's self)
Amazeth greatest judgements; and none knows
The hidden cause of those strange effects
That rise from this Hell, or fall from this Heaven.

By the end of the sixteenth century, then Elizabethan theatre offered lavish and brilliant spectacles that were created with the use of elaborate costumes, hangings and stage properties.

SAQ:

Comment on the 'commercialisation' of theatre in this period. (40 words)

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Stop to Consider

The essential point is not that the stage was bare, but that no attempt at scenic illusion was made; the stage location was whatever the dramatist made the actor say it was. This made it possible for dramatists to provide spectators with romances, histories and tragedies that ranged freely over the known world or to imaginary locations, like Marlowe's *Tamburlaine*, or Thomas Heywood's *The Four Prentices of London*, with *The Siege of Jerusalem*, or Shakespeare's *The Tempest*.

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The reference to Philip Henslowe is indispensable for our knowledge of English Renaissance theatre. You can judge for yourself the significance of his name from what the following passage tells us:

“Although contemporary evidence for the structure and organization of the Elizabethan theatre continues to be discovered, it is still fragmentary and not entirely consistent in its implications. This information consists of incidental references in letters, diaries, pamphlets, and so on, of the implications of the action and stage directions of plays themselves, and of documents such as the decrees of the Privy Council

The diary of Philip Henslowe, the theatre owner and manager, who kept an account of the daily takings at the Rose theatre from February 1592 to November 1597, is a unique and invaluable source, not only of information about the theatres themselves, but also for the lives of the playwrights and actors who furnished their business. . .

The archaeological excavations on the site of the Rose theatre show it to have been a polygonal structure, originally with about fourteen sides, of roughly 72 feet in diameter. . . Major alterations were carried out in 1592, giving the building a bulging tulip-shape. Henslowe's diary includes a list of costs for the alterations, and shows that the walls were made of lath and plaster, and that some of the ceilings were plastered, and the roof thatched.”

[From *The Penguin Shakespeare Dictionary*, (1999) pp.18-20]

By 1599 the free-ranging spectacles of the public theatres were drawing the scorn of dramatists like Ben Jonson who preferred to observe the neo-classical unities of time place and action. In *Every Man out of His Humour* (Globe, 1599), Jonson's commentators on the action pun on the playwright's 'travel':

MITIS... How comes it then that in some one play we see so many seas, countries, and kingdoms passed over with such admirable dexterity?

CORADATUS Oh, that but shows how well the authors can travail in their vocation, and outrun the apprehension of authority.

(Introduction, 267-72)

The arena playhouses of the period 1576-1642 were radically different from modern theatres in which actors usually appear behind a proscenium arch, under spotlights, in front of an audience sitting in a darkened auditorium. In the arena playhouses “the actor and audience shared the same lighting and effectively the same space, since the stage projected into the middle of the building, and the actors spent much of their time in close contact with the spectators who surrounded them. One reason these theatres stayed in business was that they provided an especially close relationship between actors and audience, with no visual barrier between them, allowing the actor to identify as intimately as he pleased with spectators, or to distance himself within the action.” Dramatists continually exploited this awareness, *in prologues, inductions, jokes, metaphors and plays within the play*, reminding the audiences of the fictive nature of what they were watching, and of the uncertain boundary between illusion and reality.

Two devices, which were used brilliantly by most dramatists of this time, were the *aside* and the *soliloquy*. In the *aside* the actor could step out of his role to comment on the action and take the audience into his confidence, and the *soliloquy* in which the character was allowed to reveal to the audience aspects of himself that were hidden from other characters.

SAQ:

To what extent does historical information regarding literary conventions (like ‘prologues’, or ‘soliloquy’) change your reading of Elizabethan plays? (35 words)

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.....

1.4.2 The Early Private Playhouses

In the early years of Queen Elizabeth's reign she had relied on the boys of the choir and grammar schools of St Paul's cathedral and the choir boys of the Chapel Royal at Windsor to provide entertainment at court during Christmas and Shrovetide. Richard Farrant, an enterprising master of the choirboys at Windsor had become well known in court circles as a presenter of plays. He leased rooms at the Blackfriars Monastery in the city of London to establish the first private playhouse. After his death the lease passed on to the dramatist John Lyly and performances continued to be put up till 1584. This was the first roofed, indoor playhouse in London. The space available was quite small and the audiences were too. The establishment of the first Blackfriars playhouse between 1576 and 1584 marked a major innovation in offering to a select audience a sophisticated alternative to the dramatic fare provided at the adult public theatres. The repertory of the boys' companies of this period included morality plays, classical pastorals like Peele's *The Arraignement of Paris* and the graceful court comedies of Lyly, usually based on classical themes, but laced with topical allegory, as in *Endymion and Midas*.

The dramatic activities of the boy players took on a quasi-professional status with the establishment of a hall within St Paul's Cathedral and the establishment of the second Blackfriars theatre in 1600. The boys staged plays by Marston, Chapman and Middleton. From about 1600 the indoor playhouses at Blackfriars and St Paul's came to be known as 'private' theatres in contrast to the 'public' theatres. The private theatres staged plays less frequently and they began plays at a later time, 3 or 4 in the afternoon as against 2 o'clock the customary time at the public theatres. The private playhouses also charged much higher prices than the public ones. All the audiences were seated in the private theatres, and higher prices meant that these theatres attracted gallants and gentlewomen. The boys acted by candlelight and provided music between acts of a play.

This was an innovation, for act divisions were not observed as intervals in the public theatres, and music was not played. At Blackfriars, music was played before performance began, and sometimes there was dancing and singing between acts. Music was a feature of small enclosed theatres, where soft sounds could be heard, and a range of instruments used. Another innovation that became a

Space for Learner

feature of private theatres was the practice of allowing members of the audience, who paid extra for the privilege, to have a stool and sit on the stage during the show.

The characteristic style of playing of the boys' companies has been described as anti-mimetic. The boys playing and mimicking adults invited their audiences to be continuously critical and detached. They deliberately catered to a more select audience. The development of the indoor playhouses points to an increasing concern for refinement, comfort and sophistication, and to a kind of naturalism. In these theatres the relation of the audience to the stage was fundamentally changed, since the audience was seated close to the stage, a more low-keyed and intimate style of acting was possible. The boys companies at the private theatres flourished for a relatively short period but they established the desirability of enclosed theatres and they showed that small theatres charging higher prices was economically viable proposition

Stop to Consider

Players & Theatres: Facts to Remember?

- In 1583 Queen Elizabeth's Master of the Revels formed a company of players for the Queen. ?
- In 1576, James Burbage, leader of the Earl of Leicester's men, built the first permanent theater, called "The Theatre," in a field near Shoreditch, out of the city and thus out of the control of the Lord Mayor, who was the official "censor" of plays. ?
- Other permanent, public theatres soon followed: the Curtain, in 1577; the Rose, in 1588; the Swan, in 1595. ?
- Shakespeare's theatre, the Globe, was built in 1599. ?
- In addition to the public theatres, there were private ones, chief among them the Blackfriars (1576). They were different from public theatres because they:
 - were roofed,
 - had more elaborate interior arrangements, and presented plays originally acted by child players.

SAQ:

1. As you read this section try and see how the plays prescribed for you were influenced by the stage practices of the time they were written in.

Can you relate the different kinds of plays that were written in this period to the development of the 'private' and 'public' theatres? (30 words)

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.....

2. Study the asides and soliloquies and see what use the playwright is making of these devices (40 words)

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

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1.5 Playwrights and Conditions of Production

The stage conditions for which Shakespeare and his contemporaries wrote were ideally suited to reflecting issues of importance in the society. The Elizabethans reaped the advantages of Burbage's first public commercial theatre, which was built in London in 1576. Its significance was twofold. In the first place the building of a permanent public theatre in London guaranteed the professional status of both the playwright and the acting companies. The strolling players of the sixteenth century had been outlawed as vagabonds. The companies, which played in the new theatres, were normally associated with a noble household, but in practice they were independent of patronage because they were financed on a commercial basis by their own earnings in the theatres. The willingness of the new theatre companies to pay for the plays created, for the first time in England a paying market for literature. The playwrights instead of being wholly dependent on patronage and on command performances in the court were now employed by the acting companies, as Shakespeare was for the Chamberlain's Men, and then the King's Men, and as Heywood was for the Red Bull. This gave them security, for they were not dependent on personal favours to make a living. Early plays were written for the Children's companies attached to the Chapel Royal and St Paul's. In the period before 1600 these companies were strictly amateur; their performances were given at court about twice a year; even at Blackfriars theatre performances other than those specifically requested by the court were billed as rehearsals.

When playwrights wrote with an eye to court performances their plays needed the court audiences for their completion, and they had to acknowledge the presence of the Queen. For the professional playwrights in the public theatre the situation was completely different. They were not indebted to a patron or monarch, and were answerable to the audience - an audience very different from the court audience.

Stop to Consider

- As you read this section try and remember what has been said about players and playhouses in the section before this.
- Try and recollect what you have already learnt about boy actors and public theatres.
- Now read the plays prescribed for you and see how these factors controlled the playwright.
- Plays cannot be fully appreciated in their complexity if modes of production are not taken into account. The form, as well as the theme a playwright chooses, is closely connected to the theatres and actors at his disposal.

The plays enacted in the public theatres had to appeal to an extremely diverse group of people - gallants and courtiers, as well as a large following of tradesmen, citizens, merchants, artisans and workers, and their wives and children. The theatre was no longer the preserve of the wealthy, the poorer sections of society could afford this entertainment because standing seats cost only a penny while seats in the gallery could be procured for two or three pence. The commercialization of the theatre in the Elizabethan and Jacobean period forced playwrights to leave academic school drama and elegant court interludes and get in touch with the concerns of the London world at a time when it was seething with new ideas and activities.

Playwrights writing for the public theatres were dealing with adult actors this enabled them to extend their range of interest. The child actor had special talents of precocity, wit and quickness in debate but he also had limitations. Children tire more quickly than adults and their light voices were not suitable for elaborate soliloquies involving complex psychological problems. Many Critics have pointed out that *Hamlet* could not have been written for a boy. Shakespeare's plays might have been very different if he did not have adult actors and the public theatre at his disposal.

1.6 Summing Up

The English Renaissance Drama, also popularly known as Elizabethan Drama, was the most significant literary genre that flourished during the Elizabethan Age. During that era, most eminent playwrights like Shakespeare and Marlowe ruled over dramatic compositions, influential for the stage as well as literary explorations. The playwrights usually adopted the classic models, and the drama was basically of two major types- tragedy and comedy. However, a new genre of history plays emerged during the period and gained immediate success and popularity on the stage. The Elizabethan drama flourished until 1642, when the Puritans closed down the theatre houses and banned all forms of dramatic performances, considering it immoral and obscene. The theatre was restored in 1660 with the English restoration of King Charles II ascending the throne, which came to known as the Restoration Age.

1.7 References and Suggested Readings

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Unit 2 : Introduction to Modern Drama

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Unit Structure :

- 2.1 Objectives
- 2.2 Introduction
- 2.3 The Great Innovators
- 2.4 Understanding the 'modern' in English Drama
- 2.5 Understanding the 'modern' in European/American Drama
- 2.6 A New 'Tradition' of Modern Drama
- 2.7 Summing up
- 2.8 References and Suggested Readings

2.1 Objectives

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

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

2.2 Introduction

Before the work of pioneers like Henrik Ibsen of Norway, August Strindberg of Sweden, and George Bernard Shaw of Ireland, it is difficult to describe or to define what drama look like in the modern period. Of course, you must understand that drama is not 'modern' simply because it is created in the modern period. The pioneers we have mentioned began with breaking away from the kind of theatre that characterized much of 19th century dramatic works. Instead of continuing with the earlier realism of the 'well-made' plays which resulted in too much moralizing, sensationalism, and farcical melodrama modern dramatists encouraged the audience to participate in a kind of 'open-endedness'. What this amounted to was what Shaw called in his book, *The Quintessence of Ibsenism* (1891) a 'socially conscious drama'. In that sense, modern drama has always made important a sense of experimentation, where rather than the plot it is the open-ended discussion which invited the spectator to

participate in and not remain a passive audience. Modern drama, in the hands of such pioneers made use of, besides realism, expressionism, surrealism, absurdism, epic theatre, agit-prop, and meta-theatre.

2.3 The Great Innovators

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

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

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

Adolphe Appia: (1862-1928):

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

Antonin Artaud: (1896-1948):

The French playwright, poet, actor and theatre director, Antonin Artaud was a significant member of the French theatrical avant-garde between the two World Wars. Artaud believed that theatre should affect

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

Stop to Consider

Antonin Artaud, surrealism and modernism Artaud emphasised the role of surrealism in the theatre in his search for the total liberty that he thought would make drama the adequate art form capable of projecting the catastrophic conditions that the modern world seemed to promise. Realising that old values could no longer offer meaning to modern civilisation, he declared realism and all its traditional forms of representation, declaring traditional “master pieces” to be irrelevant. However, the most significant and influential development of Surrealism in the theatre came with Antonin Artaud, who rejected everything ethereal in pursuit of “the truthful precipitate of dreams . . . imprinted with terror and cruelty.” Artaud’s principles are essentially modernist - his aim being specifically “to return to the theatre that total liberty which exists in contemporary music, poetry, or painting, and of which it has been curiously bereft up till now.” Like many of his contemporaries in the 1920s and earlier, Artaud was sensitive to the destabilizing effect of modern conditions, of being faced with a period “when the world . . . sees its old values crumble.” He attacked realism, and all traditional European forms of representation by proclaiming all “masterpieces” as irrelevant. He worked for direct communication and explored irrationality. As Eric Bentley writes Artaud’s manifestos shed lights on the phenomenon which Mr. Martin Esslin has called ‘Theatre of the Absurd.’

Bertolt Brecht (1898-1956):

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

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

Stop to Consider:

Epic Theatre

Epic theatre was a theatrical movement arising in the early to mid-20th century from the theories and practice of a number of theatre practitioners like - Erwin Piscator, Vladimir Mayakovsky, Vsevolod Meyerhold and, most significantly, Bertolt Brecht. The Epic theatre incorporates a mode of acting that utilises what he calls 'gestus'. The epic form describes both a type of written drama and a methodological approach to the production of plays: "Its qualities of clear description and reporting and its use of choruses and projections as a means of commentary earned it the name 'epic'." Brecht however, preferred another term "dialectical theatre" to it. One of the goals of the Epic

theatre is for the audience to always be aware that it is watching a play: "It is most important that one of the main features of the ordinary theatre should be excluded from [epic theatre]: the engendering of illusion."

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Gordon Craig: (1872-1966):

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

Stop to Consider

Gordon Craig wrote 'On the Art of the Theatre' (1911) as a dialogue between a playgoer and a stage director, who examine the problems of the nature of stage directing. Craig argues that it was not dramatists, but rather performers who made the first works of drama, using action, words, line, colour and rhythm. Craig goes on to contend that only the director who seeks to interpret drama truly, and commits to training in all aspects of dramatic art, can restore the "Art of the Theatre." Maintaining that the director should seek a faithful interpretation of the text, Craig argues that audiences go to the theatre to see, rather than to hear, plays. The design elements may transcend reality and function as symbols, he thought, thereby communicating a deeper meaning, rather than simply reflecting the real world.

Luigi Pirandello: (1867-1936):

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

Konstantin Stanislavsky: (1863-1938):

Konstantin Sergeyevich Stanislavski was a Russian actor and theatre director. Stanislavski organized his realistic techniques into a coherent and usable 'system.' Stanislavski's 'system' acquired an unprecedented ability to cross cultural boundaries and developed an international reach, dominating debates about acting in the West. Stanislavski treated theatre-making as a serious activity that requires dedication, discipline and integrity. Throughout his life, he subjected his own acting to a process of rigorous artistic self-analysis and reflection. His 'system' resulted from a persistent struggle to remove the problems he encountered. Stanislavski's work was important to the development of Socialist Realism in the USSR and to the development of Psychological Realism in the United States. Stanislavski's work draws on a wide range of influences and ideas, including his study of the modernist and avant-garde developments of his time (Naturalism, Symbolism and Meyerhold's constructivism), Russian formalism, Yoga, Pavlovian Behaviourist Psychology, James-Lange's Psychophysiology and the Aesthetics of Pushkin, Gogol, and Tolstoy. He described his approach as

'Spiritual Realism'. Stanislavski wrote several works. Those notable in English translation include *An Actor's Work*, *An Actor's Work on a Role*, and his autobiography, *My Life in Art*.

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2.4 Understanding the 'Modern' in English Drama

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

Stop to Consider

Percy Wyndham Lewis (18 November 1882 - 7 March 1957) was an English painter and author (he dropped the name 'Percy', which he disliked). He was a co-founder of the Vorticist movement in art, and edited the literary magazine of the Vorticists, *BLAST*. His novels include his pre-World War I-era novel *Tarr* (set in Paris), and *The Human Age*, a trilogy comprising *The Childermass* (1928), *Monstre Gai* and *Malign Fiesta* (both 1955), set in the afterworld. A fourth volume of *The Human Age*, *The Trial of Man*, was begun by Lewis but left in a fragmentary state at the time of his death. He also wrote two autobiographical volumes, *Blasting* and *Bombardiering* (1937) and *Rude Assignment: A Narrative of my Career up-to-date* (1950). Mainly residing in England from 1908, Lewis published his first work (accounts of his travels in Brittany) in Ford Madox Ford's *The English Review* in 1909. He was an unlikely founder-member of the Camden Town Group in 1911. In 1912, he exhibited his Cubo-Futurist illustrations to *Timon of Athens* (later issued as a portfolio, the proposed edition of Shakespeare's play never materialising) and three major oil-paintings at the second Post-Impressionist exhibition. This brought him into close contact with the Bloomsbury Group, particularly Roger Fry and Clive Bell, with whom he soon fell out. In 1912 he was commissioned to produce a decorative mural, a drop curtain, and more designs [1] for *The Cave of the Golden Calf*, an avant- garde cabaret

and nightclub on London's Heddon Street. In the years 1913-15 that he developed the style of geometric abstraction for which he is best known today, a style which his friend Ezra Pound dubbed "Vorticism." Lewis found the strong structure of Cubist painting appealing, but said it did not seem "alive" compared to Futurist art, which, conversely, lacked structure. Vorticism combined the two movements in a strikingly dramatic critique of modernity. In his early visual works, particularly versions of village life in Brittany showing dancers (ca. 1910-12), Lewis may have been influenced by the process philosophy of Henri Bergson, whose lectures he attended in Paris. Though he was later savagely critical of Bergson, he admitted in a letter to Theodore Weiss (19 April 1949) that he "began by embracing his evolutionary system." Nietzsche was an equally important influence.

(The passage above has been downloaded from the Wikipedia)
http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wyndham_Lewis

The following passage will help you to understand the diversity within the movement that finally becomes for us 'modern drama' - "drama in the twentieth century has been highly international, with English-speaking playwrights and directors responding to innovations from Europe, and having their experiments picked up in turn. It is also true that theatrical developments over the century do not fit the same chronological frame as that for poetry or the novel, where the two decades from 1910 to 1930 are generally held to mark the boundaries of the movement. By comparison, drama had already staked out a distinctively modernist territory by the turn of the century with a work like August Strindberg's *A Dream Play* (1902). But perhaps the main explanation for the omission of drama from the history of Modernism up to this point is that, for various reasons connected with the nature of theatre itself, on the stage the movement has produced extremely diverse work. The directors and dramatists, several of whom were primarily poets and made significant contributions to Modernism in their poetry, may have had the same artistic aims and been responding to the same perception of twentieth-century realities. But their plays and productions use a wide range of stylistic solutions to express this. So any discussion of dramatic Modernism must take a wide focus in following a multifaceted development." [The Cambridge Companion to Modernism, p.130]

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

SAQ

Attempt to distinguish between Expressionism and Impressionism with examples. (70 words)

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.....
.....

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

"The rejection of Victorian orthodoxies, along with the logical and chronological structures of traditional narrative, may be standard for modernist poets. The theatre took this to an extreme, following Strindberg in denying the whole of Western civilization, with its emphasis on rationalism and its materialism. The Expressionists reflected the same sense of a disintegrating culture, dissociated personalities and fragmented

consciousness, but went further in working for spiritual transcendence. Their themes also tended to be more extreme, intensified by the physicality of performance. A good example of this is Kokoschka's *Murder Hope of Women*." [The Cambridge Companion to Modernism, p.140]

Stop to Consider

Theatre and abstraction

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

The work of W. B. Yeats and Gordon Craig claim our attention in the development of modernist principles on the stage. For Yeats, writing for the theatre was a natural outgrowth of his practice in verse. We see his writing for the theatre in two phases: between 1902 and 1908 which showed its fullest expression in the play of 1916, *At the Hawk's Well*, while the second phase is to be seen as achieving its fullest form in his last work, *The Death of Cuchulain*. Yeats attempted to resolve the dilemma which he encountered in his work in creating a nationalist symbolism for his Irish themes while retaining the modern creed of abstract symbolism signifying a radically new perspective on contemporary civilization. He borrowed from the Japanese Noh drama to emphasize a Brechtian 'strangeness'. While borrowing from an ancient Oriental tradition can seem least 'modern', yet

"Even so, borrowing from Oriental models in fact becomes a standard characteristic for the dramatic side of the movement. Craig and (more indirectly) Brecht draw on Chinese theatre; Artaud took Balinese trance drama as his ideal; and, like Yeats, Stravinsky's *Les Noces* copies the Japanese Noh model." In his search for anti-realistic drama, which would clearly reflect a modernist perspective, "in the Noh Yeats found his model for a style of theatre close to pure music . . . that would free [the stage] from imitation, and ally [dramatic] art to decoration and the dance." [C.Innes in *The Cambridge Companion to Modernism*, p.135]

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

SAQ:

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

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The work of Yeats and Craig show the difficulties inherent in giving to the stage its modernist shape. "Eliot recognized drama as the logical development of his poetic aims, since in his view "The most useful poetry, socially, would be one which could cut across all the present stratifications of public taste - stratifications which are perhaps a sign of social disintegration. The ideal medium for poetry . . . and the most direct means of social "usefulness' for poetry, is the theatre." And the continuum between his poetry and his plays is nowhere clearer than in *Sweeney Agonistes*." This is commentary by Christopher Innes reminding us of the undoubted importance of the name of T. S. Eliot in the Anglo-American modernist movement. *Sweeney Agonistes* can be seen as Eliot coming closest to the Surrealists. With the powerful figure of Sweeney who recurs through Eliot's

works, this play is considered to be Eliot's most viable modernist drama. It was written in the mid-1920s but finally being staged in 1933 in America. The play incorporates elements popular music-hall culture, some elements of Noh drama (following Yeats) like the use of masks and rejection of a familiar narrative structure.

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

SAQ

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

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2.5 Understanding the 'Modern' in European/American Drama

The idea of the 'modern' in European and American drama provide yet another enriching experience to both readers and critics. You will find it interesting to read the European and American playwrights who were heavily influenced by the various intellectual and artistic movements that gained tremendous popularity in the early part of the 20th century. The modernist plays during this period prepared both the readers and the theatregoers to undergo many shocking experiences while watching a play

in the theatre hall. Another way to consider the idea of the 'modern' in European and American drama is the emergence of very well-organized theories of theatricality and performance at a time when every genre of literature was undergoing changes following the modernist zeal for experimentations. You must note the fact that the great German playwright Bertolt Brecht was not only famous as a dramatist but was also a renowned theorist of the 'Epic Theatre' that altered the ways one receives a play. For your convenience of reading and understanding, the discussion of the 'modern' in this section has been done keeping in view the various intellectual and artistic movements in the late 19th century and the early 20th century that finally shaped the tradition of modernist world drama. You should also note that many of the theatrical and technical renderings in modern European drama emerged through an 'anti realistic' approach to dramaturgy.

To start with, Realism in Theatre perhaps provides the first elements of the 'modern' in European drama. Realism, as a theatrical movement of the 19th century, emerged out of the portrayal of real life in dramatic texts and performances. In fact, realism rendered the most pervasive and long lived effect in modernist theatre. Many playwrights even conceived realism as the laboratory in which societal ills, familial problems and human relationships could be 'objectively' represented to be judged by unbiased readers and observers. Beginning in the 19th century Russia, and then in Europe, realism gave modernism a unique status of its own. Through the works of Russian Ivan Turgenev, Aleksandr Ostrovsky, Aleksey Pisemsky, there emerged a tradition of Russian realist drama which later culminated in the establishment of the "Moscow Art Theatre" by Constantin Stanislavsky. While Anton Chekhov stylized the realist plays in which the minor and ordinary characters were abundantly used and in which, plot and theme developed simultaneously, Stanislavsky developed a unique 'form' of acting to train actors to represent Psychological Realism. Such developments were to influence play writing in the other parts of the world as well. As the drama critic Martin Harrison explains that the Realist trend in modernist drama was more effectively used by the Norwegian playwright Henric Ibsen whose plays focused on contemporary everyday life of the lower classes that skilfully revealed psychological conflicts. So, realism has a rich history of its own if seen in the context of world theatre and you will do well if you make it a point to study some of the Realist playwrights as mentioned above in course of time.

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

Stop to Consider

Moscow Art Theatre

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

Psychological Realism:

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

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

Expressionism as a theatrical movement began in the 20th century German theatre with the works of playwrights like Georg Kaiser and Ernst Toller. They, in fact, accepted Strindberg and Frank Wedekind, the German actor, as their precursors. Gradually, expressionism helped in the production of an artistically very rich dramatic culture. The famous German theatre director, Leopold Gessner, soon became renowned for his expressionist productions often unfolding on "stark, steeply raked flights of stairs" which soon became a trademark. During the 1920s, Expressionism became popular in America through the plays of Eugene O'Neil (His plays

The Hairy Ape, *The Emperor Jones* and *The Great God Brown* etc.), and Elmer Rice (His play *The Adding Machine*). O'Neill's play *The Emperor Jones* (1920) depicts a journey into the subconscious while in *The Hairy Ape* (1921) he extends the same theme into a condemnation of urban industrial civilization which has deformed and destroyed humanity. Though in O'Neill's other plays such Expressionist elements became increasingly disguised, the distorted worldviews of the universalized characters he introduced, reflected the depiction of dreams and the symbolic representation of reality. Such dramaturgies continued to appear on the American stage up to the end of the 1930s in the work of Elmer Rice, Thornton Wilder, Arthur Miller and Tennessee Williams, particularly in Williams' autobiographical plays *After the Fall* (1964) or *The Glass Menagerie* (1945). Expressionism transferred to England and Ireland through the political verse drama of W. H. Auden, Christopher Isherwood and Sean O'Casey (His play *The Silver Tassie*). Subsequently, their move to depict collective unconscious was sought to be replaced by the Surrealist 'free flow of imagination' that liberated the deepest levels of the psyche.

The term Surrealism, following its first use in France by Guillaume Apollinaire in a 1917 play, *The Breasts of Tiresias*, came to be adopted for operas by Francis Poulenc, the French composer. An early Surrealist Antonin Artaud thought that the rational discourse comprised "falsehood and illusion." The belief that imagination could liberate the deepest level of the psyche led to experimentations like 'automatic writing' which is a type of writing produced directly from the unconscious. Also known as psychography it is a type of writing written without conscious awareness of the content. Andre Breton's concept of 'psychic automatism' is another example of the Surrealist technique. The other major theatre practitioners to have experimented with Surrealism in the theatre, is the Spanish playwright and director Federico García Lorca (His plays *The Public* (1930), *When Five Years Pass* (1931), and *Play Without a Title* (1935)). Other famous Surrealist plays include Louis Aragon's *Backs to the Wall* (1925) and Roger Vitrac's *The Mysteries of Love* (1927) and *The Children Take Over* (1928). Gertrude Stein's opera 'Doctor Faustus Lights the Lights' (1938) has been described as an example of "American Surrealism", though it is also related to a theatrical form of Cubism.

Stop to Consider

Psychic Automatism:

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

Space for Learner

Cubism :

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

Another modernist movement in theatre can be located in the ideals of Futurism that flourished during the 1920s. To blur the distinction between art and life, the Futurists believed to have reached below the surface reality. Furthermore, heavy use of machinery attracted the Futurists a lot. However, their theatrical ideas sought to discredit great works of theatre. Vsevolod Meyerhold of Russia and Erwin Piscator of Germany represented the Futurist principles to a considerable extent. Meyerhold, through his system of biomechanics, applied industrial technology directly to stage performance. He presented each episode of the drama as a independent 'turn' that produced highly exciting performances and emphasized 'theatricality'. On the other hand, in Germany, Piscator's 'documentary drama' sought to dramatise how modern technology and mechanization could control contemporary existence. For instance, in his 1927 production of plays like *Rasputin, the Romanoffs, the War, and the People who Rose Up Against Them*, Piscator gave the outline of an era by integrating "Capitalism" or "class struggle" with acted scenes and a mechanized stage construct.

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

So, you have by now understood that through redefining the function of language, extending characters to represent abstract forces or archetypes, reconstructing stage imagery through lighting and exploring themes often tinged with anxiety, the various movements in theatre have stylized and created much of the theatrical forms and language used in

today's theatre. You will do well if you read the idea of the 'modern' against such a background and inculcate your own ways to deal with the plays prescribed for you in this course.

Space for Learner

SAQ:

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

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

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

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

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2.6 A New 'Tradition' of Modern Drama

You must note that the modern period and its drama were shaped by world-changing forces, such as industrial revolution, democratic revolutions, and an intellectual revolution that would disrupt earlier conceptions of time, space, the divine, human psychology, and social order. Consequently, a theatre of challenge and experimentation emerged. Following World War II, "Theatre of Alienation" would introduce new theatre practices and reawaken the sense of social responsibility, while the "Theatre of the Absurd" would express the futility of all action and pointlessness of all direction. Philosophical Melodrama accepted the

Absurdist notion that human being is alone in a silent universe, but takes it as a challenge to creating an effective life.

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

SAQ:

Can we say that the 'new tradition' of modern drama is best reflected in the 'Absurdist Drama'? (60 words)

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2.7 Summing Up

From the above discussions you have found that for understanding the idea of the 'modern' in modern drama, you must make a survey of the whole of Europe during the early part of the twentieth century. You have

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

2.8 References and Suggested Readings

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

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

Bentley, Eric. (Ed.) The Theory of the Modern Stage. Penguin Books, 1968.

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Unit 3 : Modern Drama and the Absurd

Space for Learner

Unit Structure:

- 3.1 Objectives
- 3.2 Introduction
- 3.3 Context and Background
- 3.4 Theatre History (Philosophical Ideas)
- 3.5 Theatre Specifics/ Theatrical Conventions
- 3.6 Summing Up
- 3.7 References and Suggested Readings

3.1 Objectives

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

- appreciate the intellectual climate in which the plays were written and staged
- develop a sense of Modern theatrical convention
- relate Existentialism with the theatre and the Absurd
- note the ramifications of the 'Absurd'.

3.2 Introduction

This unit will introduce you to the meaning, history of evolution, philosophical basis and theatrical conventions of the Theatre of the Absurd. This section will make you appreciate the prescribed texts better. The literary meaning of the term 'absurd' is 'out of harmony'. It was Albert Camus' designation for the situation of modern man who has turned into a stranger in the universe. Recognizing such strangers in stage characters in 1950s, critic Martin Esslin in 1961 published his influential book Theatre of the Absurd. He defined plays of the absurd as those that shared a presentation of man's metaphysical absurdity in an 'aberrant' dramatic style that mirrored the situation.

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

Stop to Consider

The 'Absurd'

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

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

In some contemporary plays, the problematic situation is produced by the conditions that transcend naturalistic explanations. In these plays we sense the presence of the profound situation that afflicts the characters but is in the end indefinable. In Beckett's *Endgame*, for example, we find the principal characters existing in a world where all the elements of nature seem to be on the verge of extinction; yet the cause of the condition remains a mystery. In another play, *Krapp's Last Tape*, we are faced with a single character, namely, Krapp, whose existence is defined almost exclusively by an insatiable appetite for bananas, an unquenchable thirst for

soda water and an obsessive fixation on his tape-recorder diary. These mysterious, even ridiculous, circumstances lead us to wonder whether there is any ultimate source of meaning at all in the world of those plays, or of that matter whether there is any rational source of explanation at all for the experience of the characters. For these reasons, among others, such plays are known as absurdist drama.

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

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

3.3 Context and Background

Antonin Artaud's essay "No More Masterpiece" best reflects the spirit of the time when the absurd dramatists were enjoying their prominent days. Negating the validity of past masterpieces in the modern context he says "Sophocles may speak nobly, but in a manner that no longer suits the times. His speeches are too refined for today, as if he were speaking beside the

point." Perhaps he is right when he says that the time has come when we must do away with the idea of masterpieces as they are fit only to the past but not to the present.

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

Stop to Consider

Existentialism vs convention:

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

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

Art as mimesis is a platonic concept. The final outcome of such a concept is that theatre has been regarded as an inferior art, an outlet of our worst instincts. It is because we have for long been told that theatre is all lies and illusion. After the five hundred years of renaissance we have become accustomed to purely descriptive, narrative theatre, narrating psychology. To a greater extent Shakespeare is responsible for bringing in a kind of isolationist concept to theatre, to instil an idea of art for art's sake in us; art on the one hand and life on the other, modern theatre was perhaps preparing to break their concept attached to the art of theatre. The Second World War ended in 1945 with a changed geo-political order, crisis of conscience. In the last stage of the war in Europe, the fate of Jewish and

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

Stop to Consider

Theatre as commentary:

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

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

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

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

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

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

SAQ

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

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

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

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3.4 Theatre History (Philosophical Ideas)

When the New Theatre emerged in Paris, it took the theatre world by surprise. Paris had staged many European playwrights and made their reputations. Paris was ready to appreciate the New Theatre and the rest of the world was ready to embrace any developments in Parisian theatre. Ionesco, Adamov and Beckett were the pioneers of this new theatre. Interestingly, none of them were what one might term as 'young'. When *Waiting for Godot* was first performed in 1953 in French, Beckett was 47; Adamov was 45 and Ionesco was the youngest at 44. They had

already made their reputations in the field of drama. Another interesting thing is that they were writing separately and cannot be said to be upholding a common agenda. However, they were to revolutionize theatre forever and would be associated with one another in theatrical history for all time.

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

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

Try to find a connection between the existentialist projection of the human being and the Renaissance essential humanist positioning. A very important difference that comes out is that while one believes in a 'thrownness into being' kind of existence the other sees the human being as a historical entity and a reservoir of unlimited potentiality. Read this section with reference to your previous reading of the Renaissance plays.

The existentialist philosophy came as a challenge to such an essentialist positioning. It was the writings of Jean-Paul Sartre and Albert Camus that pitted the essentialist humanist beliefs. They viewed human life as an isolated existent that was cast into an alien universe. They viewed the universe as possessing no universal truth and meaning. Human beings, according to them were moving from nothingness to nothingness. They conceived human life as both anguished and absurd. Camus in *The Myth of Sisyphus*

(1942), perhaps, best captures the absurdity of modern civilization, "In a universe that is suddenly deprived of illusions and of light man feels a stranger. His is an irremediable exile. . . . The divorce between man and his life, the actor and the setting, truly constitutes the feeling of absurdity".

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

The Form of the Absurd:

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

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

this thesis of 'presence' before the deconstructionists were to make an impact and Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* is the best example of this.

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

SAQ

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

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

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

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

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3.5 Theatre Specifics / Theatrical Conventions

Drama in the twentieth century has been highly globalized, with playwrights and directors responding to innovations from Europe and having their experiments picked up in turn. It is also true that theatrical developments over the century do not fit the same chronological frame as that for poetry or the novel, where the two decades from 1910 to 1930 are gen-

erally held to mark the boundaries of the movement. By comparison, drama has already staked out a distinctively modernist territory by the turn of the century with a work like August Strindberg's *A Dream Play* (1902).

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

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

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

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

explores the potentiality of verbal and non-verbal action. We can find many evidences of this in the play *Waiting for Godot*.

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

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

If we observe carefully, we will notice that the use of incoherent language is a favourite technique of the absurdist playwrights. This is not an ornamental device, but an inherent structural necessity. Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* draws on the resources of popular entertainments and most of its comic effects are worked through ironic and witty situations as well as dialogue. The short, crisp, supposedly inconsequential words celebrate play, a condition that uses the condition of the lucid to great purpose. The lucid but eddying and pointless dialogues are often funny, and other modes of slapstick are used to project metaphysical alienation. But if we look at the early works of Genet, Pinter and Albee we will find that they have exploited the devices of the absurd more for comic than for philosophical ends. Their absurdity is usually evident not only in plot but also in the dialogue. The characters use a very uncommunicative language. In much the same way we may be puzzled by the resolution of such a play - wondering whether the characters' situation at the end is in any significant respect

different from what it was at the beginning. We wonder whether the play is a tragedy or a comedy. Another very important aspect of absurd drama is the use of simple stage settings. Ionesco's *The Chairs* is the best example of such a monotonously simple setting where the stage is finally filled up with a number of chairs and nothing else. There are also affinities with the movement in the numerous recent works which exploit black comedy: baleful, naïve, or inept characters in a nightmarish modern world play out their roles in what Ionesco called a 'tragic farce', in which the events are often simultaneously comic, horrifying and absurd. Joseph Heller's *Catch-22* (1961), John Irving's *The World According to Garp* (1978) are the best examples of the ramifications of the absurd theatre.

Check Your Progress:

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

3.6 Summing Up

The basic objective of the absurdist was to reconcile man with the absurdities of the modern world. They were the progenitors of the idea of acceptance in the face of absurdity, without any condition to constitute an ideal human existence. They tried to challenge the preoccupations of what constitute theatre and how it is not bound by any rules or some preconceived notions. Essentially, the absurd dramatists tried to redefine and create space for all kinds of art to flourish.

3.7 References and Suggested Readings

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