



NATIONAL OPEN UNIVERSITY OF NIGERIA

SCHOOL OF ARTS AND SOCIAL SCIENCES

COURSE CODE: ENG 362

COURSE TITLE: ENGLISH DRAMA

**COURSE  
GUIDE**

**ENG 362 ENGLISH DRAMA**

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## INTRODUCTION

English drama- from the Elizabethan age to the present is fascinating. Its playwrights have created masterpieces. The plays crafted by the geniuses of English theatre are indeed wide-ranging in scope and universal in appeal, showcasing greatly the loves, joys and travails of our existence. It is in recognition of this fact that a popular American theatre director, Clurman (1974) declares that:

*Shakespeare and other masters of the past are, as Jan Knott and others have pointed out, our contemporaries. Their greatness transcends the limits of time and many cultural differences; in the theatre, they reveal their contemporaneity only when they are felt and projected in response to our innermost need* (pp.164-5).

ENG 362 English Drama is a 3 credit units' course. It focuses on the evolution and development of English drama from Thomas Kyd and Christopher Marlowe, through William Shakespeare and Ben Jonson to John Osborne. The course is intended to provide you with adequate knowledge of the technicalities and themes of the playwrights; and this will be achieved through painstaking analysis and interpretation of selected plays.

The course consists of 20 units and each unit examines a specific theme within the scope of the course. The course guide gives you an idea of what the course entails, what you are expected to grasp in each unit; what course materials you will be using and how you can work your way through the materials. It includes tutor-marked assignments contained in a separate file to be sent to you. However, a good knowledge of the English folk drama is a prerequisite for this course.

## WHAT YOU WILL LEARN IN THIS COURSE

ENG 362 will enable you to gain understanding on variety of issues relating to the English drama from its 'golden age to the present period'- often christened the "Anger period and After".

## COURSE AIMS

The basic aim of this course is to get you familiarised with the background to the various traditions of English drama embedded in this course, the different genres and their representative playwrights, as well as the principal themes of their dramaturgy. This will be realised by:

- examining the concept of the Elizabethan world picture
- discussing the plays it fostered and their representative playwrights
- providing information on the themes of selected plays
- explaining the nature of the Restoration drama
- explicating the concern of the 18<sup>th</sup> century drama
- throwing light on the Victorian dramatic taste
- highlighting the preoccupation of the English drama of the present times
- examining the nature of the English stage, its audience as well as the challenges of censorship in English drama.

## **COURSE OBJECTIVES**

The course has a general objective, and this overall objective is to make clear the trends of thought that guided English dramaturgic writings from the 16<sup>th</sup> century to the present. In addition, each unit has a specific objective at the beginning, and you are encouraged to read it before going through the main content of the unit. At the end of the course, you should be able to:

- define the concept of Renaissance as well as discuss the Elizabethan worldview
- explain the themes and characters of English drama under survey
- discuss the contributions of specific playwrights
- explain the concerns of the Restoration drama
- point out the objective of melodrama
- examine the influence of Ibsen on English drama
- discuss the technicalities of the English playhouse, its audience and the problem of censorship
- examine the contributions of Irish playwrights as well as the temper of the present period.

## **WORKING THROUGH THE COURSE**

You are advised to commence the study by reading the course guide, which gives a quick overview of the course. Read the units carefully starting from unit one. Before reading a particular unit, make sure that you read its objectives as this will give you the overall picture of the unit. Try and read the recommended textbooks and other related materials in order to deepen your understanding of the course. Each unit has a self-assessment exercise, which you are expected to use in assessing your knowledge of the course. Note down questions that you may need to get clarified during tutorials.

## COURSE MATERIALS

This course is made up of the following components.

1. Course guide
2. Study units
3. Textbooks
4. Assignment file
5. Presentation schedule

## STUDY UNITS

This course has five modules. Each module is made up of four study units. On the whole, the course has twenty study units of varying length, depending on the content and scope of study. The modules and their units are as follows.

### Module 1 Elizabethan Drama I

- Unit 1 Background to the Elizabethan Drama
- Unit 2 Thomas Kyd and the Evolution of Revenge Tragedy
- Unit 3 The Dramaturgy of Christopher Marlowe
- Unit 4 Shakespearean Comedy

### Module 2 Elizabethan Drama II

- Unit 1 Shakespearean Tragedy
- Unit 2 Tragicomedy
- Unit 3 Shakespearean Chronicle Plays
- Unit 4 The Drama of Ben Jonson

### Module 3 17<sup>th</sup> – 19<sup>th</sup> Century

- Unit 1 Restoration Comedy
- Unit 2 The Heroic Drama
- Unit 3 18<sup>th</sup> Century and the Drama of Sensibility
- Unit 4 Victorian Drama

### Module 4 19<sup>th</sup> – 20<sup>th</sup> Century

- Unit 1 The Well-Made-Play
- Unit 2 George Bernard Shaw and the English Drama
- Unit 3 The Abbey Theatre
- Unit 4 Modern Poetic Drama

**Module 5 20<sup>th</sup> Century and After**

Unit 1	The Drama of Samuel Beckett
Unit 2	The Anger Period and after
Unit 3	The English Audience and Playhouse
Unit 4	English Drama and the Challenge of Censorship

Each module is preceded by a miniature table of contents, including introduction, objectives, the main content, Self-Assessment Exercise (SAE), as well as Tutor-Marked Assignment (TMA) which you are required to answer and submit for grading.

**TEXTBOOKS AND REFERENCES**

At the end of every unit, you will find a list of books and other such materials that will enable you have a firm grasp of the course. The books required to aid your understanding of this course are by no means exhaustive here. You are, therefore, expected to consult as many materials as possible. This will enable you to deepen your understanding of the course.

**PRESENTATION SCHEDULE**

The presentation schedule gives you the important dates for the completion of your tutor-marked assignments and when you will attend tutorials. Remember that you are required to submit your assignments according to the schedule.

**ASSIGNMENT FILE**

The file contains the details of all the assignments you must do and submit to your tutor for marking. The mark you obtain from these assignments will form part of the final mark you will obtain in this course.

**ASSESSMENT**

The course has two types of exercises or questions you are expected to tackle. The first is the Self-Assessment Exercises (SAEs) which you are expected to solve, but not to be submitted, at the end of the study. The second is the Tutor-Marked Assignment (TMAs) which you must solve and submit in an assignment file, in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the successful completion of the course. The TMA accounts for 30% of your total score for the course. Every unit has a Tutor – Marked Assignment, which is a compulsory question that must be answered and submitted at the end of the course. You will minimise



your chance of doing well in the course if you fail to submit answers to all the Tutor-Marked Assignments, as required.

## FINAL EXAMINATION AND GRADING

The final examination for ENG 362 will take a duration of three hours. The examination itself will carry 70%. It will consist of questions that reflect the self-assessment exercises, as well as the tutor-marked assignments. You are expected to spend quality time to read the entire course units and all the SAEs and TMAs for the final examination.

## COURSE MARKING SCHEME

The table below shows how actual course marking scheme is broken down.

**Table 1: Course Marking Scheme**

Assessments	Marks
Assignment 1 – 5	Five assignments, best three marks of the four count as 30% of course mark.
Final examination	70% of overall course mark
Total	100% of course marks

## COURSE OVERVIEW

The table below brings together, the units, the number of weeks you should take to complete them, and the assignments that follow them.

Units	Title of work	Week's Activity	Assessment (End of Unit)
	<b>Course Guide</b>	1	
	<b>Module 1</b>		
1	Background to the Elizabethan Drama	1	Assignment 1
2	Thomas Kyd and the Evolution of Revenge Tragedy	2	Assignment 2
3	The Dramaturgy of Christopher Marlowe	3	Assignment 3
4	Shakespearean Comedy	4	Assignment 4
	<b>Module 2</b>		
1	Shakespearean Tragedy	5	Assignment 1
2	Tragicomedy	6	Assignment 2
3	Shakespearean Chronicle Plays	7	Assignment 3
4	The Drama of Ben Jonson	8	Assignment 4

	<b>Module 3</b>		
1	Restoration Comedy	9	Assignment 1
2	The Heroic Drama	10	Assignment 2
3	18 <sup>th</sup> Century and the Drama of Sensibility	11	Assignment 3
4	Victorian Drama	12	Assignment 4
	<b>Module 4</b>		
1	The Well – Made – Play	13	Assignment 1
2	George Bernard Shaw and the English Drama	14	Assignment 2
3	The Abbey Theatre	15	Assignment 3
4	Modern Poetic Drama	16	Assignment 4
	<b>Module 5</b>		
1	The Drama of Samuel Beckett	17	Assignment 1
2	The Anger Period and After	18	Assignment 2
3	The English Audience and Playhouse	19	Assignment 3
4	English Drama and the Challenge of Censorship	20	Assignment 4
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### FACILITATORS/TUTORS AND TUTORIALS

Fifteen tutorial hours are provided for in this course to enable the students and their tutors to meet and examine the contents of the course at intervals. You will be informed of the dates, time, and venue for these tutorials, along with the name and particulars of your tutor as soon as one is assigned to your group. Your tutor will grade and comment on your assignments, monitor your progress and provide answers to your questions during tutorials. You must submit your assignments in good time to enable your tutor to read them well and to make appropriate comments. Do not play with your tutorials or hesitate to consult your tutor when the need arises. Tutorials afford you opportunity to meet and discuss with your tutor face to face and they help you to get immediate answers for troubling questions. Apart from tutorials, you may consult your tutor when:

- you do not understand any part of the study units
- you have difficulty understanding self-assessment exercises or tutor-marked assignment
- when you have problems with the tutor's comments on your assignments or their grading. To gain maximally from the tutorials, you ought to prepare list of questions before attending

them and you must endeavour to participate actively in discussions during tutorials.

## **SUMMARY**

This course is historical, theoretical as well as analytical in dimension. It will enable you to understand how the English tastes, characters and sensibilities are captured in drama over time, as well as help you to know those who influenced English drama and the trend of their thought. This course examines the English drama from its golden age to the contemporary period. It explains the factors that helped to nurture the different kinds of dramatic traditions inherent in English world, the works of selected playwrights and the various themes espoused in them, the nature of the English audience and playhouse, as well as the problematic of censorship in English Drama.

The course guide is, therefore, designed to make the course enjoyable and rewarding experience. However, what you get depends on how much time you dedicate to studying the various course units.  
Good luck.


**MAIN  
COURSE**

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Unit three dwells on the activities of Christopher Marlowe. Some of his plays shall be examined as reflecting the tempestuous nature of Elizabethan life. Unit four focuses on the comedy of the greatest genius of the time- William Shakespeare. The Elizabethan age named after the virgin Queen Elizabeth I (1588 – 1603), is one of the most memorable and exciting periods in human history. It is regarded as the ‘Golden Age’ of English history because during the period, England achieved monumental success in many spheres of life, and some of the achievements (especially dramatic achievement) are yet to be surpassed in human history.

A complex of factors is responsible for the greatness of England during this period. This unit examines these factors, beginning with the Elizabethan world view. The unit is significant for this course because a people’s drama usually embodies their basic belief, assumptions and impulses.

## **2.0 OBJECTIVES**

At the end of this unit, you should be able to:

- explain the Elizabethan world view
- examine the idea of degree and order
- describe the notion of the king as a divine form
- identify the role of the elements and humours in character building
- examine the impact of the Renaissance on the cultural life of the Elizabethans
- discuss how all the above influenced the Elizabethan drama.

## **3.0 MAIN CONTENT**

### **3.1 Elizabethan World View**

A world view refers to a system of beliefs and thoughts which enables us to see and to understand or make sense of the functioning of the world around us and creation in general. World view is used interchangeably with world picture. World view is something dynamic, reflecting many of the changes that characterise human civilisation.

The Elizabethan world picture is not static; it is in a state of motion. However, some basic assumptions appear to be rigid over a considerable period of time. From belief in stars, elements and humours as well as degree and order, the Elizabethan world view has been affected by the adventurous spirit of the Renaissance; the surge of technology as a result

of scientific discoveries, and the navigational activities supported by the queen.

### SELF-ASSESSMENT EXERCISE

What is world view?

### 3.2 Degree and Order

The idea of degree and order is a basic assumption that God created the universe and assigned a position to everything in it, according to his will. This feeling is grafted from the medieval assumption of ordered chain of being, which implies a hierarchical existence. This belief assumes that God is at the apex of creation followed by angels, through man down to the dust of the earth. The Elizabethans accepted this theory of hierarchy in existence from the heavenly beings to the earthly creatures and translated this into the ordering of their society.

The king or Queen is deemed to be divine and is at the head of human society. The king or the Queen- as god must be revered and obeyed. The Elizabethans believed that the society will be worse for it, should the chain of degree and order be violated. Queen Elizabeth was an epitome of the belief that the queen or king is a divine form and sought to be adored. She insisted in being adored by all especially by the court favourites. In their deeply intellectual book, *The Western Intellectual Tradition*, Bronowski and Mazlish (1970) state that:

*Elizabeth's need for veneration and her shadowy affectation of femininity were not merely personal traits; they had important national consequence. They determine the tone of the court and the type of court favourites; and they influenced the sort of poetry and play that was written.*

However, Elizabeth was not a wicked queen for she rewarded those who indulge her pleasure handsomely. Shakespeare reflected this basic belief in most of his tragedies and chronicle plays, but he enunciated it in Act 1, scene II of *Troilus and Cressida* when he states through the character, Ulyses thus:

*The heavens themselves, the planets and this centre  
Observe degree priority and place  
Insisture course proportion season from  
Office and custom, in all line of order  
And therefore is the glorious planet Sol  
In noble eminence enthron'd and spher'd  
Amidst the other, whose medicinal eye*



*Corrects the ill aspects of planets evil.  
 And posts like the commandment of a king  
 Sans check, to good and bad. But when the planets  
 In evil mixture to disorder wander  
 What plagues and what portents, what mutiny  
 What raging of the sea, shaking of earth  
 Commotion in the wind, frights, changes, horrors  
 Divert and crack, rend and deracinate. The unity and married  
 calm of the states  
 Quite from the fixture. Oh, when degree is shak'd,  
 Which is the ladder of all high designs  
 Degree in schools, and brotherhood in cities  
 Peaceful commerce from dividable shores  
 Primogenitive and due of birth  
 Prerogative of age, crown, scepters, laurels, But by degree  
 stand in authentic place?  
 Take but degree away, untune that string  
 And hark what discord follows.*

The significance of this speech is that creation is a harmonious entity and that everyone, and everything has his/her (and its) own place in it. According to Tillyard (1946):

*If the Elizabethans believed in the ideal order, animating earthly order, they were terrified lest it should be upset, and appalled by the visible tokens of disorder that suggested its upsetting. They were obsessed by the fear of chaos and the fact of mutability, and the obsession was powerful in proportion as the faith in the cosmic order was strong.*

As pointed out earlier, the divine right of the King stems from the belief in degree and order. The position of the King or Queen in the affairs of men is unquestionable and if this position is violated, it brings confusion and disturbance of equilibrium. The disorder that follows the unlawful killing and un-sitting of the king etc., is given sufficient dramatic weight in the tragic and chronicle plays of William Shakespeare.

### **SELF-ASSESSMENT EXERCISE**

What do you understand by degree and order?

### **3.3 The Stellar Influence**

An aspect of the Elizabethan world view is the idea that the stars exert some kind of influence on man and his doings. It is accepted that the star

under which one is born affects his/her behaviour, characterises his disposition, and life style. It was believed that the stars, initially, worked together for the well-being of man until the biblical fall of man, and that the occasional collision of stars which began after the fall of man, was part of God's means of causing man to suffer for his disobedience. The Elizabethans believed that stars can make one extremely wicked or good. Man can lose his reason through the promptings of the stars and this can make him to become excessively emotional. Shakespeare used the stellar influence to bring out qualities of character, especially those that are susceptible to superstition. For example, in Act I, Scene II of *King Lear* Gloucester blames the present evil in society to the eclipses:

*These late eclipses in the sun and moon portend no good to us. Though the wisdom of nature can reason it thus, yet nature find itself scourged by the sequent effects. Love cools; friendship falls off, brothers divided. In cities, mutinies; in countries, discord; in palaces, treason; and the bond cracked' twixt son and father. The villain of mine comes under the prediction, there's son against father; the king falls from bias of nature...*

In *Julius Caesar*, Caesar compares himself with the northern star which is noted for its inflexible position. In *Macbeth*, the stars are angry about the upsetting of degree and order through Macbeth's killing of King Duncan.

### **SELF-ASSESSMENT EXERCISE**

What is the place of the star in Elizabethan world picture?

#### **3.4 The Four Elements and Humours**

Another aspect of the Elizabethan belief emphasised in their drama is the acceptance of the interwoven relationship between the four elements of air, fire, water, earth and the four body humours, namely-melancholy, phlegm, blood, and choler. The elements are believed to be the qualities of all created beings and things; but they are usually in constant war, one against the other. The elements of water and fire hardly see eyeball to eyeball. The Elizabethans linked human relations to elemental conflict.

The food we eat are said to be compounds of these elements which when digested yield the four humours. The disposition of the humours is said to determine character, mood, and human action. A healthy living is attributed to proper mixture of all the humours.

In William Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar*, Mark Anthony describes Brutus as balanced specie of humanity, for in him all the humours are properly mixed. However, in most cases, all the humours are never properly mixed in individuals. One humour normally dominates others in an individual, giving such a person a unique trait. For example, if phlegm is a dominant humour in an individual's system, such individual will normally be cold and moist, unemotional, calm and rational; if it is blood that is overriding, the person will be hot and moist. Characteristically, the individual will be optimistic, daring and amorous; a person dominated by melancholy will be cold and dry, sleepless, despondent and easily irritable; a person of choleric temperament will be hot and dry, bad tempered, easily annoyed as well as idealistic. Hamlet is said to possess this quality in promising degree.

Humours can be sick. If a humour is impaired, it can be dangerous and disturbing. For example, melancholic abnormality creates a deeply gloomy character; while an excessive blood leads a character to be ruled by vaulting ambition as we find in *Macbeth*.

### **SELF-ASSESSMENT EXERCISE**

Discuss the relationship between the elements and the four humours.

### **3.5 The Fortune Wheel**

The concept of the fortune wheel describes the unceasing activity of the blind fate, which appears to rotate like a wheel tumbling down those on top as well as causing those beneath to ascend. The wheel of fortune is accepted by the Elizabethans as a metaphor of our unknowable world which metes out good and bad luck to people randomly as it rotates round its own axis. The rotation of the fortune wheel is deemed to be part of the controlling life-force which determines human condition. It simply tells us that life is lived on the crest of the wave. Shakespeare refers to the wheel of fortune in his tragedies and historical plays to point out the mutability of life. The idea of blind fate is not acceptable to the humanist who believes that man can control, change, and shape his world. This is the Renaissance spirit.

### **SELF-ASSESSMENT EXERCISE**

What is fortune wheel?

### **3.6 The Impact of the Renaissance**

The Renaissance, which in cultural history, means the rebirth of classical scholarship is, according to Downer (1950), an awakening

“concerned in part with the efforts of the individual and the nation to break through the confining walls of the medieval world and ways of thinking”. No longer contented with the degraded position of man in creation, the Renaissance man found himself under obligation to assert the dignity of man and he found the impetus to do this in classical learning. Since the concept of the Renaissance has been examined in detail in another course, before now, attention will be given here to the implications of this great cultural revolution for the English men and their drama in particular.

Frye (1982) states that, the Renaissance got to England through the visit of Italian scholars like:

*Desderius, whose insistence upon the educational primacy of the great writings of Greece and Rome had shaken the medieval foundation at Oxford and Cambridge: so high had the feelings run that mobs of students had battled each other in the streets, and order had to be restored by royal intervention.*

Although Renaissance reached England in the early 15th century; Downer (1950) observes that it was during “the ascension of King Henry VIII in 1485 that it became established in influential circles”- such as “the circle of Cardinal Morton, and later of Sir Thomas More”. The spirit of the Renaissance compelled every healthy English man to become inquisitive in thinking and in seeking practical means of elevating the status of man in creation and how to maximise human potentials, in order to transform the world and puncture certain beliefs that have been, for so long, taken for granted.

This resulted to enormous scientific enquires, discoveries, and inventions that enabled man to transform his environment, conquer space and time. Through great industry, the puritans transformed England into a manufacturing society. The surge of technology enabled England to become, economically and industrially, viable and to become a military super weight.

Also in their adventurous spirit, men like Sir Francis Drakes and Walter Raleigh etc., began to navigate the world in order to explore unknown territories and exploit their wealth. Bronowski and Mazlish (1970) note that Sir Francis Drakes’ expedition of 1577 – 88 to America and the Pacific, sparked off reaction from Spain, another powerful European nation of the time. In 1588, Philip II of Spain assembled an intimidating military force called the Spanish Armada for the purpose of taming the

English inquisitive spirit and adventure, but through a superior military power and an act of providence, the Queen's soldiers were able to crush the Armada. This great feat by the English army instilled fear into the rest of the world, leaving Queen Elizabeth I unchallenged for most of her reign. Downer (1950: 99) observes that:

*Fortune rode with the banners of her army and upon the prows of her ships. Her merchants grew prosperous and powerful, the New World offered limitless promise. The intellectual aspirations of the Renaissance were being matched by the material aspirations on an economic and political awakening. This happy bred of men, governed by the almost deified Gloriana, were confidently prepared to shock the three corners of the world though armed against them.*

Bronowski and Mazlish (1970) argue that "Elizabethan Age's great literary adventure sprang from the optimism and sense of destiny which the defeat of the Armada almost by divine intervention, inspired in the minds and hearts of the English men" (156). In order to realise the humanist ideals in drama, in schools and universities, the plays of the Roman playwrights namely- Terence, Plautus and Seneca, "were held up to the students as models of literature as well as models for living, and their performance both by the schoolboys and their teachers was a pedagogical device for inculcating their moral lessons and literary style" (Downer, 1950: 51). This became a step for the writing and production of original plays first in Latin, and then in English language.

The plotting of English drama along the line of the new learning first developed in comedy, where the Roman themes on mistaken identity, parasitic living, amoral rogues who live by their wits, follies of the stupid and love tangle, fascinated the students. Nicholas Udall's play, *Ralph Roister Doister* is the earliest English extant comedy that shows the naturalisation of the classical style and model.

The adaptation of the tragedy, according to Downer, took a long process to crystallise because Senecan tragedy which provided the model, was a sort of closet drama for the learning of stoic philosophy. However, his theme of conflict of passion, subjects of murder, adultery and incest so became attractive to English artists and this led to the translation and publication of his plays between 1559 – 1581. The first English tragedy to be modeled after the Senecan type is *Gorboduc* written by two lawyers, Thomas Sackville and Thomas Norton. This play, presented at Christmas in one of the Inns – the Inner Temple, was received with open

enthusiasm; and this made Queen Elizabeth to request for a command performance.

Apart from the Roman influence, the Italian Renaissance comedy equally impacted on the Elizabethan drama. One of the significant things about the series of plays adapted from Italian Renaissance is that, “they provide the Elizabethan theatre with its most common theme, the ideal quality of romantic love, and its subject matter the merry – tangles, which must be resolved before a happy marriage may crown the end” (Downer, 57). The clearing of obstacles before the wedding of true hearts is copied directly from Ariosto’s plays. In this type of play, according to Downer:

*Slapstick and vulgarity are eliminated, and a ragged prose substituted for the verse of naïve comedy. Puns abound, and what the Elizabethans called “word – catching”, playing with semantic and etymology. The prologue toys with the title of the piece.*

This type of comedy that became popular with the courts was championed by John Lyly. He established the proper medium for prose comedy, which was at once lively, pointed and panoramic in scope. This then became very well elaborated by William Shakespeare in his dazzling romantic comedies.

### **SELF-ASSESSMENT EXERCISE**

Discuss the impact of the Renaissance on English drama.

## **4.0 CONCLUSION**

This unit is aimed at acquainting you with the basic ideas that give the Elizabethan drama its basic character and colour. The formative ideas will help you to gain fuller understanding of the Elizabethan plays – notably those of Christopher Marlowe and William Shakespeare.

## **5.0 SUMMARY**

This unit examines the background to the Elizabethan age and its impact on the drama of the period. Specifically, the Elizabethan world view bordering on the concept of degree and order, the stellar influence, the elements and humours, fortune wheel as well as the role of the Renaissance in the formation of the great Elizabethan drama elicited attention.

## 6.0 TUTOR-MARKED ASSIGNMENT

Discuss the concept of degree and order.

## 7.0 REFERENCES/FURTHER READING

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## UNIT 2 THOMAS KYD AND THE EVOLUTION OF REVENGE TRAGEDY

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### 1.0 INTRODUCTION

Thomas Kyd stamped his creative genius on the English drama as both an innovator and inventor of revenge tragedy- as a genre. This unit examines his contributions to the English drama during the Elizabethan period. In this unit, special attention is devoted to the idea of revenge tragedy and its elements. This discussion ends with the analysis of his influential play, *The Spanish Tragedy*.

### 2.0 OBJECTIVES

At the end of this unit, you should be able to:

- give an overview of tragedy
- explain two types of tragedy – *de casibus* tragedy and the revenge tragedy
- describe the elements of revenge tragedy
- highlight Thomas Kyd's contributions, using his play, *The Spanish Tragedy*.

### 3.0 MAIN CONTENT

#### 3.1 Kyd's Biography

Thomas Kyd, one of the most important figures in the development of English drama, was the son of a scrivener, Francis Kyd. Born in 1558 in London, he studied at Merchant Taylor School where he became acquainted with French, Spanish, and Italian literatures. Like William Shakespeare, Kyd did not have the opportunity to attend the university



where literary scholars were given training in classical literature. This was the reason the popularity of his play, *The Spanish Tragedy* sparked off bitter reaction from the ‘University wits’ - notably Nashe and Greene. “Nashe and Greene expressed resentment at the rise of dramatists without classical training, who were proving more effective than the University wits”.

However, in spite of the bitter literary jealousy, *The Spanish Tragedy* enjoyed tremendous popularity throughout the Elizabethan period and well beyond the age, its popularity spreading even to Holland and Germany. The idea of Kyd’s popularity in his days is supported by facts, including Ben Jonson’s statement that Kyd belong to the class of John Lyly, Christopher Marlowe and William Shakespeare. Thomas Heywood referred to him as “famous Kyd”; while Francis Meres said that his plays are among the best of “our tragedy”.

*The Wikipedia* states that *The Spanish Tragedy* “was the most popular play of the “age of Shakespeare and sets new standards in effective plot construction and character development”. Not only that, Kyd inaugurated revenge tragedy as specie of tragedy in England, he was deemed to have written a now lost *Hamlet* that pre-dated that of Shakespeare. Thomas Kyd wrote other plays and even poems; and some of the plays include *Soliman Perseda*, *Jeromimo*, and *Arden of Fevershm*.

In 1593, Kyd was arrested on suspicion that he was among the group who posted libels against foreigners. His apartment was searched for incriminating evidence, but instead of finding facts against libels, certain tracts considered by investigators as “vile heretical conceits denying the eternal deity of Jesus Christ” (*Wikipedia*) were found. Although he was eventually released on his testimony that the papers had been left among his effects by Marlowe in 1519, when the two of them used the same room, while in the service of an unidentified lord. Kyd died in August of 1594, perhaps as a result of official manhandling the previous year.

### **SELF-ASSESSMENT EXERCISE**

Give a short biography of Thomas Kyd.

### **3.2 Overview of Tragedy**

Before we examine the concept of revenge tragedy said to have been introduced in English drama by Thomas Kyd, it is necessary to take a cursory look at tragedy- of which the revenge type is an aspect. Alvin Schnupp (1993: 225) gives us a very exciting idea about tragedy, including what one may find in its different species when he states as follows:

*Tragedy describes a play which deals with subject matter of a serious nature; the material is written in serious mood. Events that transpire within a tragedy have a profound and adverse affect upon a character or set of characters. Tragic figures may be victimised by their own actions, have their beliefs tested, the sincerity of their actions questioned, or the strength of their passions challenged. Although the specifics of a dramatic crisis vary from play to play, tragic characters struggle against overwhelming odds.*

*Usually as a result of the struggle, the central character suffers emotional or physical pain. In the end, a tragic character may experience a loss of reputation, power or freedom. Ultimately, tragic figures may be forced to adopt a new lifestyle or face death. The suffering experienced by the tragic figure is not relegated to that character alone. Other characters are affected adversely by the misfortune, as well. Unlike the characters, audience members are spared any physical discomfort but they experience emotional pain as they are caught up in the story.*

Schnupp's view on tragedy is quoted in detail because it captures much of what tragedy entails. It explains clearly the mood, subject-matter, character relations as well as the effect of tragedy on character and the audience. In tragic plays, tragic heroes or heroines frequently experience reversal of fortune; moments of recognition. Schnupp sees these moments of recognition as times when tragic figures "perceive themselves or their situation in a new light". He further states that:

*A deepened sense of self-knowledge may occur during these moments or a heightened awareness of people. An issue of human concern may be clarified. Whatever forms this enlightenment takes; it usually comes at the expense of pain. Audience members, privy to the insights perceived by the characters, may experience a similar realisation (228).*

Scholars classified tragedy in different forms, including classical and modern, bourgeois, etc. However, for the purpose of this study, we will examine two types of tragedy as classed by Downer (1950). They are *De Casibus* and revenge tragedy.

### 3.2.1 *De Casibus* Tragedy

*De Casibus* tragedy is the type of tragedy that deals with the fall of kings, queens, princes, and princesses. This specie of tragedy exploits the notion of fortune wheel in detail. As we have discussed in unit one, fortune wheel is a metaphor of the rise and fall of man in an uncertain and unknowable world. According to Alan S. Downer (1950: 128):

*In its later development, de casibus tragedy is the vehicle not simply for medieval theme of the vagaries of fortune, but the universal theme of the human dilemma: to live is to make choices, decisions, but such choices and decisions must be made in ignorance of their own outcome and are determined for every man by his own peculiarities, his temper, his shortcomings, his virtues and his fault. Only in the consequences of such devices can man come to full knowledge of himself, and in the drama such knowledge comes only through suffering the consequences of ignorance.*

*De Casibus* tragedy is, therefore, a moral play; and according to Downer, “the audience expected from both the action and the overt statements of the play examples of the teachings which it had inherited from the past and could hear expounded regularly from the pulpit”. Shakespeare’s *Macbeth* is a good example of this type of tragedy.

### 3.2.2 Revenge Tragedy

Revenge tragedy is the type of tragedy in which vengeance is the overriding theme. The desire to pay back for an injury that one suffered is the principal idea that controls the plotting of the play’s action. Revenge tragedy is, usually, crafted in three sequences; someone is killed and somebody close to the deceased discovers the deed and plans revenge, the revenge is carried out with trails of horror following; though it may cost the avenging team a lot, the villain and his tools are usually defeated in the end. Revenge tragedy subscribed to the dictum, “an eye for an eye”.

#### Elements of revenge tragedy

The elements of revenge tragedy include, but not limited to the following.

- **Machiavellian scheming**  
Every revenge tragedy has a Machiavellian character, usually a villain who leaves no stone unturned until he gets what he wants. He achieves his goal through all manner of scheming. No tool is

too small or too big for him. He is extremely selfish, and for him, the end justifies the means.

- **Disguise**  
Disguise is a major element of revenge tragedy. People dissemble a lot. They present a picture of the opposite of their intention to anyone they seek to destroy. This technique features prominently in the revenge plays of Christopher Marlowe.
- **Death**  
Death is an element of any average tragedy. In fact, death is, usually, that major injury to be avenged. The killing of someone in order to dispossess him of his position or stop rivalry is usually what initiates the process of vengeance.
- **Horror**  
Revenge tragedy is, usually, a play of great passion and violent activities. It is filled with appalling and monstrous deed that human imagination can fathom.
- **Principle of vengeance**  
Revenge tragedy is a play on vendetta. It is anti-Christian in morality. In fact, in a revenge tragedy, vengeance is imposed on the hero as duty.
- **Play-within-a-play**  
Revenge tragedy inaugurates the tradition of play-within-a-play. This technique is, usually, a miniature play within the play itself, in which there is a flashback of the first murder that must be avenged. It reveals the action of the past that asks for revenge.
- **Happy ending**  
Revenge tragedy exploits the melodramatic technique of poetic justice and this enables the play to end on a happy note. The villain and his agents are, usually defeated though at a very terrible cost. In fact, it is because of the causalities inherent in the play that Downer argues that revenge tragedy is a “peg on which to hang the picture of a decedent world”.

### SELF-ASSESSMENT EXERCISE

Discuss the concept of revenge tragedy.

### 3.3 Thomas Kyd's Contribution: *The Spanish Tragedy*

Thomas Kyd is regarded as a pace-setter, inventor and leader, in English drama. As indicated in New World Encyclopedia:

*For centuries, the writers belonging to the community of the so-called university wits – had attempted to translate the style of Latin drama for the English stage; Kyd was the first to do it successfully. Kyd was*

*the first to revitalise classical tragic form, with all its violence, tension, using English that was neither obscure nor melodramatic, but penetratingly real.*

The evolution of revenge tragedy is Kyd's legacy to English drama and theatre history. As a talented writer, with an eye for the stage, Thomas Kyd was never hunted by the classical spirit. He was only interested in creating plays that work, plays that catered for the taste of his audience. As we have pointed out earlier, his approach to playwriting was slashed by the university wits "who were deeply imbued with the classical spirit" (Vargas 1960). Kyd's lack of university education did not affect his talent as such.

The effectiveness of his play, *The Spanish Tragedy* kept the 'University wits' unsettled, for it was not only popular in England but also in Holland and Germany. Its fame went beyond the height attained by the works of those who thought that they were the repository of knowledge. In fact, *The Spanish Tragedy* left its stamp on the English theatre as its first revenge tragedy.

### ***The Spanish Tragedy***

*The Spanish Tragedy* is a harrowing and exciting drama on murder and revenge. There is a general feeling that the play was influenced by the Senecan tragedy. Vargas (1960) notes that the play:

*Leans heavily on Senecan tragedy of the more bloodthirsty character. It incorporates a play-within-a-play as well as a ghost...its theme and general outline are sufficient to suggest that Shakespeare may have used it as a basis for his own play, Hamlet.*

Although Kyd used Senecan devices, it is necessary to state that it is not the borrowed devices that endeared the play to the audience, but its moving dramatic action, its swift accomplishment of a carefully articulated scheme of revenge. Unlike Senecan tragedy that was essentially a closet drama, Kyd never tucked vital actions away. Brockett and Hildy (1999) observe that "Kyd places all the important events on stage, lets the action to range freely through time and place". Kyd's play is, therefore, a drama of vitality and energy.

### **The story and critical analysis**

*The Spanish Tragedy* is an enactment of a father's revenge for the murder of his son. Duke's son and a Machiavellian character, Lorenzo out of selfish interest killed Horatio. Hieronimo the father of Horatio discovered this heinous crime, planned and carried out revenge against

those responsible for his son's death; but so many heads, including his own paid supreme price for this.

One significant departure from the classical model is that Kyd never relied on narration to reveal murder, but puts all the killings on stage since it meets the Elizabethan's taste for blood and violence. He lets the audience to see the killing of Horatio; the murder of Seberine; the hanging of Pedringano, Isabella's suicide; the killing of Balthazar and Lorenzo; the Suicide of Bel-Imperia; the killing of the Duke of Castile and Hieronimo's suicide. In certain scenes, he reveals the madness of Isabella and Hieronimo, in order to show the avenger as a rant. Hieronimo bites off his tongue to avoid telling the Duke what he wants to hear.

In fact, Kyd shows his audience their own tempestuous existence on stage. Downer (1950) describes the play as "a holocaust, after which scarcely enough members of the cast remain alive to bear off the dead". Kyd did not just model his play after Seneca; he showed great skill in constructing his plot. He created parallels to foreshadow major actions. For example, the mourning of the Viceroy of Portugal in Act 1 Scene 2 over the presumed killing of his son Balthazar, foreshadows the killing of Horatio and the mourning of his death by Hieronimo in Act II Scene 4.

Kyd used soliloquy to externalise Hieronimo's griefs and misgivings which enabled him to win the sympathy of the audience. He made Lorenzo a Machiavellian archetype, an over ambitious and heartless individual for whom no method is devilish in achieving his desire. No weapon is too small or too big to be used in realising his ambition. In fact, Downer (1950) states that "craft, stratagem, policy are his watchwords and self-interest his guiding principle".

*The Spanish Tragedy* is boisterous and horrifying. It is a play of blood and gore which provided a model for the dramaturgy of Christopher Marlowe and William Shakespeare, even though critics argue that Shakespeare's revenge tragedies are tamed version of Kyd's.

### **SELF-ASSESSMENT EXERCISE**

Discuss Thomas Kyd's legacy.

## **4.0 CONCLUSION**

In this study unit, you were exposed to the work of one of the earliest Elizabethan playwrights, Thomas Kyd. The study reveals that Kyd stamped a seal of authority on the English stage through his popular play entitled *The Spanish Tragedy*. This play is regarded as the first revenge

tragedy in the history of the English drama and it provided a model for other Elizabethan playwrights like Christopher Marlowe and William Shakespeare. The study outlines and briefly discusses the elements of revenge tragedy, which include, among others, Machiavellian scheming, disguise, death, horror, vengeance, play – within – a – play, and happy ending.

## 5.0 SUMMARY

This unit examines the contributions of Thomas Kyd to the development of English drama. Specifically, attention is paid to the concept of revenge tragedy and its elements for Thomas Kyd is said to have introduced this genre to English drama. His own popular work, *The Spanish Tragedy* equally elicited our attention.

## 6.0 TUTOR-MARKED ASSIGNMENT

Discuss the concept of revenge tragedy.

## 7.0 REFERENCES/FURTHER READING

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## UNIT 3 THE DRAMATURGY OF CHRISTOPHER MARLOWE

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### 1.0 INTRODUCTION

The personality of Christopher Marlowe is highly controversial due, chiefly, to the nature of his plays, poor record-keeping of his time, and above all, the type of life this brilliant and highly influential playwright appear to have lived. This unit examines the life and themes of the plays of this great poet and man of the theatre.

### 2.0 OBJECTIVES

At the end of this unit, you should be able to:

- examine the philosophical basis of Marlowe's dramaturgy
- describe three of his plays, (namely *Tamburlaine the Great*, *the Jew of Malta* and *Edward the Second*) in relation to power, wealth and treachery.

### 3.0 MAIN CONTENT

#### 3.1 The Life of Christopher Marlowe

In "A Brief Life of Christopher Marlowe", Kelvin L. Nenster states that:

*Uncovering the truth in the life of playwright and poet Christopher Marlowe is no small feat. Besides the poor record keeping of his era and low esteem in which playwrights were held, the murkiness of his life is further compounded by slanders and disinformation advertised*



*in the wave of his passing by Puritan detractors, rivals,  
and ideological opponents.*

The implication of the above is that Christopher Marlowe was an enigmatic character, and that much of what critics said about his personality depended on speculative and subjective interpretation of his plays and what detractors concocted.

Marlowe's early life is not properly documented. There is, for example, no record showing his actual date of birth. What is on record is that Christopher Marlowe (Cristofer Marleu in his autograph) was born in Canterbury, the son of a shoemaker, and was baptised on February 6, 1564. Marlowe attended the King's College and later proceeded to Corpus Christ College, Cambridge where he "studied the Bible and Reformation theologians as well as philosophy and history". He crowned this effort with a bachelor's degree in 1584. This is through a scholarship awarded to him by the Archbishop of Canterbury, Thomas Parker.

To further his education once more, Christopher Marlowe enrolled for an M.A. degree programme in the University of Cambridge. According to history, though he had a good record of grades and attendance throughout his undergraduate days, at a certain point he "suddenly developed a habit of protracted unexplained absences while pursuing his master's degree". This act of indiscipline put him into trouble, with the university authorities refusing to grant him his M.A. degree. The reason for Marlowe's long absence from school was connected to his espionage activities. At Cambridge, he came into contact with Sir, Francis Willingham, a chief spymaster and later secretary to Queen Elizabeth, who got him involved in state secret service. Through Willingham's effort, the Queen's Privy Council intervened in Marlowe's case with the university granting him his master's degree in 1587.

Taking the holy orders was part of Marlowe's scholarship package, but when he got his master's degree, he bolted away from fulfilling this part of his scholarship scheme, and moved to London where he began to practise as a playwright- a knack he developed when he was at King's College and consolidated at Cambridge. He was recognised as a quality and gifted playwright and soon he gained the attention of the London audience.

However, much of the money which facilitated Marlowe's epicurean life and expensive dressing habit was obtained through espionage. He had government connection and befriended people that mattered, for example- Walter Raleigh. This coupled with his brilliance made him to be outspoken and quarrelsome. He disturbed the peace a lot and this led

him into prison many times, and in some of the brawls, lives were lost. As a spy, he got involved in many shoddy dealings and this compelled some people to see him in different bad lights as a homosexual, counterfeiter, magician, tobacco and alcohol addict, etc.

A key factor that helped to shape Marlowe's plays and his life was his deep-seated attachment to Machiavellian ethics, a dominant ideology championed during the Renaissance by Niccolo Machiavelli. Cowan (1966) argues that Marlowe "attempts to show that the world is made up of people who actually follow this set of ethics laid down by Machiavelli". This strong support to Machiavellian principles, led to Marlowe being seen as an atheist, and the accusation that he held "dissident views on religion in a closed society, which put him in awkward social positions", was the reason behind his last detention before he was killed.

There is no gainsaying that Marlowe's brief life on earth was tumultuous. His death was precipitated by an armed brawl. He was stabbed to death by Ingram Frizer on Wednesday 30<sup>th</sup> May 1593, following a hot quarrel with regard to who would pay their bill. A complex story trailed Marlowe's death and most of the stories were generated especially by people who hated his ideology.

However, Christopher Marlowe's 29 years, with six only for his active dramatic practice, yielded fruitful dramatic dividends. Of all English playwrights, Marlowe is second only to Shakespeare in popularity. According to the Marlowe society:

*Marlowe has left us from his short, but brilliant, career seven plays, and in several of them he was a pioneer in that particular genre. Of these Tamburlaine parts 1 and 2 caused the greatest excitement among his contemporaries. The heroic nature of its theme, coupled with the splendour of the blank verse and the colour and scale of its pageantry led to its constant revival, with the great actor Edward Alleyn taking the part of Tamburlaine.*

The seven plays are as follows:

*Dido, Queen of Cathage (1585) (said to be written with Nashe)*  
*The First part of Tamburlaine the Great (1586/7)*  
*The Second part of Tamburlaine the Epealty (1587)*  
*The Jew of Malta (1589)*  
*Doctor Faustus (1589)*  
*Edward the Second (1592)*

*The Massacre of Paris (1592/3)*

## SELF-ASSESSMENT EXERCISE

Briefly discuss Marlowe's life.

### 3.2 The Dramaturgy of Christopher Marlowe

Christopher Marlowe's plays are among the world's finest dramatic literature, in terms of complexity of plot, impelling characterisation, fine and fiery dialogue. They are a signature of the truth about human nature and of an age driven by Machiavellianism in which, according to Horton and Hopper (1954), "cleverness and boldness seem to have been the new virtues most admired". His plays reflect the fiery temper of the Elizabethan world through the stories they tell, and what the characters think, do, or say. Marlowe inaugurated the overreaching, hero-villian tradition of plays, which William Shakespeare consolidated in his unbeatable masterpieces. Eze (2006) posits that "Marlowe's popularity does not only stem from the grandeur of his poetry and penetrating tragic tone, but lies heavily on the social relevance and sublimity of his themes".

### 3.3 Themes of Power, Wealth and Treachery

Marlowe's Elizabethan age disclosed to men, "a store of wealth and power in the world which they were too stunned and intoxicated to use well" (Bronowski and Mazilish, 1970: 23). As a playwright who was sensitive to his environment, Marlowe did not ignore this living problem in his dramaturgy. Rather, "like an alchemist, separating pure gold from the base metals, in the crucible of his art, he extracted the 'pure' drives of human nature" (1970: 166). His tragedies are ethical comments on certain disquieting human possibilities, the lust for power and gold. They do not only present before our very eyes, "the thunder and flaming" (Watt, 1968: 213) involved in treacherous pursuit and use of power, as well as malevolent wealth acquisition, they equally show us "the certainty with which the hand of judgement clutches the heel of the deed" (1968: 212). In *Tamburlaine the Great*, *King Edward the Second*, and the *Jew of Malta*, Marlowe shows us "the loose morals of a free and easy age" (1968: 213), the depth of human greed, decadence and pathos; but in all this, he still allows us to hear the penetrating cry of that "still small voice."

In *Tumburlaine the Great*, Marlowe paints the picture of the Renaissance period as "an age in which power was often personal and usurpers existed at the head of many states" (Bronowski and Mazlish, 1970: 23). In this greatly tumultuous tragedy, Tarmburlaine, a "Scythian shepherd becomes the scourge of the eastern world" (Vargas, 1960:

102). His thirst for power is neither to permit social mobility in the Persian politics, nor to help the masses, who Cosroe argues, “droof and languish in Mycetes’ government, to have a good sense of governance. His aim of seeking limitless power is to become the “arch-monarch of the world, the earthly God” (Part II, Act I Scene III).

The Elizabethan age was a period of overreaching, and an age of great tempestuous passion. Bronowski and Mazlish express the view that: “during a period of overreaching, even God might be bypassed by a few daring spirits. When men themselves become godlike in their power and attributes, there seemed no need for other gods” (1970: 168). Luis Vargas notes that “the swift conquests of Tamburlaine, his unbridled wrath, and the captive kings chained to walk beside his chariot” (Vargas, 1960), give him the impression of himself as a god among men. And he parades himself as one. For example, when Theridamas loses the courage to fight him and instead begins to adore him; Tamburlaine proudly tells him:

*Forsake thy king and do but join me  
And we will triumph all over the world  
I hold the fate fast bound in chains  
And with my hand turns fortune’s wheel about  
And sooner shall the sun falls from his sphere  
Than Tamburlaine be slain or overcome  
(Part I, Act I Scene I)*

Every statement of Tamburlaine in the play reveals the ethos and quintessence of a superman. When Zenocrate, his wife becomes surfeited with his war-mongering attitude, she asks him:

*Sweet Tamburlaine, when wilt thou leave these arms  
And save thy sacred person from scathe  
And dangerous chances of the wrathful war?*

Tamburlaine arrogantly answers:

*When heaven shall cease to move on both the poles,  
and when ground, whereupon my soldier march  
Shall rise aloft and touch the horned moon  
(Part I Act I Scene III).*

Like God whom Shakespeare says ‘makes sport of men’, Tamburlaine’s motive for assisting Cosroe to oust his brother from the throne, is to make sport of him. Immediately Mycetes is defeated and Cosroe sets out to ride in triumph through Perspolis, Tamburlaine who believes that such glory should be his alone, uses force to deprive Cosroe not only the crown the very day he puts it on, but also his life. Tamburlaine does not only see himself as fate itself, his belief in the force of arms makes him

to consider the gods as inconsequential. Hence, when he captures Cosroe's crown by means of brute force, he chides the gods:

*Though Mars himself, the angry god of arms  
And all the earthly potentates conspire  
To dispossess me of this diadem,  
Yet will I wear it in despite of them*  
(Part I Act II Scene I)

Similarly, when Tamburlaine defeats Bajazeth and turns him into a footstool, he tells Bajazeth, in a mocking tone that:

*The cheapest God, first mover of that sphere  
Enchased with thousands ever-shining lamps  
Will sooner burn the glorious frame of heaven  
Than it should so conspire my overthrow*  
(Part 1 Act IV Scene II).

Tamburlaine does not only talk about his supremacy over the gods, he seeks to demonstrate it in practical terms. Thus, when sickness begins to assail him, he requests his soldiers to join him pick up arms against the powers of heaven that proclaim his demise:

*What daring god torment my body thus  
And seeks to conquer mighty Tamburlaine?  
Shall sickness now prove me to be a man  
That have been termed the terror of the world? Techelles and the  
rest, come, take your swords  
And threaten him whose hand afflicts my soul  
Come let us march against the powers of heaven  
and set black streamers in the firmament  
To signify the slaughter of the gods.*  
(Part II, Act V, Scene IV).

However, can Tamburlaine by means of his physical strength and authority conquer the powers of Heaven? The answer to the above question explains the moral gleam of the play. Tamburlaine's quest for power leads him to decimate nations, tumble crowns and capture kings; but in spite of his physical strength and military valour, death proclaims his demise, while he has not yet become the 'arch-monarch of the world' nor 'chase the stars from Heaven and dim their eyes'. When he perceives that death has drained his marital strength, he requests:

*Give me a map; then let me see how much  
Is left for me to conquer the world*  
(Part II, Act V, Scene III)

A thorough examination of the map reveals to him that his life ambition has not been realised. A feeling of dissatisfaction and resentment overwhelms him, and he laments:

*Look here, my boys; see what a world of ground  
Lies westward from the midst of Cancer's line  
Unto the rising of this earthly globe.  
Whereas the sun, declining from our sight,  
Begins the day with antipodes!  
And I shall die, and all this unconquered?  
Look here, my sons, are all the golden mines  
Inestimable drugs and precious stones  
More worth than Asia and the world besides  
And from the Antarctic poles eastward behold  
As much more land, which never was decried  
Wherein are rocks of pearls that shine as bright  
As all the lamps that beautify the sky!  
And I shall die, and all this unconquered?  
(Part II, act V, Scene III).*

Tamburlaine's dying lamentations and anguish of the soul, demonstrate the futility of human power. His death is an indication that human power is, at least, limited by death. Tamburlaine never enjoys his majesty; neither does his men the benefit arising from it. Daunting thought of conquest never allows his soul any moment of bliss, nor his men any chance of enjoying the fruits of conquered lands.

In *King Edward the Second*, abuse of power, conspiracy and treachery assume a more horrendous dimension. In this nice poetic historical tragedy, Marlowe examines "domination of self-interests, lack of self-restraint in pursuit of desire and goals" (Okolo, 1994: 67) as the bane of the power-hungry. In this play, King Edward II conceives power as a means of self-indulgence. To have Gaveston return from exile, he is prepared to rid his court of the nobles, those who "make the king seem glorious to the world". To push on with his homosexual shows with Gaveston, King Edward II tyrannises the church, and treats his wife, Queen Isabella with disdain. Expressing her loss of personal dignity, honour and the king's love to Gaveston, the Queen laments:

*For now, my lord, the king regards me not, but dote  
Upon the love of Gaveston. He claps his cheeks, and  
hangs about his neck, smiles in his face and whispers  
in his ears.  
And when I came, he frowns  
(Act I Scene IV)*

So, if the Queen later joins forces against the king, and with the Young Mortimer, desecrates the king's "nuptial bed with infamy"; she does so to pay the king back in like terms. King Edward never conceives power as service, but as lordship. To him, the king must not be overruled in any matter. While external aggression threatens to submerge England from all quarters, and the soldiers' mutiny for want of pay, he plans "lascivious shows" and empties the treasury on Gaveston. To indulge in his pleasure, King Edward II makes desperate and unnatural resolutions. For example, he is ready to turn "English civil towns into huge heaps of stones" in order to have Gaveston return from exile.

However, when Edward II succumbs to the wrathful chances of war, and surrenders the crown, the young Mortimer, in order to maintain control, proves himself to be even more cruel and arrogant than the king. In fact, he elevates conspiracy and treachery to a monstrous level. He sees power as a means of ego massage, and as a tool to plague perceived enemies. To have a pound of flesh from Edward II, he does not only cause him to suffer incarceration in a dungeon where "the filth of all the castle falls", but he treacherously uses Lightborn to murder him in a most heinous way. Again, for fear that Kent may have overbearing influence on King Edward II, Mortimer, in spite of the young king's protestation, orders for the beheading of Kent. Feeling satisfied that he has succeeded in eliminating likely opposition to the realm, he boasts:

*The Prince I rule, the Queen I do command,  
And with a lowly conge to the ground, the proudest  
Lords salute me as I pass. I seal, I conceal, I do what I  
will.* (Act V Scene II)

However, as the young Mortimer basks in the sunshine of success achieved through conspiracy and treachery, Gurney reveals his complicity in the death of King Edward II. In a torrent of anger, the young Edward, whose "thoughts have been martyred with endless torment" because of the loss of his dear father, and uncle, orders for an immediate decapitation of Mortimer.

In this play, Marlowe, through dramatic examination of abysmal use of power, harps on the concept of fortune wheel. He uses the play to alert us to the danger inherent in a wrong conception of power, to clarify the point that there is a time for everything; a time to rise and a time to fall. When the Young Mortimer is being led away to suffer the consequences of his ruthless conspiracy, he recognises all this imperative point of view:

*Base fortune, now I see that in thy wheel  
There is a point, to which when men aspire,  
They tumble headlong down. That point I touched*  
(Act V Scene VI)

The *Jew of Malta* is a dramatic diagnosis of the evil of capitalism. In it, Marlowe queries the economic morality of his age, and finds unbridled lust for gold as “an unmistakable sign of decadence” (Knights, 1968: 6). In this play, Barabas equates wealth with honour. In spite of the fact that he has enough wealth that can “maintain him all his life”, and which can “serve in peril of calamity to ransom great kings in captivity” (Act I Scene I), he is ready to “rip open the bowels of the earth” to acquire more wealth. To him, it is better to be “a Jew and be hated; than to be pitied in a Christian poverty”. Like Karl Marx, he sees religion as opium which poisons the conscience and compels people to live in penury. Mocking the Christians’ antagonism against the Jews over their unwholesome quest for gold, he boasts:

*They say we are a scattered nation.  
I cannot tell, but we have scrambled up  
More wealth by far than those that brag of faith  
There’s Kirrah Jarrim, the great Jew of Greece  
Obed in Baiseth, Nones in Portugal  
Myself in Malta, some in Italy  
Many in France, and wealthy every one.  
Ay, wealthier than any Christian (Act I Scene I).*

Barabas’s mounting impatience and lust for wealth blinds him completely, and propels him to employ the most monstrous and appalling means the human mind can imagine, to realise his economic interest. Hear him out:

*Then after I am usurer  
And with extorting, cozening, forfeiting  
And tricks belonging unto brokery  
I filled the jails with bankrupts in a year.  
And with young orphans planted hospitals  
And every moon made some others mad  
And now and then one hangs himself for grief  
Pinning upon his breast a long great scroll  
How I with interest torment him.  
But mark how I am blest for plaguing them  
I have as much coin as will buy the town.  
(Act II Scene III)*

Treachery is Barabas’s second nature. He does not only employ it to amass wealth, he equally uses it to plague his perceived offenders and enemies. For example, to punish Governor Ferneze for dispossessing him of his gold, he forces his daughter, Abigail to swear false love to Don Lodowick. He tells her:



*Entertain Lodowick the governor's son  
 With all the courtesy you can afford  
 Provided that you keep your maidenhood  
 Use him as if he were a philistine  
 Dissemble, swear, protest, vow love to him  
 He is not of the seed of Abraham (Act II Scene II)*

Barabas's intention in doing this is to pitch the governor's son against his nice friend, Don Mathias. Indeed, Lodowick's proclaimed love to Abigail greatly incensed Mathias, and they engaged in a fight in which both perished.

Again, when the death of Mathias compels Abigail to feel that, "there is no love on earth" (Act III Scene III), and forces her to join the nunnery, which "functions as a kind of Arcadia a place of escape from the world of" Barabas, "from the schemings of the material mind" (Lester, 1999: 252), Barabas who fears that Abigail may reveal all she knows about him, decides to use Ithamore, his "second half" to poison the entire nuns, just to get at Abigail.

Similarly, when friars Jacomo and Barnadine shunned the canon law, and let Barabas know that Abigail confessed his complicity in the death of the governor's son, he baits them with money, which they are yet to get before he treacherously sends them to the great beyond.

Furthermore, when the sweet thing between the tighs of women causes Bellamira to entrap Ithamore who, in the enjoyment of it, betrays Barabas to her, in a world akin to Shakespeare Belmont, Barabas disguises himself as a French musician and poisons the lovers even as Ithamore thaws in Bellamira's laps, foreshadowing Bassanio:

*Love me little, love me long; let music rumble  
 Whilst I in thy icony lap do tumble (Act IV Scene VI)*

Barabas's treacherous activity reaches its zenith when Governor Ferneze learns that he devised the death of his son, and his friend, and prepares to force him to embrace the spread arms of law. To escape death, Barabas drinks juice of mandrake and feigns death. Perceived dead, he is thrown over the wall to feed the vultures. To pay Ferneze back in more than like terms, he joins Calymath of Turkey to overrun Malta. Although he is made governor, he prefers Ferneze to ransom himself. However, when Barabas is assured of huge sum of money, he sets in motion, a dastard process of destroying Calymath and his soldiers; but while he is almost ready to realise his aim, Ferneze causes him to suffer agonising death in a caldron he intends to use to destroy Calymath. And in an intolerable pang of extremity of heat, he confesses, fumes and

abuses both God and men, before the dark cloud of death finally envelops him.

Barabas's nefarious means of wealth acquisition, his heartlessness, lack of compassion and fellow-feeling, his inability to be moved by blood, nor touched by piteous situations, are by all standards, hair-raising and spine-chilling, but his catastrophic death, is an indication that there is no smartness in evil; that treachery must necessarily beget treachery. Thus, as he pines and smoulders away in the caldron, and we no longer hear from his, "my gold!, my gold!" we heave a sigh of relief, and join Sophocles to say, "evil never dies; the gods take care of that."

Lisa Hopkins (1996) expresses the view that Marlowe's world intersects with the Renaissance geographical discoveries and attitudes. In the *Jew of Malta and Tamburlaine the Great*, for example, what is dramatised is the significance of power and gold to the men of the Elizabethan world. The barbaric financial exploits of Barabas, and the onward expansionism of Tamburlaine, remind us of the wandering English adventurers such as Raleigh, Hawkins, Cavendish, among others, who in search of colonies and gold, became a menace to the entire world during the great age of Renaissance. Hopkins further posits that:

*Marlowe's eastern world is a mirror that transcends mere orientalism. What we see reflected, of course, are English privateers such as Hawkins.*

The characters of Tamburlaine and Barabas are mirrors of human beings in a predatory world, where dominance and exploitation have become a resonant evil. As a result of their belief that men are the sum of their appetites, these characters crossed the boundaries between the human and the monstrous to acquire power and wealth. Like Shakespeare's Shylock, Barabas is an "embodiment of pure evil, a savage spirit of darkness and revenge" (Lester, 1999: 256). Though he has more than cruel disregard for the Christians, he sends Abigail, his daughter to the nunnery for the purposes of recovering his gold and revenging his perceived Christian offenders. As a master dissembler, he emphasises danger through humour, and masks his evil intentions with palatable but deceitful speeches before his unsuspecting victims.

Although Tamburlaine is painted as a treasonable and Machiavellian character, a being who thinks about nothing except power, war, blood and murder, he does not, I believe, lack completely, the tender touch of humanity. His iron heart is thawed by the seductive power of feminine beauty. Zenocrate's love is "worth more to Tamburlaine than the possession of the Persian crown" (Part I Act I Scene II). This is an

indication that the only thing that is supreme to political power for Tamburlaine, is feminine love. When love competes with power, Tamburlaine is often thrown into emotional crisis; to him :

*A doubtful battle with my tempted thoughts  
For Egypt's freedom and the Soldan's life  
His life that so concerns Zenocrate  
Whose sorrows lay more siege unto my soul  
Than all my army to the Darmascus' walls  
And neither Persian's sovereign nor the Turk  
Troubled my senses with conceit of foil  
So much by much as doth Zenocrate  
(Part I Act V, Scene I).*

Again when Zenocrate died, Tamburlaine mourns her with all passions put to use. For example, in proud fury and intolerable fit, he tells Theridamas:

*Draw thy sword  
And wound the earth  
That it may cleave in twain  
And we descend into the infernal values  
To hale the Fatal Sisters by the hair  
And throw them into the triple moat of hell  
For taking hence my Zenocrate  
(Part II, Act II, Scene IV)*

Yet, in spite of this outburst of anger, he still wishes that Zenocrate lives:

*For she is dead!  
Thy words do pierce my soul!  
Ah, sweet Theridamas!  
Say so no more!  
Though she be dead,  
Yet let me think she lives  
And feed my mind that dies for want of her  
(Part II, Act II, Scene IV).*

The above statement reveals Tamburlaine's limitless capacity for enduring love. Cope (1996) submits that Tamburlaine has certain admirable qualities. He notes that "Tamburlaine is true to his word", and "true to those loyal him as they are to him". This loyalty is reflected in his relationship with Zenocrate and her father as well as Techelles, Usumcasane and Theridamas.

#### 4.0 CONCLUSION

This unit examines the plays of Marlowe and interprets his treatment of the eternal and ubiquitous twists and turns inherent in excessive quest for power and wealth. In *Tamburlaine*, *Edward II*, and the *Jew of Malta*, Marlowe reveals the internal dynamics of power struggle and malevolent wealth acquisition; he shows us the intricate interplay between self and others, how the images of the self clash and collide with that of others. Marlowe elevates the lust for power and wealth to the level of monstrosity, to show us the loose morals of an impatient and greedy age as well as to comment on the concept of the 'fortune wheel'. In the three plays, he demonstrates that life itself is characterised by ebb and flow, and like the theatre, has its own denouement.

#### 5.0 SUMMARY

This unit examines the life and dramaturgy of Christopher Marlowe. It pays attention to the ideas that shaped his life and plays, and the ideas of power, wealth and treachery in his plays all which hinge on Machiavellian ethics.

#### 6.0 TUTOR-MARKED ASSIGNMENT

Discuss how Christopher Marlowe handled the theme of power and wealth in his plays.

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## UNIT 4 SHAKESPEAREAN COMEDY

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### 1.0 INTRODUCTION

As his contemporary Ben Johnson notes, William Shakespeare “was not a man for an age but for all time”. In terms of popularity, variety, and sublimity of themes, dexterity of plot, eloquent poetry, and scintillating characterisation, no playwright can be mentioned before him in post-classical period. As a result of his towering achievements, Shakespeare is now regarded as the icon of the Elizabethan era. In this direction, Downer (1950) posits that “Shakespeare is, of course, head and shoulders above his fellows, but he is also head and shoulders above all the playwrights of the post – classical world”. This unit examines Shakespearean comedy; but before this an overview of his biography is given.

### 2.0 OBJECTIVES

At the end of this unit, you should be able to:

- explain Shakespeare's personality
- discuss the views of his contemporaries about him
- examine the nature of his dramaturgy
- explicate the nature of his comedy
- state the characteristics of his comedy.

### 3.0 MAIN CONTENT

#### 3.1 Shakespeare's Biography

William Shakespeare's date of birth is not actually recorded. What is on record is that he was baptised on April 26, 1564, at Holy Trinity Church in Stratford – Upon Avon, the year in which -according to Schoenbaum (1972), “a plague gripped Stratford carrying off over 200 souls in six months”. As a destined child, Shakespeare was not destroyed by the plague. He survived the epidemic to be able to shine as star he was destined to be.

His father, John Shakespeare, was in council of Stratford when the child was born and so was able to give him good elementary education. Afterwards, William was put in a good grammar school but economic misfortune forced his father to withdraw him from the school in his upper class. Records were silent with respect to what the young William got involved in when he was withdrawn from school, and this had led to lots of speculation. However in 1582, he married Anne Hathway, a woman eight years older than him. They begot Sussana in 1583, and in 1585, their twins Hamnet and Judith arrived.

Again, records were silent between 1852 and 1592 when he made his debut in London both as an actor and playwright. Shakespeare's quick success on stage attracted the dying Robert Greene's venom. Troubled that William Shakespeare without university training was scaling the height of those of them that received training in the university in classical literature, Greene in his sickbed warned his fellow university wits against “those puppets... that spake from our mouths, those antics garnished in our colours”. He was particularly, exceedingly, bitter against Shakespeare whom he described as:

*Upstart crow beautified with our feathers, that  
with his Tiger's heart unwrapped in a player's  
hide, supposes he is as well able to bombast out a  
blank verse as the best of you: and being an  
absolute Johannes fac totum, is in his own conceit  
the only shake – scene in a country.*

The idea of *Johannes fac totum*, which means Johnny-do-everything, or simply jack of all trades, is very important in Greene's criticism. It shows that Greene was simply jealous that Shakespeare was succeeding in different aspects of theatre practice. As a member and shareholder in the most popular theatre company of the time, in London, the Chamberlain – King's Men, Shakespeare served the “troupe in triple capacity: as a playwright, actor, and business director”.

However, most of William Shakespeare's contemporaries saw him differently. They held him in a high esteem. In an article entitled "The life of Shakespeare," Schoenbaum (1972) summarises their perceptions of Shakespeare as follows:

*Apart from Greene, none of his contemporaries seems to have uttered a malicious word about Shakespeare. Cheetle... praised his civil demeanor and uprightness of dealing. From others we hear of good will, sweet Shakespeare, friendly Shakespeare, so dear loved a neighbour. The actor Augustine Philips in 1605 remembered him in his will and bequeathed him thirty shilling pieces in gold. Praise did not easily come from Jonson, but in his Discoveries, when not under eulogistic obligations, he confessed that he loved the man and honoured his memory, on this side, idolatry. "He was indeed honest, and of an open and free nature; had an excellent fancy, brave notions and gentle expressions.*

The opinions of Shakespeare's contemporaries suggest that Greene's bitter criticism is driven by inferiority complex. He cannot understand why Shakespeare without university training should surpass those with such training in fame because he equates creativity with rank. But Shakespeare is a typical example that creativity does depend on possession of university degrees but on talent and hard work.

In *Shakespeare at the Globe*, Beckerman (1966) tells us that theatre work during the Elizabethan time was quite strenuous, more especially for people like Shakespeare who combined playwriting with acting. This overlapping job never allowed Shakespeare any opportunity at all to challenge Greene's mere-verbal-quibble. In fact, as Munroe (2011) asserts, "when you succeed, you become more in demand and the more you are in demand the harder you have to work and study and discipline yourself". That is exactly the case with William Shakespeare. He never spent his time on triviality.

Apart from theatre business, Shakespeare was a star in another dimension. He was a shrewd real – estate investor and agriculturalist. He had powerful estates in Stratford and London. All this made him to be exceedingly rich in his time. On dramaturgy, Shakespeare excelled in many genres of the drama. Although critics identified four genres, romantic comedy, chronicle, tragedy and tragicomedy, it is necessary to point out that the classification of Shakespeare's plays into four categories is not exclusive. This is because his plays show overlapping



tendencies. Shakespeare never obeyed the classical rules of the three unities and purity of genres.

His dramatic writings show indebtedness to past artistic endeavours and historical writings. There is sufficient evidence of his contact with Greco – Roman literatures, Holinshed, and Plutarch. However, he gives penetrating analysis to borrowed ideas, turning every captured material into something of ineffable beauty. William Shakespeare died at the age of 52 years, leaving behind 37 stunning plays for humanity. The plays have continued to prove themselves as inexhaustible mines for criticism.

### **SELF-ASSESSMENT EXERCISE**

Briefly discuss William Shakespeare's biography.

## **3.2 Shakespearean Comedy**

Shakespeare wrote comedies unlike any other comedian. His comic plays- without lack of slapstick events show us the light and dark sides of life through the experience of love tangle garnished with wit-bantering, humours, puns and all kinds of disguise and mistaken identity. His comedies are not plays of complete lightheartedness for they do not always portray love, which is their major concern, as always rainbows and butterflies. This is because the universe of Shakespearean comedies is very unstable as usually we move constantly from light to darkness; from longing to despair; from the plain to the mysterious.

His comic view of life is ambiguous. In his comic world, we are thrown from unsafe territory to the world of absurd trivia, from the world of tumbling music to that of panic and anguish of the soul. In it, we encounter tornado of forces angling for unity. We encounter reality that is always shifting. All this tells us that we are not always what we claim to be and that situations are not usually what they seem to be.

### **SELF-ASSESSMENT EXERCISE**

Examine the nature of Shakespearean comedy.

## **3.3 Characteristics of Shakespearean Comedy**

A fundamental quality of Shakespearean comedies is that emphasis is laid on situation than character development. Shakespearean comedies enable us to laugh at human ignorance arising from crisis of identity and self – deception. A major theme handled by Shakespearean comedies is love tangle. We usually find a situation where a character pines for someone who pines for another. Love is portrayed in perplexing ways:

sometimes we find it as “rainbows and butterflies”, sometimes we find it tyrannical, inhuman and painful. Nothing can be as painful as losing one’s sleep for someone who does not even know that one exists.

Nevertheless, in Shakespearean comedies, there is always a movement towards the “green world”. No matter the complexity of conflict, confusion and tension, events usually gravitate to happy ending, with marriage of hearts. According to Brocket and Hildy, in Shakespearean comedies:

*A number of plots are usually interwoven, at first proceeding somewhat independently of each other but eventually coming together as denouement approaches, so that the resolution of one leads to that of the others; in this way apparent diversity is given unity.*

Deception is a glaring quality of Shakespearean comedies. In virtually all his comic plays, the playwright exploits all known forms of deception such as mistaken identity, forgery, and disguise, to deepen the problem of love tangle. Other means of extracting laughter such as pun, humour, slapstick action and wit – bantering are employed by Shakespeare in his comedies to promote the humans love for the trivia. Most of these qualities are ignited and enlivened by fools like Feste in *Twelfth Night*.

Shakespearean comedies exploit the technique of separation and unification. The separation is normally caused by a tragic incident like shipwreck, while the unification is produced by the element of chance. All Shakespearean comedies move towards the green world and usually end in festivals and marriages. The atmosphere is optimistic no matter the amount of conflicts and crises characters passed through. Overall, Fletcher observes that in his comedies, Shakespeare:

*Scoffs merrily at conceit, bombast, vanity, and worldly folly. What emerges more and more, as one reads and thinks, is the wisdom and knowledge of the man combined with his gift of poetry. These qualities have lifted him into eminence. He could make words mean more than they logically mean, and express such commonplace emotions as young lovers, sorrow, despair, and ambition, in a radiant kind of language so that these experiences seem not commonplace but the very essence of romance, adventure, pathos.*

## SELF-ASSESSMENT EXERCISE

List and explain five characteristics of Shakespearean comedy.

### 3.4 *Twelfth Night*

*Twelfth Night* has been mostly agreed to be the summit of Shakespearean comedy. Rich in gender – crossing disguise, separation and unification of identical twins and loved ones, self-inflation, shipwreck, pun and wit-bantering, etc, the play’s carefully arranged multi-situational events, makes its universe quite riveting. The universe of the play is unstable because there is constant movement from light to the mysterious; from longing to absurd trivia and nonsense talk about sex. In “Notes on *Twelfth Night*”, Serban (1999) observes that through the play Shakespeare compels us to see “the flow of images of life as a reflection of reality that is always shifting. Nothing is what it seems’. In fact, he submits that:

*The play makes us question what we think we know about love, sexuality, relationships, gender – it gives us a sense of humility and recognition that we are celebrating on stage, forces that we know very little about. Like characters caught in a net, we wonder what is missing in our experience of love. Physical love, spiritual love, tyrannical or compassionate love, between friends – tornado of forces, the cravings, fears are a manifestation of our divided beings longing for unity.*

#### 3.4.1 The Theme of Love Tangle

*Twelfth Night* examines the romantic theme of love tangle in an intriguing way. Although the play is regarded by many people as a romance, it is not as we have said “a comedy of complete lightheartedness” (Opppapers.com). In spite of the fact that there is a friendly love between Antonio and Sebastin as well as between Sebastin and Viola, yet for most of the characters, love appears tyrannical, a very painful experience. We discover that even while “the music rumbles”, Orsino who had fallen in love with Olivia at first sight, pines for her but she does not want to listen to him.

Olivia faces similar experience when Cesario (Viola) feels that her craving for him, instead of his master is a misplaced affection. Sir Andrew Aguecheck pines for Olivia and is eager to challenge Cesario who appears to steal the Lady’s heart to a fight, yet Olivia does not know that he exists. Malvolio is deceived by Maria to think that Olivia

loves him. His efforts to impress that feeling on Olivia earned him incarceration in a dark room, having been perceived as a mad man.

However, while Olivia does not fall for the men that are ready to stake all they have for her love, she falls for Cesario at first sight, without the slightest idea that Cesario (Viola) is her fellow woman masquerading as a man. Olivia's mistaken marriage with Sebastin is accepted at the end only because he is an exact copy of Viola. In the same vein, Viola's affection for his master and his master's deep feeling for her make the switching of role from servant to wife possible when her real identity is revealed at last. Notwithstanding these two marriages at the end of the play, love in the text is portrayed as a hurting experience. At some point, the Duke sees it as cruel while for Olivia it is a plague.

### 3.4.2 The Use of Disguise in the Play

Disguise is a major instrument used in the play to advance its plot. It is used to deepen the problematic of mistaken identity and to complicate the perception of love. More than any other form of disguise used in the text, it is Viola's disguise as a man that pushes the action of the play forward. In fact, almost everything is teleguided by it. Olivia falls in love with Viola in complete ignorance of her identify. Sebastin's intrusion into the scene exacerbates things, causing Olivia to wed him in the place of Cesario (Viola). The semblance of Viola and Sebastin causes the Duke to exclaim:

*One face, one voice*  
*One habit and two persons*  
*A natural perspective*  
*That is and is not (Act V Scene I)*

It is Viola's disguise that causes the quarrel between Antonio and Viola, and between Sebastin and Sir Toby and Andrew Aguecheek. Viola is blamed because of the fight between Sebastin and Sir Toby. Although there is a moment of recognition when the cloud of ignorance is cleared and true identities revealed, Viola's disguise, Feste's camouflage and Maria's forgery appear to have ruffled many and caused untold chaos. The use of disguise makes the comedy a sophisticated one with multi-layers of implication.

However, through the use of disguise, Shakespeare shows us how we fall prey to self-deception by always assuming that we are who we are not. He uses the element to show us how foolish each and every one of us can be. The twists and turns engendered by disguise make "the play a sophisticated comedy with an uneasy look at the human condition" (Serban, 1999).

## SELF-ASSESSMENT EXERCISE

Discuss the major theme of *Twelfth Night*.

### 4.0 CONCLUSION

William Shakespeare is ranked as the best among all the post-classical playwrights. His plays are excellent models for good poetry, penetrating themes and charming characterisation. They provide unlimited source for critical enquires. This unit examines the man and his comic writing.

### 5.0 SUMMARY

This unit examines briefly the biography of William Shakespeare and the nature of his dramaturgy before concentrating on his comedy. Attempt is made to discuss the nature and some basic characteristics of Shakespearean comedy. Finally, *Twelfth Night* is analysed with emphasis on the texture and universe of the play, the theme of love tangle and the use of disguise in the text.

### 6.0 TUTOR-MARKED ASSIGNMENT

Discuss Shakespearean comedy, illustrating your answer with *Twelfth Night*.

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## MODULE 2      ELIZABETHAN DRAMA II

Unit 1	Shakespearean Tragedy
Unit 2	Shakespearean Tragicomedy
Unit 3	Shakespearean Chronicle Plays
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### UNIT 1      SHAKESPEAREAN TRAGEDY

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#### 1.0      INTRODUCTION

Module 2 continues the discussion on Elizabethan drama, but the focus of the module will be on Shakespearean tragedy, tragicomedy as well as the chronicle play. The drama of Ben Johnson, Shakespeare's contemporary will equally be examined here.

William Shakespeare wrote enduring and memorable tragedies, including *King Lear*, *Julius Caesar*, *Hamlet*, *Othello*, *Macbeth*, etc. Most of Shakespeare's statements used today in garnishing public speeches and funeral orations are drawn from his tragic plays. This unit examines the nature and characteristics of Shakespearean tragedy and concludes with an analysis of *Macbeth*.

#### 2.0      OBJECTIVES

At the end of this unit, you should be able to:

- explain the nature of Shakespearean tragedy
- describe the characteristics of Shakespearean tragedy
- examine the play *Macbeth*.

### 3.0 MAIN CONTENT

#### 3.1 Nature of Shakespearean Tragedy

Shakespearean tragedies deal with multiplicity of themes and enduring human passions and these imbue them with the quality of timelessness. The most driving forces for human actions like love, hatred, envy, jealousy, lust, pride, revenge, and vaulting ambition etc., are given penetrating treatment in Shakespeare's tragic plays. In essence, Shakespeare is panoramic in his conception and expression of the tragic view of life, and this complexity makes it extremely difficult for critics to agree on what the plays say or do not say.

#### SELF-ASSESSMENT EXERCISE

Examine the nature of Shakespearean tragedy.

#### 3.2 Characteristics of Shakespearean Tragedy

It is difficult to discuss all the qualities of Shakespearean tragedy in this study. So, they will be merely scratched on the surface by explaining a few of them. Some of these qualities have been identified by A.C. Bradley (1955) as indicated below.

- Shakespearean tragedy deals with people of high estate whose fate affects "the welfare of a whole nation or empire".
- The calamity that befalls Shakespearean character is not sent by any supernatural power, but "proceeds mainly from actions, and those the actions of men". In Shakespeare's tragedy, the hero initiates an action which "beget others and those others beget others, until this series of interconnected deeds leads by an apparently inevitable sequence to a catastrophe". This means that the hero normally makes contribution to his destruction.
- However, there are evidences of the presence of the supernatural in some of the Shakespearean tragedies, but as Bradley rightly observes, the supernatural:

*gives a confirmation and a distinct form to inward movements already present and exerting an influence: to the sense of failure in Brutus, to the stifled workings of conscience in Richard, to the half-formed thought, or the horrified memory of guilt in Macbeth, to suspicion in Hamlet. Moreover, its influence is never a compulsive kind. It forms no more than an element, however important, in the problem*



*which the hero has to face; and we are never allowed to feel that it has removed his capacity or responsibility for dealing with the problem.*

- Unlike, Sophoclean tragedy *Oedipus Rex*, Shakespearean hero does not remain alive at the end of the play. So for Shakespeare, tragedy is “essentially a tale of suffering and calamity conducting to death”.
- A fundamental quality of Shakespearean tragedy is that there is always a “fatal tendency to identify the whole being with one interest, object, passion, or habit of the mind”. The hero tends to move in one direction.
- In some tragedies, conflict is outward like in *Julius Caesar* where Julius Caesar contends with the conspirators; but in his mature tragedies, conflict is inward. The hero is often driven by desire, scruple, doubt, etc.
- Roland Mushat Frye (1982) gives yet other characteristics of Shakespearean tragedy as follows.
  - Shakespearean tragedy concentrates on older people. According to him, “Maturity with its responsibilities and problems is moved from the background to the very centre of the action, and conflict between generations takes a degree of intensity absent from any of his comedies”.
  - The tragic characters have no pastoral retreat, no green worlds. Evil is too oppressive to afford characters any moment of relaxation.
- There is always a pressure on time and this makes the hero to be in a state of emergency all the time.
- In Shakespearean tragedy, existence is reduced to chaos. The atmosphere is dominated by fear. Violence is contagious and extreme action earns extreme penalty.
- Although order is normally re-established, Shakespearean tragedy usually ends in “majestic music of a funeral march”.
- Comic relief helps to reduce tragic intensity.
- Shakespeare’s tragic heroes have power of expression. They think about situations and match their deeds with speeches of equal grandeur.

### **SELF-ASSESSMENT EXERCISE**

List and discuss five characteristics of Shakespearean tragedy.

### 3.3 *Macbeth* and the Theme of Vaulting Ambition

Hurstfield (1972) states that:

*In Shakespeare's England, order and degree, where they existed at all, existed much more in form than substance; and so it had been throughout the 16th century. Indeed, the real malaise was not because order and degree were in dissolution but because they were being imposed upon a society which had in many respects broken free from their rigidities.*

Towards the end of the reign of Queen Elizabeth I, lack of an heir to the throne of England precipitated severe political problem. The troubling socio-political climate according to, Bradbrook (1972) compelled playwrights to abandon historical plays and “turn to self-questioning, which sharpened into satiric comedy or darkened into the tragic mode”. Shakespeare turned into tragedy to probe deeply into human nature and the idea of being. *Macbeth* is one of the tragedies written to clarify Shakespeare's feeling about human nature and being.

In *Macbeth*, we observe an intense and unparalleled display of criminality. In this tumultuous play, Macbeth's overweening lust for the crown, compels him to commit a culpable crime of murdering King Duncan, a man who loves him dearly. Ossie Enekwe explains that Macbeth “shares full responsibility for his crime and doom”. Macbeth knows that, according to Scottish tradition, he is not to be king, even if Duncan dies naturally. This is because Duncan has children who can replace him.

Macbeth acknowledges this when he says that “to be king stands not within the prospect of belief” (Act, I Scene III). This typifies the fact that Macbeth's heinous and bloody act is premeditated and never borne out of the influence of the witches as some critics suggest. Vaulting ambition, which means in this play, “the intention and planning of murder” (Knott 1974), propels Macbeth to think aloud of murder shortly after his encounter with the witches:

*My thought whose murder is yet  
But fantastical,  
Shakes so my single state of man,  
That function is smothered in surmise, and nothing is  
But what is not (Act I, Scene III).*

The “horried image” of death “unfixes” Macbeth’s hair, and makes his heart knock about his “ribs”, yet “palpable dangers leave him unmoved” (Bradley 1955). Bradley rightly argues that “slumbering murder has been lurking in Macbeth’s heart, for no innocent man would have started, as he did, with a start of fear at the mere prophesy of a crown, or have conceived thereupon immediately the thought of murder”. Bradley maintains, and it is true, that “the words of the witches are fatal to the hero only because there is in him something which leaps into light at the sound of them”.

In support of this point of view, Enekwe submits that the “tragedy of Macbeth is the outcome of evil conspiracy”, for “although the witches prophesy that he will be king, they never suggest that he become one through treachery and murder”. There is sufficient evidence that Macbeth is not wanting in contemplative life that he is fully conscious of what he does. For example, in a soul-searching exercise before the killing of Duncan, Macbeth is convinced that he has no reason whatever to kill the king. To him, Duncan is:

*...here in double part:*

*First, I am his kinsman and subject,*

*Strong both against the deed;*

*Then, as his host,*

*Who should against his murderer shut the door,*

*Not bear the knife myself (Act I, Scene VII).*

However, in spite of this conviction, and the fact that Duncan honoured Macbeth lately, having been “transfixed by the horror of his crime and the promises of power, he consciously rejects the possibility of repentance, salvation and an eternal future for the man that he has been”. He “chooses to know himself no longer, but instead, to know only the deed and the power it will bring, and so he becomes the very embodiment of his crime: the bloody usurping tyrant” (Microsoft Encarta). To confirm this, Macbeth states:

*I have no spur*

*To prick the sides of my intent,*

*But only vaulting ambition, which o’er-leaps itself,*

*And falls on the other (Act I, Scene VIII).*

So, in the person of Macbeth “false face must hide what the false heart doth know” (Act I, Scene VIII). Another criminal dimension of Macbeth’s personality is revealed in his dexterity in covering up the murder. In the first instance, before he carries out the murder, he employs the seductive power of strong drinks to lure the king’s guards to sleep, making them conscious only in the fairy world of dreams. After

killing Duncan, Macbeth accepts his wife's suggestion to make the guards appear culpable by staining them with the king's blood, and by dropping the blood-stained daggers by their side.

He follows this up by murdering the innocent guards in the morning of the following day under the pretext that he has found incriminating evidence of the murder against them. Nevertheless, unsettled in his mind, Macbeth hatches plans to eliminate all the noble men who are likely to attribute the killing of Duncan to him. Although he succeeds in murdering Banquo on his way to his castle, Fleance, one of the sons of Banquo, escapes the operation wipe out. This reinforces the popular feeling that Macbeth is behind the cold death of the king; and this leads many thanes and friends to desert him. Consequently, Macbeth resorts to wanton killings in order to retain power. Lamenting Macbeth's reckless killing of his perceived offenders, Macduff, the self-exile Thane of Fife, says:

*Each morn  
New widows howl, new orphans cry  
New sorrow strikes heaven in the face that it resounds  
As if it felt with Scotland and yelled out (Act IV, Scene III).*

The assassination of King Duncan amounts to a terrible violation of the concept of degree and order, which the Elizabethans cherished so much. According to John Harvey "there could be no greater violation of the natural order for the Elizabethans than the murder of a King by one of his subjects". Macduff equates the murder of King Duncan with "the breaking open of the lord's anointed temple and stealing the life of the building" (Act II Scene III). Duncan's gruesome death "reverberates through hell and heaven" (Elton, 1972). Even the elements acknowledge this maximum disturbance of cosmic order and balance, this vital aspect of the Scottish unwritten constitution. Lenox, one of the noble characters in the play, describes the event of that night, thus:

*The night has been unruly  
Where we lay  
Our chimneys were blown down, and as they say  
Strange screams of death  
And prophesying with accent terrible  
New hatched to the woeful time  
Some say the earth was feverous  
and did shake (Act II Scene III).*

The un-naturalness of this murder is again fully explained by the conversational reports of Ross and the old man, who appear in the play, to be a "measure of human experience" (Beckerman 1970). The old man has attained "the proverbial extent of a man's life" (84), that is, three

score and ten years. He has seen “hours of dreadful, and things strange, but this sore night hath trifled former knowing” (Act II, Scene IV). Ross acquiesces that Duncan’s horses eat each other to “the amazement of” his “eyes that looked upon it” (Act II Scene IV). Both reports are indications of dislocation of natural order, and they spell doom for Scotland. As the fountain – head of Scotland, “the gashed and suffering body of King Duncan, becomes the gashed and suffering body of the whole country” (Harvey, 1960). The death of Duncan throws Scotland into a state of complete disorder, especially, as the heir-apparent is not caused to ascend the throne.

For the purposes of ensuring justice, both nature and man devise appropriate ways of redressing evil and punishing crimes. Retribution, which is the cardinal goal of punishment, finds expression in the penal codes and sentencing practices of courts, as well as in the principle of equal retaliation embedded in the mosaic law of “an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth”. It is also clearly evident in the natural law of reciprocal action, an unbendable rule that insists that, “what a man sows he will reap many times over” (Abd-ru-shin, 7). Abd-ru-shin maintains that, “just like the harvest yields a multiple of the seed, so man will always receive back greatly multiplied what in his own intuitive perceptions he awakens and sends out, according to the nature of his volition”.

He further reminds us that bearing the responsibility of one’s deeds “begins already with the making of resolution, not just with the accomplished deed, which is simply a consequence of the resolution (8). Although Lady Macbeth seeks to convince her husband that “A little water clears us of this”, retribution never waits long. It clutches at the heels of the deed without delay. The play’s sustained evil and violence are balanced by its study of the minds of its main characters. “Macbeth and his wife are repulsed and torn by their own behaviour, and they both seem to verge on hallucination and madness as they recoil from the mayhem they have created around themselves” (*Microsoft Encarta*).

Immediately Duncan is murdered, little noises begin to appal Macbeth, causing him great disquietude of mind. As soon as he emerges from the chamber of murder, he fearfully tells his wife:

*Me thought I heard a voice cry  
Sleep no more!  
Macbeth doth murder sleep – the innocent sleep  
Sleep that knits up the raveled sleeve of care  
The death of each day’s life  
Balm of hurt minds  
Great nature’s second course:  
Chief nourisher in life’s feast* (Act II Scene II).

Macbeth's statement above suggests that he is already experiencing mental torture and anguish of the soul. Mental pain causes him to feel the pull of his humanity. He becomes paralytic as he contemplates his dastardly deed. Even though Lady Macbeth accuses him of being a coward, he bluntly refuses to enter the guards' chamber, and tells her plainly:

*I'll go no more.  
I am afraid to think what I have done;  
Look on't again I dare not.*

Thus, as fear starts to dominate the entire being of Macbeth, he begins to suffer from intense nightmare. According to Knott (1974):

*There is no tragedy without awareness.  
Richard III is aware of the grand Mechanism.  
Macbeth is aware of nightmare. In the world in  
which murder is being imposed as fate,  
compulsion and inner necessity, there is only one  
dream: of a murder that will break the murder  
cycle, will be the way out of nightmare and will  
mean liberation. For the thought of murder that  
has to be committed, murder one cannot escape  
from is even worse than murder itself.*

With mutiny and screams against tyranny at home, the desertion of troops, friends and thanes, and the untimely death of Lady Macbeth, Macbeth finds himself in sore need of everything, hence his bitter lamentation:

*I have lived long enough: my way of life  
Is fallen into sear, the yellow leaf  
And that which should accompany old age  
As honour, love, obedience, troops of friends  
I must not look to have; but in their stead  
Curses not loud but deep (Act V, Scene III).*

For being her husband's pillar of support and source of enduring courage, Lady Macbeth has a fair share of retribution in her sleep-walking madness. Overpowered by guilt, she complains:

*Here's the smell of blood still.  
All the perfumes of Arabia will not sweeten this little hand  
(Act V, Scene I).*

Although she threatens to wish away the blood, it is clear to her that "what's done cannot be undone" (Act V Scene I). The overweening

influence of guilt saps away the strength, which *ab initio* compels her to think that “it is the eye of childhood that fears a painted devil”. Here, “Shakespeare wishes to stress that evil is sterile and self-destructive” (Harvey 42). When Lady Macbeth dies, Macbeth in utter despair, realises albeit belatedly, the futility of unconscionable life. In a death – wish, he sees life as a candle in the wind, and cries:

*Out, out, brief candle!  
Life's but a walking shadow, a poor player  
That struts and frets his hour upon the stage  
And then is heard no more, it is a tale  
Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury  
Signifying nothing (Act V, Scene V).*

Now, his helplessness assumes even a more terrifying dimension when Birnam wood closes in on him. Listen again to the lamentation of a desperate and finished man:

*They have tied me to a stake:  
I cannot fly.  
But bear-like, I must fight the course (Act V Scene VI).*

Thus, when Macbeth in a mad battle, loses his head to the avenging sword of Macduff, he suffers in more than like measures, the humiliation and anguish of his victims. “Macduff, not Macbeth, had to win the hand-to-hand combat” (Beckerman, 31), in order to restore equilibrium in the overheated polity. And this equilibrium is maximally attained in the coronation of Malcolm – the heir – apparent.

In conclusion, this unit examines the nature of criminality and retribution in *Macbeth*. The writer feels that Macbeth is intensely evil, and that his “soul-searching before and after he has embarked on his career of murder are the thoughts of a guilty man whose conscience still troubles him after his will had already consented to a life of evil” (Vargas, 111). However, this study expresses the notion that Macbeth is created to demonstrate, among other things, the consequences of violating the idea of, and belief in, cosmic degree and order, which is very dear to the Elizabethans. Macbeth himself harps on this all-important value-habit of his people in the banquet scene, where he tells the lords:

*You know your own degree  
Sit at first and last  
The hearty welcome (Act III, Scene III).*

Similarly, when the ghost of Banquo causes Macbeth to behave in an outlandish way that eventually disrupts the banquet, Lady Macbeth

again reminds the lords as they make haste to go, “stand not upon the order of your going” (Act III, Scene IV). This implies that even in social life, the Elizabethans were to observe the idea of degree and order. It is the conviction of this author that Shakespeare, in this dense and concentrated tragedy, puts the concept of degree and order into dramatic action in order to vitalise it. Fraser posits that “intellectual positions, ideas, value-systems are sometimes only fully vitalised and assessable when they issue in action, especially action with grave potential or actual consequences”.

The Elizabethans flaunted the idea of degree and order as an existential dogma, but in their daily existence, they frequently trampled upon it. Shakespeare, therefore, created the character, Macbeth in order to reveal the gulf between what ideally his people would want their society to be, and the turbulent reality of this society.

In *Macbeth*, Shakespeare deals with violence in a fundamental way. John Fraser argues that any playwright who deals with violence in a manner Shakespeare does in *Macbeth*, “becomes a kind of nose-rubber or mirror-holder, someone rubbing the spectator’s nose in the disagreeable and holding up a mirror in which he can contemplate the essential filthiness, nastiness, beastliness of mankind, or at least, of unregenerate bourgeois mankind” (p.110). In the main, it is the writer’s view that Shakespeare dramatises the criminal ethos of men of his age, not only to show us some of the disquieting human possibilities, but equally, to “give back to thought, the kind of existential fullness that is normally denied to it by the wrong kind of idealising and abstracting” (p.122).

Although in *Macbeth*, life experiences appear to parallel expectations, Shakespeare is able to use the play to shed light on one of the maxims, which his people attempted to use to order their society, which frequent political cataclysm and madness appear to threaten. By juxtaposing impressions of world of order and disorder Shakespeare shows us “the flow of images of life as a reflection of a reality that is always shifting”(Serban,p. 43), and asks us to make a choice.

#### **4.0 CONCLUSION**

This study unit examines the nature of Shakespearean tragedy and some of its glaring qualities that make it a timeless monument.

#### **5.0 SUMMARY**

This unit explains the nature and characteristics of Shakespearean tragedy. Adequate analysis of *Macbeth* is made in order to reveal Shakespeare’s perception of the tragic view of life. Specifically, the



theme of vaulting ambition is examined to show how it helped to clarify the Elizabethan concept of degree and order.

## 6.0 TUTOR-MARKED ASSIGNMENT

Examine *Macbeth* in the light of the concept of degree and order.

## 7.0 REFERENCES/FURTHER READING

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## UNIT 2 SHAKESPEAREAN TRAGICOMEDY

### CONTENTS

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### 1.0 INTRODUCTION

This unit explains the nature and characteristics of Shakespeare's tragicomedy. It gives an overview of the concept of tragicomedy before concentrating on the Shakespeare type of the genre. Finally, *The Merchant of Venice* (1596) is examined as an example of Shakespeare's tragicomedy.

### 2.0 OBJECTIVES

At the end of this unit, you should be able to:

- describe the concept of tragicomedy
- explain the characteristics of Shakespeare's tragicomedy
- explicate the nature of *The Merchant of Venice*
- list and discuss some themes of the play.

### 3.0 MAIN CONTENT

#### 3.1 What is Tragicomedy?

Tragicomedy is a dramatic genre in which there is a juxtaposition of tragic and comic elements. It is a synthesis which, according to Wilson (2005), produces "a view in which one eye looks through a comic lens and the other through a serious lens; and the two points of view are so intermingled as to be one, like food which tastes sweet and bitter at the same time". A drama of mixed feeling, tragicomedy compels us to

“weigh in one scale”, the multi coloured world of society, or soul” as well as “the unstable public or private temper” (Styan, 1967). It draws equal “vacillating response” of tears and laughter from the audience because it is a drama in which “one pattern of feeling dramatised” is countered by another different pattern.

Styan argues that the delicate balance between the comic and the tragic, between happiness and sadness in a play keeps man in a state of wakefulness. In a tragicomedy, “we are specifically asked not to be fanatics” (Styan, 1967) because of the ambivalent nature of existence. According to Eze (2011), tragicomedy is a reconciliation drama which strikes a balance between tragedy and comedy in its narrative paradigms. It takes one to a tragic height and lowers one into a happy comic environment. This is exactly what makes the play, eminently, satisfying and of popular taste.

Tragicomic drama is very ancient in its origin. According to Styan (1967), tragicomedy was the staple of “Athen’s declining years, England at the turn of the sixteenth century, Moliere’s France under Louis XIV, Russia at the turn of the nineteenth century and Western Europe as a whole, after the two world wars”. The mystery cycle plays of the middle ages were equally tragicomic in perspective. The absurdist play probes deeply into human problems and casts a cold eye on the world, yet it is also imbued with a comic spirit” (Wilson 2005).

### **SELF-ASSESSMENT EXERCISE**

Discuss the concept of tragicomedy.

### **3.2 Characteristics of Shakespeare’s Tragicomedy**

On Shakespeare and tragicomedy, Ben Jonson observes that he “caught his ideas from the living world”. Life, as Soren Kierkegaard would say, “is a striving and is both pathetic and comic in the same degree”. Shakespeare seeks to reflect the world as the living encounters its emotional vacillating tendency. In his tragicomic plays, one encounters shifting layers of narrative pattern which leads to events obtruding into one another without warning. Some of the characteristics of Shakespeare’s tragicomedy include the following.

- In terms of plotting, Shakespearean tragicomedy employs complex narrative strategies. In *The Merchant of Venice*, we have about eleven different fables. It is the manner in which Shakespeare makes these fables obtrude into one another without warning that makes the play extremely fascinating.

- Characterisation is protean. This refers to a situation where one character exists in several narrative planes. Shylock, for example, is portrayed as an odious usurer as well as a tragic figure of loss. Portia is both a lady and an intelligent male lawyer, etc.
- Shakespearean tragicomedy, usually, presents two contrasting worlds. In *The Merchant of Venice*, these worlds are Venice – an aggressive business community with all manner of scheming, and Belmont – a green world that functions as an Arcadia.
- In this type of play, the presence of evil, according to Frye (1982), “serves as a foil to set off the beauty of virtue, and misery is the soil out of which goodness grows”. The effort is, usually, to bring order out of chaos; to replace malice with mercy; and vengeance with forgiveness; to bring opposing forces into a more humane social arrangement.
- In Shakespeare’s tragicomedy evil impresses us as more challenging than is typically found in the comedies, though it does not reach the staggering proportion to which evil grows in the tragedies” (Frye 1982: 126). Suffering is not always allowed to stretch too far. Evil is defeated at the end and the protagonist has the prospect of living happily in the end. However, it is not always a happy ending for all the characters.

### SELF-ASSESSMENT EXERCISE

List and discuss two characteristics of Shakespeare’s tragicomedy.

### 3.3 A Synopsis of *The Merchant of Venice*

In *The Merchant of Venice*, Bassanio wants to go to Belmont to woo a very rich lady, Portia, but he being a spendthrift is unable to do so because he does not have the money. However, a generous friend by name Antonio whose wealth are all at the high sea at the time, decides to stake a pound of his flesh to an old business rival, Shylock, in order to raise money for Bassanio’s trip. He will only loose his pound of flesh to Shylock if he is unable to repay the money at an agreed time. After obtaining the money, Bassanio travels to Belmont, wins Portia after solving the casket riddle; but before their solemnisation, a message comes that all of Antonio’s ships are doomed in the sea and Antonio is unable to pay back the money at the appointed time. However, Portia disguises as a male lawyer and wins Antonio’s freedom after a brilliant display of his mastery of the law. Shylock loses half of his wealth to the state and is equally compelled to convert to Christianity.

#### 3.3.1 Critical Analysis of *The Merchant of Venice*

*The Merchant of Venice* is a thrilling dramatic piece, but its portrayal of a Jewish money lender has made it the most controversial of all Shakespearean plays. “Shylock has swollen our imaginations to become a star of a show in which he was written as a small part” (Lester, 1999). The uncharitable depiction of the Jew as a Machiavellian is totally unacceptable to the Jewish people, and their critical and physical rejection of the play has been aggravated by the holocaust of the Second World War. The personage of Shylock ignited Nazi persecution during the war. Anti – Defamation League sees it as inciting racial hatred against the Jews and frequently goes to court to stop its production.

Gideon Lester states that Arnold Wester wrote an article in the *Guardian* about the play, describing it as “a hateful, ignorant portrayal” that “confirms and feeds those whose anti – Semitism is dormant”. Due to bitter criticism about the portrayal of the Jew in the play, several attempts have been made to revise and produce the play in a manner that is ideologically acceptable. Lester (1999) states that:

*There is, for instance, a strong tradition of Hebrew and Yiddish productions that portray Shylock as a misunderstood victim of anti – semitic persecution. One of the finest actors of the Yiddish theatre in New York, Jacob Adler, played Shylock as a noble patriarch; a man “who is rooted in life and has grown strong in it”.*

However, it is necessary to point out that the play, according to Lester, is a balanced “act that suggests the operation of narrative strategies more complex than might be implied by the heavy – handed approach of recent Shylock – centered productions”. Shylock only appears in five out of the 20 scenes of the play. Antonio’s story is the principal fable and we have as Lester reckons about 11 different sub – plots in the text, including the “fable of the servant who flees his master to seek employment from a young nobleman, the recognition plot, where the blind old Gobbo is finally reunited with his son Lancelot”... the casket plot, where Bassanio speaks lofty poetry, the disguise plot, where Portia becomes a brilliant male lawyer, in order to rescue Antonio, the ring trick and the revenge plot “in which a wronged man, his daughter and wealth stolen from him and his faith reviled seeks a terrible revenge from his aggressors” (Lester, p.257).

It is the Antonio plot that determines the principal direction of the play. His is the one who makes Bassanio’s trip possible. He is the one who stakes his life and clarifies part of Shylock’s personality. He is equally the one who makes Portia’s cross – dressing possible. He is the Merchant of Venice whose fortune determines the pace of the play. It is

certainly because of the human's fascination for the disagreeable that critics and directors tend to make Shylock the epicenter of the play.

Two things make the play very fascinating. The first is the shifting narrative strategies and the second is the protean nature of characterisation. A major thrilling thing about *The Merchant of Venice* is the rapid way in which different fables are mingled, making events to obtrude into one another without warning. For example, immediately Bassanio solves the riddle of the caskets, "and no sooner have he and Portia, Nerissa and Gratiano sworn "to solemnise/The bargain of (their) faith" than Salerio enters with the news from Antonio "that steals colour from Bassanio's cheek" and suspends the action of the scene" (Lester, 1999). One is impressed by the quality of surprise, the twists and turns in the play. The entrance of Salerio is like invading a temple and disrupting a profound ritual. It immediately turns a sweet soup sour.

The shifting tendency of narrative strategies promotes protean characterisation where characters assume different postures in different narrative realms. Lester argues rightly that "Shylock is portrayed, for example, as a malevolent usurer, cackling with pleasure as he plans to "plague" and torture Antonio, then the wretched broken old man, abandoned by his daughter and utterly alone in a bigoted, hostile world" (p.257). This suggests that Shylock performs double dramatic function as "the odious caricature of a grasping mercenary that feeds the claim of the play's anti-semitism" as well as "the tragic figure of loss and despair" (Lester, 1999).

Although at the end of the play, Antonio's wealth is safe, Bassanio and Gratiano wed Portia and Nerissa respectively, it is not safe haven for some other characters. Antonio is melancholic in a weary – world of Venice, appearing to suffer from imbalance of honours. Material wealth no longer brings joy to him, and his closest friend has been taken away forever by Portia. Shylock is left an outcast of society. Lester (1999: 258) remarks that:

*Shylock lost his daughter, his riches, and his dignity; the ring trick has demonstrated how little Portia may trust the flighty Bassanio; the Christians of Venice have employed tactics that bears no trace of "the quality of mercy" to punish Shylock; Antonio the merchant whose overwhelming melancholy frames the play, remains an isolated figure, wealthy but quite alone.*

### 3.3.2 Themes

*The Merchant of Venice* is a typical example of a play with quite a plethora of exciting themes. It examines problems that are universal and ageless in appeal. As we have noted, the play is a comment on racial prejudice. It alerts us on the danger of erroneous human relationships based on religion and where one comes from. It shows how unjustly we relate to people on the basis of race and the disgrace we have to bear on account of our faith. In fact, Shakespeare portrays racial and religious discrimination as malignant diseases and something extremely hurting. The theme of appearance and reality is highlighted in the riddle of the caskets, where we are told eloquently that all that glitters is not gold.

The theme of greed and lust for money is typified by Shylock's disposition towards business. He is portrayed as a true Machiavellian who eschews sentiment in business. We also have other themes such as betrayal, deception, hypocrisy, unconditional love, revenge, mercy, vendetta, forgiveness, etc. The various issues which the play raises are still affecting human relationships and will continue to do so. The play portrays man as vile, desperate, and selfish, but it equally shows his capacity to love.

### 3.3.3 The World of the Play

The play presents the picture of two contrasting worlds – Venice and Belmont. Venice is portrayed as a passionate world of merchandise and capitalism. It is a world full of exploitation, hazards and all manner of scheming. It is a place of Machiavellian indulgence and waste. Bassanio begins the play in Venice as “a spendthrift, in a state of sexual and emotional confusion” (Lester, 1999). Venice is a weary world where wealth no longer guarantees joy. The character, Antonio, exemplifies this.

The second world is Belmont, a paradise-like city. In an interview with Gideon Lester, Andrei Serban states that “Belmont functions as a kind of Arcadia, a place of escape, from the world of Shylock, from the scheming of the material mind”. He maintains that Bassanio “journeys to Belmont in part because he is attracted to Portia's wealth but also because he longs for something higher, something that enables him to speak such extra ordinary poetry as he faces the caskets”.

However, when Bassanio gives out Portia's ring, we find him being betrayed by his Venetian spirit. Serban tells us that “only when he finally leaves Venice and his old life can” Portia “forgive him and offers him a second chance”. He believes that “the play's fifth act is, according to this interpretation, wonderfully hopeful, because Bassanio really has a

chance “to start all over”. He submits that “salvation is always possible provided that we are able to find our own Arcadia”.



## SELF-ASSESSMENT EXERCISE

Discuss any theme in *The Merchant of Venice*.

### 4.0 CONCLUSION

Tragicomedy is a drama that reflects life in its ambivalent formation. It is a drama of mixed feelings which approaches existence both as pathetic and comic, and this is the reason it draws vacillating response of tear and laughter from the audience simultaneously. It is full of surprises, paradoxes, and contradictions, and this exactly makes it a fascinating genre of drama.

### 7.0 SUMMARY

This unit examines the concept of tragicomedy, the characteristics of Shakespeare's tragicomedy. It analyses *The Merchant of Venice* pointing out the nature of controversy it has been generating, some of the themes of the play, as well as the type of worlds reflected in the play.

### 8.0 TUTOR-MARKED ASSIGNMENT

Discuss the character, Shylock and what he represents in the play.

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## UNIT 3 SHAKESPEAREAN CHRONICLE PLAYS

### CONTENTS

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  - 3.2 Shakespeare's Chronicle Play
  - 3.3 Critical Analysis of *Henry V*
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### 1.0 INTRODUCTION

Christopher Marlowe's play, *Edward the Second*, is often regarded as the first epoch-making English chronicle or historical play. Although there were earlier attempts to create historical drama in England, these efforts appear "more like epic poem than dramatic composition, loosely constructed giving the entire life of a king or hero" ([www.theatrehistory.com](http://www.theatrehistory.com)). It was in the hands of Christopher Marlowe that the chronicle play became fully realised. It was in Marlowe's *Edward the Second* that:

*The English history play was pulled up into the tenseness of true drama. The characters are bold and vivid, conceived amply as taking part in history. Here too is something of the power of Marlowe's "Mighty line" and the skill which can portray great figure overborne by the consequences of his own folly. Edward II is the first fine historical drama in English language and aside from Shakespeare's, tragedies, the best in existence (www.theatre history.com).*

Marlowe's *Edward the Second* has been discussed earlier on. This unit will examine Shakespeare's chronicle play in its ambivalent position on leadership.

### 2.0 OBJECTIVES

At the end of this unit, you should be able to:

- explain what a chronicle play is
- describe the functions of the chronicle play

- examine the nature of Shakespeare's historical play
- analyse Shakespeare's *Henry V*, in terms of its objectives.

### 3.0 MAIN CONTENT

#### 3.1 The Chronicle Play

The chronicle or historical play refers to the drama produced from the people's history. *Encyclopaedia Britannica's Guide to Shakespeare* states that "plays of this type lay emphasis on the public welfare by pointing to the past as a lesson for the present and the genre is often characterised by its assumption of a national consciousness in its audience". This means that the chronicle play is a drama of intensely nationalistic feeling. England produced so many historical plays during their most optimistic years, the Elizabethan period. It is argued that the chronicle play is an extension of the medieval morality play. It is seen as a moral tool, and as it appears, the English playwrights used the genre of drama to:

*teach their subjects obedience to their king, to show the people the untimely ends of such as have moved tumults, commotions, and insurrections, to present them with the flourishing estate of such as live in obedience, exhorting them to allegiance, exhorting them from all traitorous and felonious stratagems* (*Encyclopaedia Britannica Guide to Shakespeare*).

The implication of the above statement is that the chronicle play is a drama of patriotism and that it primarily exhibits characters of certain magnitude in actions of importance, actions that have far-reaching effects on the whole national population. The king is usually the centre of attraction. However, the historical play is not usually telescopic because sometimes historical facts are distorted for the purposes of heightening dramatic effect. Occasionally, according to Downer (1950: 109), "non – historical incidents – usually involving characters from low life" are introduced "to enliven and add to the amusement of the chronicle". Downer states that "the 10 years which preceded the opening of the 17th century witnessed the greatest prosperity of the chronicle history and again in the hands of Shakespeare, its reshaping into a unique vehicle for tragedy".

#### SELF-ASSESSMENT EXERCISE

Discuss the nature of a chronicle play.

### 3.2 Shakespeare's Chronicle Play

In the 1590s, Shakespeare thrilled the English audience with plays showing incidents from their recent past history. In these plays, the playwright dramatised the activities of kings and statesmen and demonstrates how they affect the people whom they frequently drag into needless wars. Shakespeare showed interest in the nature and function of a ruler, drawing his materials from the state of the politics of his own country, England. Most of Shakespeare's chronicle plays were written during the stable period of Queen Elizabeth I, and as such, some of them reflected the patriotic zeal of the period.

Ostensibly though, the plays examined the wrangling that characterised the English monarchy in the recent past. According to Bevington (1972) "Shakespeare examines the strengths and weaknesses of the English monarchy, and searches for a definition of the ideal ruler through negative and positive example". Bevington cites *King John* as an example of a leader with poor and undesirable quality of leadership. He argues that:

*Shakespeare refuses to glorify the king's reign into anti-catholic defiance, as a more rabidly protestant dramatists had done. Instead, he portrays a whimsical tyrant and murderer of his kinsmen, so evil that well – meaning Englishmen must actively consider the prospect of overthrowing him.*

Some Shakespearean historical plays examine factionalism in courts, civil unrests and war. The three *Henry VI* plays and *Richard III* in the words of Frye (1982):

*treat the years between 1422 and 1485, during which English hold upon France was lost and English society itself was disrupted by civil war between the rival houses of York and Lancaster, each striving for the possession of the throne. When these "wars of Roses" were ended by the founding in 1485 of the Tudor dynasty in King Henry VII, the country turned away from the bitterness of civil strife, and the reign of the founder's grand-daughter Elizabeth I saw England reach one of the high points in human history. It was during her reign that Shakespeare looked back upon the bloody years of the preceding century and wrote what amounts to a "secular*

*morality” in the series of four plays on the evils of civil strife.*

This period of great disorientation and internal crises prompts a statement in the *Encyclopaedia Britannica Guide to Shakespeare* that “the Shakespearean English history play told of the country’s history at a time when English nation was struggling with its own sense of national identity and experiencing a new sense of power”.

However, internal and external aggressions were reduced by Queen Elizabeth I who ascended the throne of England in 1588. She put an end to the civil wars, staves off the Roman Catholic power and defeated the great Spanish Armada. The historical plays that followed show England as an unravel power in the world led by a powerful monarch. The English supremacy and patriotic zeal is exemplified by *Henry V*, which Bevington cites as an illustration of Shakespeare’s portrayal of a positive leader, and Downer (1950), as “a symbol of exuberant patriotism that gave England hope after the victory over the Spanish Armada”. Frye (1982) states that:

*Some three or so years after he had completed the minor tetralogy, Shakespeare began his second and greater cycle plays on English history. The cycle was begun in 1595 – 96 with Richard II, continued in succeeding years with the two parts of Henry IV, and concluded in 1599 with Henry V. Each of the four plays and the cycle itself shows an advance in unity and coherence over earlier group.*

Above all, these four plays examine the concept of degree and order which as has been discussed in unit one, is a fundamental guiding principle of the Elizabethan society. According to Frye (1982):

*The four plays are neatly structured in terms of relationships, foils, and antithesis, which initially move out from Richard II to other characters. In the first play, King Richard has the legal title to reign but lacks the ability to rule, whereas the princely cousin Henry Bolingbrook has all the necessary qualifications for leadership of a nation but lacks the legal right of succession to the crown.*

Frye argues that it is this huge antithesis that provides the needed dramatic conflict, especially, as Bolingbrook has to take the crown by force. For Frye, therefore, the thematic antithesis of order and disorder –

which so intrigued Shakespeare throughout his career – is reiterated: once legitimacy is broken, civilisation is shaken to its foundations, and the Bishop of Carlisle predicts that “the blood shall manure the ground/and further ages groan for this foul act”.

The predicted chaos is dramatised in the two parts of *Henry IV*. However, in *Henry V*, order is restored, and as Frye maintains, in the last play of the cycle, “we see the theme of order – disorder – order worked out to a conclusion which suits dramatic propriety and historical accuracy at once” (p.71).

### SELF-ASSESSMENT EXERCISE

Examine the traits of Shakespeare’s chronicle play.

### 3.3 Critical Analysis of *Henry V*

*Henry V* is informed by two sources, an earlier play entitled, “*The Famous Victories of Henry the Fifth*” and Raphael Hollinshed’s chronicles, celebrating the greatness of England.

In *Henry IV* part two, *Henry V* formerly known as Prince Hal was advised by his father to become aggressive to foreign lands. In this play, King *Henry V* in support of the church and his noblemen, decides to invade France like his ancestors did, in order to take back French lands previously acquired by England, but which France won back. After a trade of words with the Dauphin of France, King Henry mobilised English forces to realise his dream in concrete terms. In spite of the boastings of the Dauphin and French large army, the English with small but determined soldiers were able to overrun France. France paid stipulated tributes to England, including the French Princess Katherine being taken as King Henry’s wife.

The play shows that victory is not easily won. This informs the high level preparation by the two countries. In fact, as part of the military stratagems, the English king has to disguise in order to know how prepared his soldiers are, what their problems are and how to address them.

*Henry V* is full of nationalistic feelings. Indeed, it is a drama aimed at imbuing the English people with high spirit of nationalism. In the play, Shakespeare shows what an ideal hero – king should be. In his disguise, King Henry inspires the English soldiers with the feeling of togetherness, unity and brotherhood. He possesses a very charming personality and vast knowledge of military stratagems. He is interested in justice and does not break agreements.

A very prominent quality of King Henry V is that he is a powerful and motivational speaker. As an inspirational speaker:

*Henry V utilises his uncanny rhetorical skill to manipulate friends and foes alike with ruthless determination, yet a compassionate nature to successfully portray a good king as well as a good man. King Henry V comes across as a dependable young man whose commanding qualities of leadership were necessary to stabilise the nation (www.bookrags.com).*

The king has a great sense of human worth and value for life. He is loved by his troops for identifying with them individually and collectively. He is willing to fight alone; even willing to fight unto death than bring shame on England. He is able to conquer France with small and weather-beaten soldiers through deft military stratagem and especially through motivational speeches and encouragement. In fact, the emphasis is on Henry V as an ideal king. Downer (1950) in describing the total effect of the play states that:

*The effect is that of a kind of patriotic hymn to the power of a victoriously united country. If the Dauphin taunts Henry with his gift of tennis – balls, Henry’s equally taunting reply is followed by the more effective gift of cannon-balls. If the French can outnumber the English on the field, the English cannot outfight them; nor does Shakespeare hesitate to appeal to nationalistic sentiments by quoting at length comparative casualty lists.*

### **SELF-ASSESSMENT EXERCISE**

Discuss *Henry V* as a nationalistic play.

## **4.0 CONCLUSION**

Shakespeare’s chronicle plays examine the nature of leadership with emphasis on English historical past. They portray both the negative and the positive characteristics of leadership using various English kings for illustration. In this thematic antithesis, Shakespeare illuminates the concept of degree and order which has so much occupied him throughout his career.

## 7.0 SUMMARY

This unit examines the nature of historical or chronicle play. It specifically explains Shakespeare's chronicle play and its characteristics. The play, *Henry V* is analysed as an example of Shakespeare's concept of an ideal and democratic ruler.

## 8.0 TUTOR-MARKED ASSIGNMENT

What do you understand by a chronicle play?

## 7.0 REFERENCES/FURTHER READING

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## UNIT 4 THE DRAMA OF BEN JONSON

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### 1.0 INTRODUCTION

Benjamin Jonson, popularly known as Ben Jonson in literary circle, was a poet extraordinary, an excellent comic writer, great observer, narcissist, classicist as well as man of tremendous reach of thought. L.C. Knights (1955/1975) is of the view that in Jonson's works, we find a mode of expression that is grave, weighty, and sententious, moves easily into spirited buoyancy. In him, we find a moralist voice and erudition in fine and racing language. This unit examines the dramaturgy of Ben Jonson and *The Alchemist* will be analysed as an example of his comic plays.

### 2.0 OBJECTIVES

At the end of this unit, you should be able to:

- highlight Ben Jonson's biography
- examine the qualities of his dramatic writings
- explain some themes of his comedies
- analyse *The Alchemist* as a sample of his comedies.

### 3.0 MAIN CONTENT

#### 3.1 Ben Jonson's Biography

Ben Jonson whom Herford (1957) acknowledged to possess "in-effusive intellect", was born in London in 1573, a month after the death of his father who, until his death, was a clergy. The onus of his upbringing naturally fell on his mother. He attended a private school in St. Martin's Lane. An Elizabethan scholar Camden lent a helping hand in Ben's training in a very effective way. However, because his father left very

little wealth for them, his mother remarried to a London master bricklayer.

The remarrying of Ben's mother brought the congenial life he enjoyed under the assistance of Camden to an end and "Jonson entered the unromantic business of his step father" (Herford 1957). When the brick-laying job became quite unbearable, Jonson left London for Netherlands where he joined the army.

Nevertheless, he returned to London in 1592 and got married to a woman he regarded as "shrew and yet honest". They begot a son which he unfortunately hosts to the plague of 1596. Returning to London, Jonson dedicated himself to studies. Whether he went to the University or not is shrouded in secrecy, but Herford notes that:

*Of all the unknown candidates for fame who then walked the streets of London, this young humanist was certainly the most remarkable. Familiar with every phase of its life, acquainted with all its haunts and all its pleasures, he was already master of that incomparable wealth of observation which stiffens the texture of his writing in the earliest of his drama as conspicuously as in the last.*

With or without university education, Ben Jonson is regarded as the most scholarly of English poets. He influenced a lot of young English poets and those are referred to as "Sons or Tribes of Ben". They are later known as the Cavalier poets and they include Sir John Suckling and Robert Herrick, etc.

Like Marlowe, Ben Jonson lived a tempestuous life. In 1597, he was imprisoned for his involvement in a satire entitled "*The Isle of Dogs*" which the authorities declared seditious. The following year, he killed a fellow actor Gabriel Spencer in a duel in the fields of Shoreditch and was tried for murder. He escaped the gallows by pleading the *benefit of clergy*. He was thrown into the prison but when he was released he was given a felon's mark on his thumb.

Jonson's explosive life was equally carried to the realm of writing where it metamorphosed into what is now referred to as the "war of the theatres", which essentially refers to the satirical rivalry among the playwrights. His hot-headed temperament and conviction of his superior talent led him into verbal quarrel with playwrights. Thomas Dekker and Marston jointly attacked his pride in their play, *Satiromastix*. In fact, the war of the theatres involved much "throwing about of brains".

He made a trip from London to Scotland on foot between 1618 and 1619. And when he returned, he was honoured with a honorary master's degree by the Oxford University. He taught rhetoric at Gresham College, London.

In 1628, he was appointed the city chronicle of London but he suffered severe stroke the same year. He died on 6<sup>th</sup> August, 1737 and was buried at Westminster Abbey. On his tombstone was inscribed "O'Rare Ben". Ben Jonson was undoubtedly intelligent, but he was quarrelsome and a self-loving fellow to the core. William Drummond of Hawthornden notes that:

*He is a great lover and praiser of himself; a contemner and scorner of others; given rather to lose a friend than a jest... he is passionately kind and angry; careless either to gain or keep; vindictive, but if well answered, at himself... oppressed with fantasy, which hath ever mastered his reasons.*

### **SELF-ASSESSMENT EXERCISE**

Discuss the personality of Ben Jonson.

### **3.2 The Dramaturgy of Ben Jonson**

Ben Jonson emerged from obscurity in 1597 and in July of the same year, we find him in the theatre as an actor and playwright in Philip Henslowe's Fortune Theatre. For Jonson, drama is in close affinity with society. It is not an exercise in art for art doctrine. In describing the social context of Jonson's plays, Knights (1975) states that:

*The best of Jonson's plays are living drama because the learning and the "classical elements" are assimilated by sensibility in direct contact with its own age. The judgements, the operative standards, are those of a man who has read and thought, but the material, however transmuted, is supplied by direct observation.*

The above suggests that Jonson's plays are the signature of their time, the finger-prints of a given historical period. In other words, the common social life formed the basis of his dramaturgy. According Coleridge, "there is no one whim or affectation in common life noted in any memoir of the age which may not be found drawn and framed in some corner or other of Ben Jonson's drama". Each one of the

characters of his plays is inseparable from the context of common English life that frames him.

Jonson's themes, like those of his contemporaries, border on inordinate ambition for power, wealth and quest for sexual bliss, which are "deeply ingrained preoccupations of his age" (Knights 1975). According to Knights:

*His art – it has become a common place is an art of exaggeration and caricature; but it draws directly and potentially on the actual, now isolating and magnifying some impulse that "in reality" would express itself in more complex and more devious way now crowding the stage with instances of greed or folly that had easily recognisable counterparts in England of James I, as indeed they have today.*

Although Jonson wrote tragedies and court masques, which enabled him to be appointed a court poet, his reputation as a playwright of note rests on the comedies he wrote between 1605 and 1614. They include *Volpone or The Fox* (1605 – 1606), *Epicoene or The Silent Woman* (1609), *The Alchemist* (1610), and *Bartholomew Fair* (1614). In fact, Luis Vargas (1960) argues that "comedy for him was the correct medium for castigating the follies and vices of his time". He maintains that Jonson never believed in romantic comedy but on satire which afforded him the chance to depict the city life of his time in realistic terms. The English society provided him with "spontaneous comic verve" which helped to enrich his plays with quick-moving intrigues and "what this means is that his comedy has the impact of something directly presented to the senses" (Knights 1975).

Jonson's comedies rely on wits, humours, eccentricities and affectations of his countrymen. Herford says that "Every grade of society yields its tribute of humour to the robust writer who was himself a gentleman by birth, a citizen by training, a craftsman and soldier by necessity, and a scholar by manner and choice" (Xiii). Indeed, it is the amalgamation of these different levels of humours and flowing wits that make Johnsonian comedy powerful and to have continuous life on stage, as it were.

### **SELF-ASSESSMENT EXERCISE**

Briefly discuss the dramaturgy of Ben Jonson.

### 3.2.1 Analysis of *The Alchemist*

Herford observes that “in *The Alchemist* (1610) Jonson, for the first time and also for the last time, found a subject in which all his varied faculty could run riot without injury to the art-quality of his works”. I believe that it is in reference to the moving quality of this play that F.S. Eliot states that although Jonson “is saturated in literature, he never sacrifices the theatrical qualities”. *The Alchemist*, written in fine English language is a grand design for the testing of different kinds of affectations in concrete terms.

*Sir Epicure, gloating over his vision of endless voluptuousness and endless ostentation, the envoys of the saints of Amsterdam, perplexed between unholy cupidity and pious resignation, the lawyer's clerk and the tobacco man, Dol Common and Dame Pliant, - not one of them can be spared from this wonderful comedy of avarice and lust*(Herford, 1957).

#### Synopsis

Lovewits, like many wealthy Londoners flees the city of London in order to avoid being destroyed by the plague ravaging the place, leaving his house to his butler, Jeremy. Jeremy who now assumes the name, Face, enlists two other dubious lower class citizens like him and turns the house into a beehive of knavery where greedy and lustful fellows of both secular and religious realms are dispossessed of their money and goods. Dol Common, a prostitute is used to drain the pockets of men who have an uncontrollable appetite for sexual gratification.

While Subtle, whom the con-artists assigned the title of doctor of alchemy, uses the mountebank reputation and mystic pretensions of the subject to water the addictions of affectations of the people. This is in order to keep them longing all the more and to cause them to surrender their money and goods without contemplation. Face's job is to scout for customer whom he convinces that Doctor Subtle, can through projections, give them elixir of youth, and cause them to see the Queen of fairy and to acquire the philosopher's stone that can enable them to do anything their mind can conceive. Above all, he can turn base metals into gold and has the perfect ability for match-making.

Their first customer is Dapper, a lawyer's clerk. Subtle tells him that he will be given “a familiar” that will enable him as a gambler to “win up all the money in the town” and “blow up gamester after gamester”. He is told that “He is of the only complexion, the queen of Fairy loves”. This makes Dapper to conclude to abandon the law and to be prepared to give

all his money and material things to see the Queen of Fairy. The second customer and victim is a tobacco dealer named Drugger. He is told by the doctor of alchemy that an incredible fortune is looking for him and that he will be a wonderful distiller. He is asked to pay and to rejoice in doing so because he is born on Wednesday of which Mercury is the Lord of the holescope. Subtle says that all these are revealed to him by a “metoscopy”, “A certain star in the forehead you see not” (Act I Scene I).

The third victim is Sir Epicure Mammon, a wealthy man. He needs an elixir of youth and the philosopher’s stone that will enable him change ages of people, cure all manner of plagues and turn base metals into gold and:

*To have a list of wives and concubines  
Equal with Solomon, who had the stone  
Alike with me; I will make me a back  
With elixir, that shall be as tough  
As Hercules, to encounter fifty a night  
(Act the Second Scene I)*

Mammon wants also to “buy divine flatterers” and to make all his “cooks, knights”. In fact, “be rich” is what he needs to say to his loved ones to make them wealthy. Mammon tries to persuade the skeptical Subtle who accompanies him to believe that the book of alchemy is an ancient book packaged by Adam, Moses and his sister as well as Solomon.

The fourth client comes from the religious world, the holy brethren of Amsterdam, the exiled saints who need the stone to increase their number and perform great feats. Their representative is Ananias. Ananias’s appearance indicates that the saints have already paid a lot of money and this very coming is to tell Subtle the decision of the saints not to give any other money until they “see projections”. However, when Subtle, on enquiry, discovers that the name of the saints’ representative is Ananias, he uses his biblical knowledge to push him away and to cause the saints’ to make a repeat visit with Ananias being accompanied by a more elderly person. In chasing Ananias away, Subtle utters:

*Out the varlet  
That coxezened the apostle! Hence away!  
Fie mischief! Had your holly consistory  
No name to send me, of another soul  
Than wicked Ananias?*

In Act three, Ananias returns now accompanied by Tribulation. The discussion of the two indicates that both are skeptical about Subtle's claim and art. Ananias sees Subtle as bearing "visible mark of the beast in his forehead". He also perceives his art as heathenism and work of darkness used to blindfold men. Although Tribulation regards Subtle as "profane person indeed", he sees their cause as overriding everything and, therefore, advises that they must "hasten on the work" in order to restore "the silenced Saints,... "which ne'er will be but by the philosopher's stone" (Act the Three Scene I).

To get the two men in tune and to overpower Ananias's skepticism, Subtle tells them that the stone will be ready in 15 days but he needs more load of coal to get their fire to the level of "ignis ardens". But should their purse run dry, he has the trick to melt pewter into Dutch dollars. This idea is attractive to Ananias but Subtle tells them to go and ascertain from the saints whether such idea is lawful and acceptable.

When Ananias and Tribulation depart, Face and Dol Common who play the Lady rejoice for manipulating people and duping them in their 'safe' discipline. Dapper comes and undergoes humiliating rituals, including being pinched many times until he gives everything on him away.

Mammon is made to see Dol Common who pretends to be a graceful lady, which he had been dying to see. He gives Face money for bringing the woman, and tells the woman that beholding her makes him the "happiest man in Eunpe". However, when Dol finishes dealing with him, she feigns mad to prevent him from having carnal knowledge of her.

Kastril comes to be taught how to quarrel and learn wit along with his widowed sister seeking for match – making. The woman is promised to be made a spinard countess but she will prefer to be one of English. She is persuaded to accept their wish but the truth is that Face and Subtle quarrel over who will possess her.

Act Four, Scene IV marks the turning point of the play. Surly pretends to be a Spanish rich man desiring a woman. After abusing Surly in English which they feel he does not understand, Subtle and Face give Dame Pliant away to him. Not willing to join this act of folly, Surly reveals his true identity to Dame Pliant whom he has not slept with and now requests her to marry him. Pliant accepts the request and the two come out for Surly to unmark the knaves.

However, as Subtle comes to do his normal business but is bluffed and struck down by Surly, Face slips out and then comes in with Kastril whom he requests to quarrel Surly out of the house. As Kastril is doing

so, Drugger enters and joins the quarrel on the side of the con-men, claiming that Surly is indebted to him. In a moment, Ananias joins, calling Surly an antichrist and “child of perdition”. In fact, Face told them that Surly is employed by another conjurer who does not like the doctor. Surly leaves when no one is willing to hear him, regarding all of them as insane.

When the dust calms down, Drugger presents the damask which he is requested to bring, Ananias tells Subtle that the saints agreed “that casting of money is most lawful” (Act four, Scene IV). Ananias is asked to go and tell the brethren to pray and fast for a “fitter place” to do the casting. He agrees and says as he leaves, “the peace of mind/rest with these walls”. As Face and Subtle talk about what has happened and haggle over who will take Dane Pliant, Dol comes to announce the arrival of Lovewits, the owner of the house.

In Act five, Lovewits discusses with neighbours who tell him all they observe taking place in his house during his absence. Face takes the chance afforded him by the discussion to change into Jeremy and arrange for the escape of his colleagues. He is confronted by his master with information given to him by his neighbours. He puts up smart defence. His appearance as Jeremy confounds their neighbours who now make contradictory statements.

As Lovewits contemplates what to believe, Surly and Mammon come to look for the gang and as they are talking with the bewildered Lovewits, Kastril enters, followed by Ananias and Tribulation, Surly has revealed the truth to them and all come fuming, gearing up to deal with Subtle and Face. Neighbours identify them as some of the people that visit the house. In the heat of all this Dapper who has been gagged cries out inside the house. Face asks for forgiveness, promising to give his master a rich widow of which he will be thankful. He tells that putting on a Spanish cloak is the only required magic to achieve this.

Having settled with his master, Face sets Subtle and Dol Common on their feet by telling them that his master is already aware of their business and that officers, are underway to arrest them. The two con-artists run away empty-handed; while Lovewits uses superior logic to ensure that all the other victims forfeit their money and goods.

### **Analysis**

*The Alchemist* is a play that depicts Ben Jonson’s encyclopedic sense of observation and conception of successful dramatic action. In the text, events of varied nature follow one another in quick succession, without any noticeable delay or sense of any character overstaying his or her



welcome. Actions are sweeping and abundance, and the raciness of their occurrence eliminates the idea of dull moment in the text.

In *The Alchemist*, Ben Jonson concocts a bewildering satire on vanities and follies in every human society, for greed for power, wealth and sex are as troubling now as they were during Jonson's Elizabethan period. The picture is that of a Machiavellian world where each one seeks to take undue advantage of the other, Jonson's attack is against uncontentive push for miraculous cure for all manner of human problems and desires.

He uses the subject of alchemy, which is an obsession of his time to reveal the moral slackness of man and vividly demonstrates that avarice and lust for power, wealth and sex can be self-deluding by causing those who long and gloat over their intractable vision as well as those who think that they are secure in the affectations, to become victims of their shifty dreams. Not one of those who delude and being deluded ever gets his or her dream realised. Dol Common and Subtle are discarded empty-handed, while Mammon, the saints, Drugger and Dapper all forfeited their money and goods to Lovewits.

Jonson studies "humanity through deeply and sharply – etched characters" (Vargas 1960). Subtle is a symbol of sham alchemy and world of falsehood. He combines the belief in alchemy and fortune – telling to keep all his costumers ever longing for their desire. He is never at loss of what to tell customers. Because of the gullibility of his victims, he uses all sorts of style to keep them confounded and water their emotions. This is aided by the technique of prevarication, which he is the master of, but which he asks his customers to beware. Bewildering estoric jargons used to mystify the customers are everywhere scattered in the text. When Drugger is captured, Subtle tells him:

*Write Mathlai, Tarmiel, and Baraborat;  
Upon the north part, Rael, Velel, Thiel.  
They are the names of those Mercurial sprits  
That do fright flies from boxes (Act I Scene I).*

To hoodwink Mammon, Subtle and Face talk in mystifying tongue:

*Subtle. Ulen Spiegel!  
Face. (within) Anon Sir!  
Subtle. Look well to the register.  
And let your heat lessen by degrees, to the aludels.  
Face (within). Yes, sir.  
Subtle. Did you look?  
O'the bolt's head yet?*

*Face (within). Which? On D, Sir?*  
*Subtle. Ay!*  
*What's the complexion?*  
*Face (within). Whitish.*  
*Subtle. Infuse vinegar*  
*To draw his volatile substance and his tincture.*  
*And let the water in glass be filtered,*  
*And put into the gripe's egg.*  
*Lute him well.*  
*And leave him close in balneo.*  
 (Act the Second Scene I).

Also Face is asked by Subtle, “have you set the oil of luna in kemia?” The esoteric jargon is to make the victims think that the con-artists are deeply into the practice of alchemy. When Mammon tells Subtle that his companion – Surly, distrusts their language, Subtle puts up a strong defence:

*Was not all the knowledge of Egypt*  
*Writ in mystic symbol?*  
*Speak not the scripture oft in parables?*  
*Are not the choicest fable of the poets,*  
*That were the fountains and first springs of wisdom,*  
*Wrapped in perplexed allegories?*  
 (Act II Scene I).

The technique of prevarication is used to sustain suspense and to keep the victims to keep coming. When in Act II Scene I, Subtle takes more gold to put finishing touches to the charm he is preparing for Mammon and the victim demands when the projection will be made, he keeps him off, telling him:

*Son, be not hasty, I exult our medicine by hanging him*  
*in Balneo vaporosoo*  
*and giving him solution; then congeal him;*  
*and then dissolve him; then again congeal him;*  
*for look, how oft I iterate the work.*  
*so many times I add unto his virtue... get you your stuff*  
*here against afternoon, your brass, your pewter and*  
*your andirons. (Act II Scene I).*

The same technique is used to dribble Drugger, Dapper, and the saints of Armsterdan.

In *The Alchemist*, all the segments of the society are made the butts of the satire – the rich and the poor, the doctor, lawyer, prostitute and the

religions. Through role – switching, Face assumes the roles of multiple characters – the captain, the servant to the doctor as well as Lovewits varlet. The prostitute, Dol Common plays the Doctor’s mad sister as well as an aristocratic lady. Subtle is the master alchemist and a seer. These different narrative stratagems indicate that the problems treated in the play are not peculiar to any one class of people, but disturbing issues that affect both the spiritual and the temporal of all shades.

### **SELF-ASSESSMENT EXERCISE**

Discuss any one theme examined in *The Alchemist*.

## **4.0 CONCLUSION**

Ben Jonson is a notable Elizabethan playwright, poet and scholar. He is an influential member of the age both in terms of his theatrical activities and the thought he provokes. He conceives drama as a moral and social force and tries to use it to record his observation about the nature of existence in his time. He produces tragedies, comedies and masques, but his reputation as playwright rests firmly on his comic writings.

## **7.0 SUMMARY**

This unit examines the life and dramaturgy of Ben Jonson. It explains the nature of his personality, his relationship with his colleagues, as well as his temper and qualities of his dramaturgy. Finally *the Alchemist* is analysed as an example of his dramatic output at his best.

## **8.0 TUTOR-MARKED ASSIGNMENT**

Write a short essay on *The Alchemist*.

## **7.0 REFERENCES/FURTHER READING**

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## MODULE 3 17<sup>TH</sup> -19<sup>TH</sup> CENTURY

Unit 1	Restoration Comedy
Unit 2	The Heroic Drama
Unit 3	18 <sup>th</sup> Century and the Drama of Sensibility
Unit 4	Victorian Drama

### UNIT 1 RESTORATION COMEDY

#### CONTENTS

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#### 1.0 INTRODUCTION

For the English people, 17th century was a period of great political turmoil and social upheaval. In 1642, the parliament outlawed theatrical performances in public places and playhouses. In 1649, political wrangling led to the decapitation of king Charles 1 and this forced his son- the heir apparent, to exile in France. Cromwell was appointed to head the English government in a period often referred to as the commonwealth era. However, when he died, his son appointed to replace him was unable to maintain control. By 1660, Charles II was restored to the English throne.

The restoration of Charles II brought the French taste and influence to bear on the English stage leading to a brand new form of drama now referred to as the Restoration drama. The Restoration drama was short-lived due to puritans' attack. The eighteenth century ushered in drama of sensibility and sentimentality. The playwrights of this period tried to make up for the looseness and obscenity of the Restoration drama.

From the late 18th century up to the first-half of the 19th century, melodrama became the staple of the English drama. This type was evolved to beat the law. Downer (1950) states that:

*As the almost exclusively offering of minor or illegitimate theatre, melodrama has also a special meaning for the English stage. In the first decades of 1800 a series of small playhouse had been erected in various parts of London with the intention of profiting from a legal quibble over what constituted the theatrical 'entertainments' described by the patents. The proprietors of the minor affected to believe, with Palmer of the ill – fated Royalty, that the patent referred only to "legitimate" drama, the standard repertory of five – act plays told in dialogue and action. The minors pretended to confine themselves to a kind of opera: plays which made great use of lyrical interludes, choruses, ballets, and other illegitimate delights. Since the patents were indisposed to challenge them, the minor managers were emboldened to insert songs into the standard works, even of Shakespeare, and produce them as plays with music, or melodrama. In a few years what began as a scheme to evade the law became a basic convention, the elaborate systems of musical cues which reinforce the passions, accompany actions, and serve as a leitmotifs for the characters of this lively and popular art.*

Between 1642 and 1660 when the exiled heir to the English throne, Charles II was restored to the throne, theatrical performances “were presented surreptitiously” (Downer 1950) due to the civil war and puritans attack. The theatre was made a hazardous business as playhouses were raided, costumes seized, and actors arrested and thrown into the prison. In fact, constant raid of the playhouses made it extremely difficult for full-blown plays to be staged. In the alternative, series of cuttings from mostly popular Elizabethan plays known as drolls, became fashionable as “ingenious expedients for outwitting the authorities” (19). Downer (1950) argues that:

*The advantage of the drolls, of course was that although brief, it was the most popular essence of the play from whence it was taken, and because brief it could be presented with little preparation, could be transported easily from one fair, festival, or theatre to another and was over before a raid could be organised.*

However, the restoration of Charles II to the throne led to an official reopening of the theatre, but the restored theatre abandoned the known theatrical pathway and followed a new pathway charted by the returned king and his court. The theatre lost its national status and became a “narrowly aristocratic one... instead of an audience representative of the whole community, the playhouses now attracted only the aristocratic element, the courtiers and gallants” (Vargas, 1960: 128). According to Downer (1950):

*The life of exile in France had developed to a greater degree in Charles II those qualities which the puritans found most offensive in his father. He was by nature witty and pleasure-loving and the rootless, homeless life of even a royal wanderer had destroyed his sense of moral values. Members of his court-in-exile reflected their king. His poets for want of matter had taken to writing illustrations of the code of court of love, and of all the artifices connected with the science of friendship.*

In spite of the Puritans’ perception of the theatre as a cesspool of immorality, King Charles II did not hide his love for theatrical performances. In fact, one of Charles II’s acts was to grant patents to Thomas Killigrew and William Davenant. The licenses enabled them to form two theatre companies namely the King’s Men and the Duke of York’s Men, respectively. These two companies were the recognised national theatres and they enjoyed the monopoly of theatrical productions in the country from 1660 to the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century when minor groups began to emerge as a result of the theatrical legal quibble. This unit examines this new vogue in English drama and emphasis is on the Restoration comedy.

## 2.0 OBJECTIVES

At the end of this unit, you should be able to:

- examine the context and concept of the Restoration drama
- describe the character of Restoration comedy
- describe William Congreve as a representative of Restoration comic playwright
- explain and analyse *The Way of the World* as an example of Restoration comedy.

### 3.0 MAIN CONTENT

#### 3.1 Restoration Comedy

Due to the considerable time the royal entourage spent in France and their acquisition of a comic taste influenced by the comedies of Moliere that were “beginning to make a stir in Paris at this time” (Vargas 1960), the court did not hesitate in declaring its taste for comedy, but the comic world of romance preferred by the Elizabethans was, according to Downer, “exchanged for the comic world of manners, a witty, cynical, intellectual, deliberately immoral world, an exact reflection of the tastes, interests, and code of behaviour of its aristocratic audience”. Hence, immediately the theatre was reopened, the courtiers went for the plays of Jonson, Beaumont and Fletcher built on manners, wits and humours. Like Jonson’s comedies, wit was the touchstone of the Restoration comedies. It was the yardstick of assessing characters and “perhaps the accomplishment on which the courtier most prided itself” (Downer 98).

Heroes and heroines of the ‘Restoration comedy celebrate the code of life of the gallants and aristocratic ladies. In his essay, “A Short View of the Profaneness and Immorality of the English Stage”, Reverend Jeremy Collier sees the gallant from essentially an immoral angle. According to him:

*A fine gentleman is a fine whoring, swearing, smutty, atheistical man. These qualifications, it seems, complete the idea of honour. They are the top improvements of fortune, and the distinguished glories of birth and breeding. This is the stage – test for quality, and those that can’t stand it, ought to be disclaimed. The restraints of conscience and the pedantry of virtue are unbecoming a cavalier; future security and reasoning beyond life are vulgar provisions.*

In fact, riotous and “aristocratic macho life styles of unremitting sexual intrigue and conquest” are the cornerstones of the Restoration comedy. The characters are pleasure -seeking and amorous, essentially profligates, with strong tendency to have sex with their friends and neighbours’ wives or husbands. They are eccentrics who banter wits and often drink to stupor. It is a reflection of the rakish ethos of the court of Charles II. The gallants passed from one mistress to the other because they believed that variety is the spice of life. For them, a single love intrigue is as unsatisfying as a single plot in a play.

The ladies shared the same code of behaviour. They enjoyed keeping as many lovers as possible in suspense. They needed to take precaution in marriage and never joked with their freedom. They fail to accept the superiority of men in wit. Bringing the gallant and the lady into discussing the business of love is like partaking in a verbal fencing. “They insult one another freely and profess the greatest reluctance to commit themselves to the permanence of the marriage contract” (Downer, 200).

In fact, in certain plays, like John Dryden’s *Secret Love*, the gallant and the lady while consenting to marriage, “swear an oath of inconstancy, as well as prohibiting jealousy, safe-guarding the liberty of speech and action; and abolishing all terms of endearment both of marital affection and platonic servitude” (201). The truth is that the double – standard of the men was equally established for the women by the Restoration comic playwrights.

The characters are not altogether depraved, though. There are characters who fail to yield to the acceptable immoral code and push for genuine relationship and marriage that is solid and trustworthy. This tradition of characterisation was inaugurated by William Congreve in *The Way of the World* as a way of mitigating the fanatical opposition of the religious to theatrical performances. George Farquhar (1678 – 1707) and Sir John Vanbrugh (1664 – 1726) joined Congreve in bringing “a welcome change of air” to the somewhat excessively low moral tone of the stage” (Vargas 135). With the plays of these playwrights “excessive looseness and wit were on their way out, boisterous good humour, greater realism and sentiment were on their way in” (135).

The plot of Restoration drama is bustling and multicoloured. Love intrigue is handled in a variety of way in order to reveal the English perception of love, sex, marriage, gender as well as power and capital relations at that given time. Every segment and facet of society was illuminated with the shining light of sex. Each individual seeks for his or her own welfare and what guarantees happiness and this is done in most cases, in a dissembling fashion. The plot highlights the collapse and instability of social structures which is the consequence of the civil war that preceded the Restoration period. In fact one is free to say that Restoration comedy is a drama of social analysis of gambling, sex scandal, atheism, gossip, character – assassination, greed for money, and power tussle between the sexes.

### **SELF-ASSESSMENT EXERCISE**

Briefly discuss Restoration comedy.



### 3.2 Biography of William Congreve

Thomas Shadwell (1642 – 1644), Mrs. Aphra Behn (1640 – 1689), the first English woman playwright, Sir George Etherege (1678 – 1691), William Wycherley (1640 – 1716), Sir John Vanbrugh (1664 – 1726), George Farquhar (1678 – 1707), and John Dryden (1631 – 1700) are notable Restoration comic playwrights, but William Congreve (1670 – 1729) “usually takes pride of place as the greatest of the authors of Restoration Comedy” (Vargas 131 – 132). He is selected for discussion because his play, *The Way of the World* is regarded by many critics as “the apotheosis of the Restoration manners comedy” (Downer, 213).

Born on January 19, 1670 at Bardsey, West Yorkshire, William Congreve attended Trinity College and upon graduation; he enrolled in law at Middle Temple. After matriculation he got attracted to literature. He was a disciple of John Dryden and a friend to Jonathan Swift whom he met in Ireland where his father lived as a cavalier.

He wrote plays between 1693 and 1700. His career in theatre was short-lived because the puritan critics made sexual comedy highly unacceptable. Collier’s “A short View of the Immorality and Profaneness of the English Stage” was a major stumbling block that turned his mind away from writing for the stage to politics and the writing of poems. Congreve never married but he had a daughter from a noble woman, Henrretta Godolphin. In 1728, he sustained an internal injury in a carriage accident. In 1729, he died and was buried in poets’ corner’ in Westminster Abbey, London. His short but brilliant theatrical adventure yielded five plays to the theatre repertory. The plays are as follows:

- *The Old Bachelor* – 1693
- *The Double Dealer* – 1693
- *Love for Love* – 1695
- *The Mourning Bride (Tragedy)* – 1697
- *The Way of the World* – 1700.

#### SELF-ASSESSMENT EXERCISE

Discuss William Congreve’s Biography

### 3.3 A Study of *The Way of the World*

Congreve’s *The Way of the World* reflects a society in transition. It paints a picture of moral decadence that characterised the court of King Charles II of England, as well as charts a course for a new tight moral forthrightness that blossomed fully in the 18th century.

## Synopsis

The play is written in five acts. In Act I, Mirabell and Mr. Fainall are engaged in aristocratic past time of card playing, which Mirabell does nonchalantly because Millamant a woman he bleeds for disappointed him the previous night. From Fainall it is gathered that Mirabell's problem is caused by Lady Wishfort Millamant's guardian who has a longing desire for Mirable. Though the rakish Fainall pretends to love Mirabell, he does not want him to succeed in his quest to marry Millamant. This is to ward him off from sharing the wealth of the Wishforts. His wife is lady Wishfort's daughter and he wants to be the only custodian of their estate. To worsen Mirabell's condition, Witwoud, a follower of Mrs. Millamant hints that Mirabell's rich uncle who is rumoured to be in town has an eye for Millament. Meanwhile, Mirabell has arranged a marriage between his servant, Waitwell and Lady Wishfort's maid, Foible. He hopes to get lady Wishort do his wish through this relationship.

Act II starts with Mrs. Fainall and Mrs Marwood's gossip about their hatred for men. Mrs. Fainall advocates extreme feminst position of shunning men completely. Although Mrs. Marwood pretends to hate men, she does not share Mrs. Fainall's extreme stance. According to her:

*True, it is an unhappy circumstance of life that love should ever die before us; and that the man so often should outlive the lover. But say what you will, it is better to be left than never to have been loved... for my part, my youth may wear and waster, but it shall never rust in my possession.*

Also, Mrs. Fainall says that her current tendency to "love without bounds" is because she is married to a sham man, a match which Mirabell helped to make when his affair with Mrs. Fainall after losing her first husband resulted in pregnancy. Mirabell and Millamant meet face to face but Millamant taunts him and leaves him all the more longing. Mirabell explains his feeling thus:

*A fellow that lives in a windmill has not a more whimsical dwelling than the heart of a man that is lodged in a woman.*

Having been financially rewarded by Mirabell, Foible agrees to convince her mistress that Mirabell's uncle, Sir Rowland who has just arrived in town sees, her picture and is burning to wed her without delay. Meanwhile, Waitwell Mr. Mirabell's servant has been positioned to act as Rowaland.

In Act III, Lady Wishfort talks about her hatred for Mirabell. Foible uses the opportunity to tell her how badly Mirabell spoke of her. The aim is to cause her to hate Mirabell violently and to accept to marry his uncle without delay. Foible is able to get her mistress excited about Sir Rowland.

Act IV shows Lady Wishfort in high-spirit, eagerly awaiting the arrival of Sir Rowland. She tells Foible to get sir Willful Witwoud her nephew who has just arrived in town to woo Millamant, but instead of doing so, Foible tells Millamant about Mirabell's urgent need to see her and convinces her to see him. Meanwhile, Mrs. Fainall locks Sir Witwoud and Millamant in a room for him to propose marriage to Millamant; but Witwoud who is heavily drunk begins to talk nonsense. He can only request Millamant for a walk, an idea she rejects.

This is followed by the proviso scene where Mirabell and Millamant state their conditions for consenting to marry each other. They seal their plan with a kiss. Furthermore, Waitwell as Sir Rowland is in Lady Wishfort's house for the marriage business. In a dissembling tone of urgency, he tells lady Wishfort:

*My impatience, madam, is the effect for my transport; and until I have the possession of your adorable person, I am tantalised on a rack, and do hang madam, on the tenter of expectation.*

As the marriage is about to take place, a letter comes to reveal the odious marriage game. But Foible tells lady Wishfort that the letter is a dubious plan by Mirabell to disrupt the marriage. Rowland (Waitwell) supports Foible and promises to show her Mirabell's letter in order to prove that he is the author of the letter.

However, in Act V, the blackmail plays up and lady Wishfort is terribly angry especially against her own daughter Mrs. Fainall for being part of an effort to deface her publicly. She wants Foible to disappear from her house without delay. In the heat of all this, Mr. Fainall comes to place claims for the entire estate and other things.

However, through Sir Wilful's assistance Mirable comes to apologise for the blackmail. Wilfull rescinds his plan to marry Millamant and surrenders her to Mirabell. Lady Wishfort is grateful. When Fainall insists on having his way, Foible and Mincing reveal his amorous encounter with Mrs. Marwood, while Mirabell proves with a deed that Mrs. Fainall gave him her estate in trust before getting married to him.

Mr. Fainall is devastated; but to ensure a reunion of Fainall and his wife, Mirabell restores the deed of trust to Mrs. Fainall.

### 3.3.1 Critical Analysis

*The Way of the World* presents two worlds, the first is a world in outer darkness, characterised by sexual perfidy, deceit, and all kinds of Machiavellian stratagems of wealth acquisition, without labour. The second world is a world groping for light, earnestly yearning for trust in a world that is bereft of it. Activities in the two worlds are carried out within the context of love, marriage, and sexual intrigue.

In the first world of hypocrisy, drinking, gambling, gossiping, hatred, and sexual manipulation, we find characters like Mr. Fainall and his wife, Witwoud, Petulant, Foible, Waitwell, Mrs. Marwood, Mincing and Lady Wishfort. These characters dissemble, presenting an appearance that is quite antipodal to their nature. Charles Lamb's attack on the Restoration characters best describes this set of characters. Of such immoral personalities, Lamb (1973) notes:

*When we are among them, we are amongst a chaotic people. We are not to judge them by our usages. No reverend institutions are insulted by their proceedings for they have none. No peace of families is violated for no family ties exist among them. No purity of the marriage bed is stained for none is supposed to have a being. No deep affections are disquieted – no holy wedlock bands are snapped asunder – for affection's depth and wedded faith are not of the growth of that soil.*

The above statement indicates that the characters that inhabit the first world of the play are morally vicious and deplorable. Mr. Fainall and Mrs. Marwood, for example, are manipulative and unreliable. Fainall pretends to be Mirabell's friend, but he works behind to frustrate Mirabell's effort to marry Millamant. He does not want Mirabell to share the Wishfort's estate with him. Both Fainall and Mrs. Marwood, according to Bryson, are "entirely disrespectful to the conservative moral and social tastes. Mrs. Marwood pretends to hate men and claims that the only reason she will marry preferably Mirabell, is to put him "upon the rack of fear and jealousy" for being "insufferably proud". She pretends to be lady Wishfort's trusted friend, but she works assiduously to help Fainall to realise his plan of taking away her estate.

Fainall has promised to lavish the money on her if swindled. Her restless effort in Act V to point out to Lady Wishfort, "the pitfalls of

litigating relationships in court” (Davis 1999) is to maximise her opportunity to enable Fainall get the estate, to increase her life of pleasure. In fact, Mrs. Marwood’s verbal utterances negate her nature. She claims to hate men but she sleeps with her friend’s husband and even yearns for Mirabell. In Act II, Foible says of her, “she has a month’s mind for Mirabell, but I know Mr. Mirabell can’t abide her”. Millamant also knows that Mrs. Marwood has a longing desire for Mirabell and decides to play on her jealousy with verbal cruelty:

*Then I alone the conquest prize  
When I insult a rival’s eyes  
If there’s delight in love  
It is when I see  
That heart, which others bleed for  
Bleed for me*

Fainall is as sexually promiscuous as he is excessively greedy. He sleeps with Mrs. Marwood and works in a clandestine way to dispossess his wife and her mother – in – law of their wealth for a life of profligacy. He shows an array of greed in Act V where he seeks to rely on Lady Wishfort’s attempted marriage of blackmail to dispossess her of her inheritance. But as Paul and Miriam Mueschike observe, “the double – dealer whose life has been a sham meets shattering defeat through overconfidence in a spurious document”.

In fact, as Norman N. Holland (1973) states, “Fainall’s deed is an abortive attempt to make social pressure permanently dislocate emotions, to create a retrograde movement in which the fear of scandal separates Mirabell and Millamant”. Foible really lived up to her name. She causes confusion here and there and together with Waitwell, she agrees to blackmail her mistress, who brought her up from nowhere. Like her, Waitwell is enthusiastic to play Sir Rowland. He tells his master, Mirabell that:

*The difficulty will be how to recover my  
acquaintance and familiarity with my former  
self, and fall from my transformation to a  
reformation into Waitwell.*

The other world of the play is an attempt to transform a culture of sexual immorality and profligacy into relationships of trust and self – control. Mirabell, Millamant, and Sir Wilfull Witwoud are used in the idiom of the play to propagate this change. On this side of the coin, we see a hand earnestly waving goodbye to illicit sexual jamboree, gambling, and avarice. Before the play opens, Mirabell had had a fill of premarital sex, but within the context of the play, we see him as being focused and

emotionally stable, having only one goal, to make Millamant a trusted wife. He refuses to be Lady Wishfort's lover even though he is aware that she is terribly rich. He refuses to sleep with Mrs. Marwood who is described as having a month's mind for him.

Of all the women in the play, Mrs. Millamant is the only one who is chaste and decides to remain so until she gets a man who can be trusted and save her from sexual scandal. She needs a man with whom she can enter into a marriage of confidence. "Before their contract scene Millamant insists on treating love lightly and distantly" (Holland 534). Millamant's tauntings and feminist provisos are not intended to hurt Mirabell but to test his emotional stability and allegiance. There is no doubt that she loves Mirabell tenderly for after their contract, she remarks:

*Well, if Mirabell should not make a good husband, I  
am a lost thing for I find I love him violently.*

Their long wooing is not only a way of taking precaution, but an opportunity to build trust and deepen their emotional feeling towards each other. Martin Price (1973) expresses the opinion that:

*Millamant's affectations do not reveal her as  
artificial. They are clearly defensive maneuvers.  
She seems at every point to be inviting Mirabell to  
separate himself from this world and to free her  
from it.*

In spite of the various stumbling blocks on his way to marry Millamant, Mirabell remains undaunted and constant. The enormous obstacles he wades through demonstrate that true love is a very potent force, stronger even than kinship relationship. Although Mirabell stirs Lady Wishfort out of her wit in the marriage of blackmail, all is done to take hold of Millamant for it is he also who initiates the process of calming frayed nerves and points to a new moral order, to embrace conscionable existence which blossomed in the English drama of the 18th century. In fact, it is with reference to the character of Mirabell that Downer (1950: 212) notes:

*Congreve has one basic plot, the story of an honest  
love affair brought to a near catastrophe by the hero –  
gallant's relations with some other woman in the play,  
relations which proceed not so much from congenital  
looseness as from an unwillingness to act contrary to  
the prescribed code of social behaviour.*

## 4.0 CONCLUSION

Restoration drama, especially, the comic genre is a reflection of a society in social decay as a result of collapsed social structures. It is a society bereft of God and moral certitude; but the drama also shows the forces of decency struggling for self – assertion.

## 5.0 SUMMARY

This unit has examined Restoration comedy. Specifically, it focused on the conditions that brought about the new drama, the nature of Restoration comedy, and the biography of William Congreve are discussed. Finally, Congreve's *The Way of the World* has been considered, as an example of Restoration comedy.

## 6.0 TUTOR-MARKED ASSIGNMENT

Discuss characteristics of Restoration comedy.

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## UNIT 2 THE HEROIC DRAMA

### CONTENTS

- 1.0 Introduction
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### 1.0 INTRODUCTION

The Restoration period was not just an era of comic extravaganza on evil manners; there was equally an effort to produce drama of serious note. John Dryden (1631 – 1700), Thomas Otway (1652 – 1685), Nathaniel Lee (1653 – 1692), Nicholas Rowe (1674 – 1718), Roger Boyle (1621 – 1679), and Elkanah Settle (1648 – 1724), among others, made giant stride to create tragic drama in the likeness of the French neoclassical tragedy, but the drama that emerged was distinctly English because as MacGowan and Melnitz (1955) observed, it merely stepped “up earlier tendencies” in English drama by being panoramic and deeply steeped in violence. This unit examines heroic drama which is the counterpart of the Restoration comedy.

### 2.0 OBJECTIVES

At the end of this unit, you should be able to:

- discuss the concept and characteristics of heroic drama
- explain how it differs from its counterpart, the Restoration comedy
- explicate a major theme of the genre
- describe the biography of its leading playwright- John Dryden
- analyse *The Conquest of Granada* as an example of heroic drama.

### 3.0 MAIN CONTENT

#### 3.1 Heroic Drama

Although the taste of the English audience of the Restoration age inclined itself more to comedy, serious attempts were made by some playwrights of the time to write tragic plays. It is this second genre of the Restoration drama that is referred to as heroic drama. In some quarters, it is also known as heroic tragedy or heroic romance. The heroic drama represents an attempt by writers inclined to classicism, to give the English theatre a school of classic drama after the tradition of the plays written by the French Pierre Corneille and Jean Racine.

In fact, the heroic drama seeks to evoke the spirit of the French neoclassicism on the English stage. In order to gain the attention of the audience already taken by the spirit of comedy of humours and evil manners, the playwrights of the heroic drama created plays that present “blown – up characters who spouted high – flown rhetoric, indulged in extravagant sentiments, and were generally torn between love and honour” (Vargas 1960, 134).

In distinguishing the Restoration comedy from the Heroic drama, Downer (1950) states that:

*The serious counterpart of the Restoration comedy is so utterly different that it is difficult to believe they were intended for the same theatre and audiences. Instead of the amiable man – about – town – with an epigram upon his lips and several hundred more about his sleeve, with little money, no heart, and a large trope of creditors, with a wandering eye and a horror of permanent entanglements, the hero becomes a superman – of – the – world, richly robed in fantastic colours and materials, with a mass of ostrich plumes sprouting from his helm, and endless tirades of moral tags, vaunts, taunts and epithets spouting from his lungs. The actors, the same audience, each apparently accepting and believing in a totally different concept of virtue, a totally different set of ethical values.*

The hero is more than man in grandeur and has capacity for incredible action. He is eccentric and possesses an unimaginable vocal ability. Like the hero, the heroine is highly idealised. She has a copious ability to endure anguish of the soul. She is ready to die than to betray her virtue.

Her earth – born passion may step up but her notion of love outside of marriage is platonic, such that heightens piety.

Although the heroic drama was patterned after the French Neo-classical plays, it is important to note that:

*English neo-classicism was always more liberal than the version that prevailed on the continent. Unity of action was interpreted to permit a number of related sub-plots and the unity of place was thought to have been adequately observed if the characters could move easily between the various locales without violating, the 24 – hour time limit (Brockett and Hildy 1999, 237).*

It is necessary to state that in spite of the French model and critical authority, the heroic drama retains that true – born English nature as the playwrights of the genre filled their plays with ample activities and violence. John Dryden the most significant literary figure of the period states in his essay *Defence of Dramatic Poesie* that “my chief endeavours are to delight the age in which I live” and in order to realise this he declares his willingness “to break the rule for the pleasure of variety”. The implication is that the English neoclassicists were never encumbered by the French neoclassical ideals.

The heroic drama is extremely moralising. This is because, as Dryden posits in the same essay, a play ought to be, “A justly and lively image of human nature representing its humours and passions, and the changes in fortunes to which it is subject, for the delight and instruction of mankind”.

Heroic drama is written in rhyming couplets. Its sensational actions are played out in exotic setting; because the heroic drama was a “diet of undiluted rant and heroic endeavour... a style trod too closely on the heels of bathos”, it became “a fair game for the satirist (Vargas 1960). Critics like George Villiers, the Duke of Buckingham saw nothing subtle about the genre. Grandiloquent dialogue and over – blown and idealised characters became obvious targets for witty deflation.

In fact, *The Rehearsal* (1671) by the Duke of Buckingham was a burlesque on the heroic drama, a stinging satire against its theme and fantastic worlds. However, modern critics have departed from the notion of the heroic drama being an escapist drama. They have tried to point out the political tendencies of the plays. Apart from the popular theme of love versus honour, issues of gender, colonialism, and political philosophy have been isolated as themes of heroic drama.

## SELF-ASSESSMENT EXERCISE

Discuss four characteristics of heroic drama.

### 3.2 Biography of John Dryden

John Dryden, critic, poet, playwright, translator, and historiographer, was the most remarkable literary figure of the Restoration period and the most notable author of heroic drama. He was born on August 9, 1631 at Aldwinckle, Thrapston, Northampton shire. The eldest son of the fourteen children of Erasmus Dryden and Mary Pickering, John had puritan grandparents who supported the puritan cause.

He received his early education in Northampton shire before proceeding to Westminster School in 1644. According to *wikipedia*:

*As a humanist school, Westminster maintained a curriculum which trained pupils in the art of rhetoric and the presentation of arguments for both sides of a given issue. This is a skill which would remain with Dryden and influence his later writing and thinking as much of it displays these dialectical patterns. The Westminster curriculum also included weekly translation assignments which developed Dryden's capacity for assimilation. This was also to be exhibited in his later works. His years at Westminster were not uneventful, and his first published poem, and eulogy with a strong royalist feeling on the death of his schoolmate Henry, Lord Hastings from small pox alludes to the execution of King Charles I.*

In 1654, Dryden obtained his B.A. at Trinity College, Cambridge, and graduating top in his class. On graduation, he took up appointment with Cromwell's secretary of state. This job was facilitated by his maternal cousin, the Lord Chamberlain, Sir Gilbert Pickering. Together with other puritan poets Milton and Marvell, Dryden produced a eulogy during the funeral of Cromwell on November 23, 1658.

In 1660, Dryden celebrated the Restoration of the monarchy and the return of Charles II with *Astraea Redux*, an authentic royalist panegyric. In this poem, the Commonwealth era was described as a period of anarchy while King Charles is seen as the bringer of peace and order. It is, therefore, worthy to note that Dryden's first poems were written upon occasions of national importance.

Following the reopening of the theatre, Dryden soon launched himself as an important playwright and critic having transferred his allegiance to King Charles. His first play *The Wild Gallant* was written in 1663 the year he married Lady Elizabeth who bore three sons for him. From 1668, he was a resident playwright for the King's Company of which he later became a shareholder. Dryden wrote comedies but he excelled in heroic drama of which *The Conquest of Granada* is deemed to be an exciting example.

When the plague forced the theatres in London to be closed in 1665, Dryden turned his attention to poetry and dramatic criticism. In the latter, he defended his theatrical practice. His essays are works of great and independent mind who feels strongly about his own ideas and they demonstrate the incredible breadth of his reading. His essays include: "Essay on Dramatic Poesie" (1668), "Preface Evening Love" (1671), "Of Heroick Plays" (1672), "Preface to Troilus and Cresida" (1679), "Preface to by Sylvae" (1685), "A Discourse Concerning the Original and Progress of Satire" (1693), etc.

In 1668, he was appointed both poet laureate and city historiographer, but the two public offices were taken away from him in 1688 when King James was deposed and he refused to swear an oath of allegiance to the new king. From this time on, Dryden decided to live by the proceeds of his pen. He was busy writing poems and translating classical authors of note, including Ovid, Horace, Juvenal, Lucretius, Homer, Virgil etc. The publication of his translation of Virgil was of national importance and the work fetched him a whopping sum of £1, 400.

Dryden was a revered author. His works were widely read and quoted. He influenced many of the eighteenth century English poets including Alexander Pope, Walter Scott, George Crabbe, etc. Samuel Johnson noted that he refined the English language, improved the sentiments and tuned the numbers of English poetry.

On 1<sup>st</sup> May, 1700, Dryden was called home by his maker; but before his death, certain rivals had earlier made attempt to kill him. He was originally buried at St. Anne's cemetery, but after 10 days, his body was exhumed and reburied at Westminster. His death and burial inspired many eulogies.

### **SELF-ASSESSMENT EXERCISE**

Briefly discuss the personality of John Dryden.

### 3.3 The Conquest of Granada

The play *The Conquest of Granada*, in many ways, explained clearly the elements and standards of the heroic drama. These qualities are embodied by the hero and heroine of the play, Almanzor and Almahide while the hero in his superhuman capacity is brash, unconquerable and unencumbered by any political loyalties, “Almahide is the self – sacrificing heroine who will not abandon the bonds of honour that subjugates her to a tyrant” ([www.enotes.com/heroic](http://www.enotes.com/heroic) drama). The play, in two parts written in 1670 and 1671 respectively, is based on the historical re-conquest of Spain from the Moors by King Ferdinand in the fifteenth century, and is crafted after the neoclassical concept of propriety other than historical fact.

The interest is on characters with great soul. In part 1 of the play, the playwright examines the internal crisis between two noble houses in Granada – the Abencerrages and the Zegrays. A woman of Vice – Lyndaraxa envies the Queen and manipulates two rivals, Abdalla and Abdelmelech by pledging her love to both in order to get them rid off the king and make her Queen; because the ruling King Boabdelin is weak, he is unable to maintain control. The factions are about to go into full – scale war when Almanzor, a stranger arrives and helps the king to unite the two houses for the purposes of tackling the invading Spaniards.

In Act II, Lyndaraxa gets Abdalla to plan to overthrow his brother, and because King Boabdelin is unwilling to fulfill his promise to Almanzor, the hero switches allegiance to Abdalla and helps him to topple the king. In Act III, Almahide is betrothed to the king steals Almanzor’s heart and he makes effort like Zulema, Lyndaraxa’s brother to win her love. Abdalla the new King supports Zulema and this once again takes Almanzor to Boabdelin whom he eventually restored to the throne. In utter joy, Boabdelin requires Almanzor to name any gift for his assistance, and he names Almahide, but the king is unwilling to give her out to him. In fact, the request provokes terrible jealousy in the King and this forces him to banish Almanzor.

In part II, the war to regain Granada commences with the Spaniards taking the upper hand. This leads to a mutiny against the king. On the Queen’s suggestion, the King unwillingly appeals to the exiled Almanzor for help of which he obliges him because of Almahide. With the presence of Almanzor, the king’s jealousy grows worse to the point that he accuses Almahide of stirring up the people in order to have Almanzor back; but in the face of all these accusations, the Queen remains chaste and virtuous. Lyndaraxa causes Abdalla and Abdelmelech to fight in which Abdalla is killed; she uses Zulema and Hamet to accuse Almahide of having sex with Abdelmelech.

This leads the Queen and Abdelmelech to be subjected to public ridicule. The Queen's side wins the contest for justice and this leads to Zulema's confession. However, as Lyndaraxa rejoices and taunts Abdelmelech when the Spaniards of which she now sides win the war, Abdelmelech kills her and thereby destroying her ambition to be Queen. Almahide accepts Queen Isabel's suggestion that she marries Almanzor but with a proviso that she has to complete her one year widowhood first.

### 3.3.1 The Hero

The hero of the play, Almanzor is an epitome of the heroic drama. His actions and passions determine the direction events take at each given moment. Drawn after the like of the Greek Achilles, Almanzor is described by Dryden as not absolutely perfect but of "an excessive and overboiling courage". In him, we find "a roughness of character, impatient of injuries, and a confidence of himself almost approaching to arrogance; but these errors are incident only to great spirits. He is full of sympathy but do not care for human commands which he looks with disdain. The first time he appears on the scene, he takes side with the minority – the Abencerrages; and it is the feeling of this minority being oppressed that informs his choice. As he reasons:

*I cannot stay to ask what cause is best: But this is so to me, because opprest (Act, Scene I).*

When in the same scene, the king orders that Almanzor be executed as an animal of atonement for disobeying him, he tells the king disdainfully that:

*No man has more contempt than of breath,  
But whence hast thou the right to give me death? Obeyed  
as sovereign by they subject be,  
But know, that I alone am king of me.  
I am as free as nature first made man,  
Ere the base laws of servitude began  
When wild in the woods the noble savage run (1, Act I  
Scene I).*

The speech above confers the quality of divinity on Almanzor, a trait which his invincibility in war appears to demonstrate. Changes of fortune and re-groupings in the play occur according to his disposition and emotional allegiance. He is a character "for whom no odds are too great, no enemy sufficiently powerful, and who beg to be sent to fight outside the city since all he has accomplished (Downer 1950):

*is too little to be done by me...  
I cannot breathe within this narrow space,  
My heart's too big, and swells beyond this place.*

### SELF-ASSESSMENT EXERCISE

Examine the qualities of the hero of heroic drama.

#### 3.3.2 The Theme of Love

*The Conquest of Granada* explores many themes such as gender relations, political dissensions, war, imperialism and so forth, but the theme of love appears to be a cardinal theme of the play. Both conditional love such as the type Lyndaraxa promises to Prince Abadalla and Abdelmelech as a means of attaining political status, and virtuous and platonic love as exemplified by Ozmyn and Bensayda as well as that championed by Almahide and Almanzor. Much of the sentiment of the play is driven by love. It has a decisive and humbling effect upon numerous characters in the play, including the seemingly immortal Almanzor.

This mighty hero is brought to his knees by his love for the virtuous and beautiful Almahide” (Downer 224). Almahide’s beauty is inflammable. It burns the heart of the king with jealousy that he is willing sink under the weight of political crisis than to cede her to Almanzor as a gift for restoring him to his throne that Abdalla usurped, temporarily. Almahide’s love for Almahide is deep, fierce and moving. The genuineness of this love is not lost to Almahide. In fact the thought of Almanzor’s deep feeling for her makes the Queen to be lost in her “own web of thought” (II, Act I Scene II).

Almanzor’s love for Almahide transcends the boundaries of nuptiality. It is love ignited in the soul. Lyndaraxa tries “each secret passage to his mind” and seeks to “melt into him ere his love’s awares” (II, Act III Scene III), but Almanzor tells her:

*Fair though you are  
As summer mornings, and your eyes more bright  
Than stars that twinkle in a winter’s night”  
Though you have eloquence to warm and to move  
Cold age and praying hermits into love;  
Though Almahide with scorn rewards my care;  
Yet than to change, ‘tis nobler to despair. My love’s my soul; and  
that from fate is free.  
‘Tis that unchanged and deathless part of me.  
(II, Act III Scene III).*



The above quote indicates that if sexual gratification is the goal of Almanzor's quest for Almahide, Lyndaraxa is clearly a wonderful alternative as she appears to possess all that can move the heart to tender feeling. But the truth is that Almanzor's love comes from the soul and not the groin. Almahide admits that his fatal proofs of love have "moved my heart so much", only that he "ask what honour must forbid" (II, Act IV Scene III). The text suggests that Almahide truly loves Almanzor but she is only prevented from yielding by her adamant loyalty to piety, something she defends tenaciously until her husband gets killed in the war. However, Almanzor's constancy eventually wins him the love of Almahide at the end of the play, though he has to wait with a weight of love for her to complete her one year widowhood.

### **SELF-ASSESSMENT EXERCISE**

Discuss the theme of love in *The Conquest of Granada*.

## **4.0 CONCLUSION**

Heroic drama is the counterpart of the Restoration comedy. It is a drama in rhymed couplet, with exotic setting, overblown – character, and dialogue. In it, love and virtue contend for attention. The hero possesses divine quality, performs extraordinary actions while the highly idealised heroine struggles against odds in order to live a life of heightened piety.

## **9.0 SUMMARY**

The study examines the nature and qualities of heroic drama. It distinguishes the heroic drama from its counterpart, the Restoration comedy as well as shows the difference between the English neoclassical drama and the French type. This is followed by an examination of the biography of the genre's leading playwright, John Dryden. Finally, Dryden's *The Conquest of Granada* is studied as an example of heroic drama.

## **10.0 TUTOR-MARKED ASSIGNMENT**

Discuss the differences between the French neoclassical tragedy and the heroic drama.

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## UNIT 3 18<sup>TH</sup> CENTURY AND THE DRAMA OF SENSIBILITY

### CONTENTS

- 1.0 Introduction
- 2.0 Objectives
- 3.0 Main Content
  - 3.1 Sentimental Comedy
  - 3.2 *The Conscious Lovers: A Synopsis*
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  - 3.3 Domestic Tragedy
  - 3.4 Synopsis of *The London Merchant*
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### 1.0 INTRODUCTION

The 18th century, usually, referred to as the Augustan Age or Age of Enlightenment in English literary and dramatic history was a period of theatrical reformation. Jeremy Collier's criticism of the Restoration drama in 1698 elicited the support of the English people and it caused the said public "regard with increasing distaste the sort of dramatic fare, particularly, in the way of comedy, which patent theaters and the established dramatists had for years been offering them" (Quintana 1952). There was widespread expression and feeling that the time was ripe for the stage to purge itself of its own self-inflicted madness.

The eighteenth-century is significant in theatre history because it marked the evolution of the middle – class drama. Williams (1973) states that "the development of the middle – class drama is in fact one of the most interesting cases we have of a changing society" (554). It is necessary to point out that the middle-class has been opposing the type of drama promoted by the court since the sixteenth-century. However, Collier's attack of the theatre in which he itemised the faults of the stage compelled a crop of playwrights to make conscious effort to reform the drama in order to meet the demands of the time.

The evolving drama seeks to set a new moral tone but this tone is multifaceted because of the nature of the taste of a mixed audience it aspires to cater for. At the beginning of the century, the heroic drama still appealed to the older theatre goers. The court loved the Italian and English opera, while the younger people of Augustan temperament and

the middle – class preferred drama of sensibility. In fact, the playwrights were left in perplexity with respect to the tastes of the theatre – going public. However, as the century progressed, sentimental comedy, domestic tragedy, and the ballad opera became the distinctive genres of the age of enlightenment.

Raymond Williams (1973) observes that:

*it is fair to say that an important part of 18<sup>th</sup> century drama was that it offered a conscious image of the middle – class and its virtues, but the creative possibilities of this new consciousness were very uneven, and in the drama, particularly, they were further limited.*

He is of the opinion that “the uncertainty in dramatic forms combined with the strong fashionable element in the audience to produce a concentration of interest on actors as such”. He notes further that “whenever this happens, and plays in consequence, are valued primarily as vehicles for particular acting talents; the drama tends to become mixed and eclectic”.

## **SELF-ASSESSMENT EXERCISE**

Discuss the nature of 18th century drama.

### **2.0 OBJECTIVES**

At the end of this unit, you should be able to:

- examine the nature of 18th century drama
- describe the concept of domestic tragedy
- explicate the implications of sentimental comedy
- illustrate the two genres, using *The London Merchant* and *The Conscious Lovers*.

### **3.0 MAIN CONTENT**

#### **3.1 Sentimental Comedy**

The sentimental comedy is designed to be antipodal in perspective to the lewd comedy of the Restoration period. Richard Steele who is credited to have evolved this type of comedy aims at creating a new “social morality that values restrained passions and patient reflection over bold, contentious behaviour” (wikipedia). This comedy takes Collier’s criticism of the drama into cognizance and seeks to impress upon the

audience and the reader, the primacy of conscionable existence over the lascivious life of the Restoration. It is valued for its insistence on moral education.

Like the tragedy, eighteenth – century comedy reflects the cultural changes going on in the English society, but “with greater vividness, exhibiting at the same time a much more radical change in form, and on occasion rising to a level of excellence never attained by the tragedies of the period” (Quintana XIV).

The emergence of the middle – class and the evolution of a new point of view in the ethics and everyday moral speculations are at the root of the changes evident in the new sentimental comedy. Quintana (1952), states that the world reflected by the sentimental comedy is “the comfortable society of 18th century England well-to-do, humane in outlook, addicted to social virtues, increasingly self-satisfied”. In portraying a stable society, comedy as a matter of necessity underwent a significant change by highlighting the goodness in man. According to Quintana:

*Instead of showing folly and knavery, it showed error; instead of portraying the fool and knave as incorrigible and thus in a sense true to the laws of their own being, it portrayed the aberrant character as open to reformation once his better nature had been appealed to.*

Ethical writings and discourses of the period of which sentimental comedy propagates, suggest that man is innately good. They propose that man can be touched by altruistic emotions. At the age of 29 years, Steele published a Christian moral tract *The Christian Hero* (1701) “which made” benevolence, compassion, and a forgiving spirit the bases of human conduct. He followed this up with a number of comedies, including “*The Funereal, The Lying Lovers, The Tender Husband, and The Conscious Lovers*. In these plays, he crystallised his moral vision dramatically.

In fact, at its peak, sentimental comedy projects humanitarian reform against the damning and malicious behaviour and wit of the Restoration comedy. According to Parnell (1973), the sentimentalist feels that when he “intervenes on the side of virtue against debauchery and evil, he is directly inspired by Heaven and is a kind of guardian angel” (550).

Sentimental comedy holds optimistic end in view whether the hero lives or dies. Effort is always made to reclaim the errant for there is always an ample room for transformation. In all sentimental drama, virtue is promoted against unscrupulousness. There is always a disquieting

character which everyone wants to see destroyed. In some cases, he or she is offered the possibility to change but he or she usually remains adamant.

### SELF-ASSESSMENT EXERCISE

Discuss the characteristic of sentimental comedy.

### 3.2 *The Conscious Lovers: A Synopsis*

The *Conscious Lovers* (1722), written by Sir Richard Steele, is a drama in five – acts which revolves around the hero, John Bevil Junior. Due to his interest in fortune, Bevil Junior's father, Sir John Bevil, wants the young man to marry Lucinda, the second daughter of the wealthy merchant, Sealand. To respect his father's inclination, Bevil Junior, unwittingly, accepts to marry Lucinda who is in love with his best friend, Myrtle; but John Bevil's inclination is to marry the poor but beautiful Indiana.

Indiana is Sealand's first daughter who is lost in her infancy during a Shipwreck but who is eventually recovered and nurtured. In a trip to a foreign land, Bevil Junior saves Indiana in a compromising situation, brings her home and secretly maintains her with the intention of marrying her. Indiana and her father are aware of each other being alive, but have not been able to reunite.

Sealand is interested in giving Lucinda away in marriage to Bevil Junior, but his wife makes clandestine effort to marry her to a young coxcomb Cimberton because of his fortune. However, Cimberton cannot marry Lucinda without the authorisation of his uncle Geoffrey or his lawyers. As a result of their vested interests, Bevil Junior and Myrtle devise the idea of Myrtle and Bevil's servant, Tom, disguising as the lawyers – Bramble and Target. In disguise they tell Cimberton and Mrs. Sealand that Sir Geoffrey must be present in person to cede out part of the family estate and to sign the marriage register.

Meanwhile, it has come to the knowledge of Mr. Sealand that John Bevil Junior is keeping a strange lady of even a lower-class. He decides to visit this woman in order to evaluate John Bevil Junior's moral state first hand. In the meantime, Phillis, Lucinda's maid arrives at Bevil Junior's lodgings with the news that Geoffrey will be in town any time now and suggests that Myrtle disguise as him. The smart idea is quickly put into practice. As Geoffrey, Myrtle poison's Lucinda's mind about Cimberton, and eventually reveals his true identity to Lucinda before feigning sick to further delay the marriage.

Sealand visits Indiana and in the course of their discussion, Indiana lets him see a bracelet he gave to his lost wife and her mother. Father and daughter recognise each other. In appreciation for what John Bevil Junior did for Indiana, Sealand gives Indiana to him as wife. He equally allows Myrtle to marry Lucinda, while the coxcomb, the young Cimberton loses out in the whole affair.

### 3.2.1 Critical Analysis of *The Conscious Lovers*

*The Conscious Lovers* is a drama on the theme of love and dynamic relationship between parents and their children on the question marriage. The play looks at the traditional notion of marriage as business as something outmoded requiring a change. It suggests that the moral implication of marriage based on fortune arising from the woman's dowry does not lead to happiness in marriage. The play, therefore, seeks to inaugurate a new moral perspective to the issue of marriage. The victory granted to the young lovers in the play is an indication that marriage based on fortune is on its way out while that based on love is on the threshold.

It suggests that marriage that can guarantee happiness is such contract between people who are mutually attractive to one another. Although John Bevil Junior is dressed to marry Lucinda, Phillis tells us that he has not shown to her mistress any proof of his passion (Act 1 Scene 1). Tom, Bevil's servant tells Humphrey the servant to Sir John Bevil that although the young man "is dressed as gay at the sun... he has a very heavy heart under that gaiety" (Act I Scene 1). While John Bevil Junior is in anguish of the soul, his father's inclination in the whole affair is based on "the prospect of such a vast fortune's being added to our family" (Act 1 Scene 11).

Junior's indifferent resignation to the issue is understandable. His dilemma is incredibly touching. As a good young man who does not want to disobey his parents, he feels that not marrying Lucinda will make him "lose the best of fathers", while marrying her against his desire for Indiana, will make him "part with more than life" (Act I Scene II). The match with Lucinda is an albatross around his neck. In fact, he sees it as a "fatal match that hangs upon my quiet" (Act I Scene II). Junior does not think only about his own feeling, he feels for Indiana too. His own foreboding, Indiana's anguish of the soul as well as the jealousy of Myrtle lend him to conclude that:

*To hope for perfect happiness is vain,  
And love has ever its array of pain.*  
(Act II Scene I).

The intervention of providence is the only way that disputation is averted between John Bevil and his father. It also emphasises the primacy of love over all forms of human relationship. In the personality of John Bevil Jnr, we find some of the new set of values championed by sentimental comedy. In avoiding any physical confrontation with Myrtle, the young man endorses the idea of restraint of passion and promotes the virtue of patient reflection over bold, contentious behaviour.

In averting fighting, the playwright shows his disapproval of human waste that usually results from dueling and this is a way of providing new moral guidance for the emergent middle-class culture. To run away from the rakish hero of the Restoration comedy, John Bevil Jnr. is made a positive hero, with a great deal of patience, a symbol of “a peaceful behaviour in sharp contrast to the British theatrical norm of the aggressive musculanity and assertiveness” (wikipedia).

### **SELF-ASSESSMENT EXERCISE**

Discuss the value championed by *The Conscious Lovers*.

### **3.3 Domestic Tragedy**

This is the genre that deals with the activities of the middle – class in a tragic dimension. It is a drama of sentiment but unlike the heroic drama, there is a softening of passion. It is the fusion of “the social realism, the pathos and pathetic and the moral ethos of the middle – class England” (Quintana xiii). In it we witness the corrupting influence of evil, but unacceptable behaviours, usually, end up in ruin. The domestic tragedy is not “interested in characters and situations lying outside the realm of prosperity and comfort” (xiv). It promotes virtue even as it points out human errors that can be corrected.

The domestic tragedy is a drama of the everyday people. It contrasts with the classical and neoclassical tragedies that deal with state affairs and characters drawn from the aristocratic family. Domestic tragedy does not deal with issues that have wider implications but centers on the affairs of the common folks. Unlike classical tragedy where fate is immovable, domestic tragedy is humanitarian. It shows the possibility of repentance and forgiveness. According Wilson (2005):

*Bourgeois or domestic drama developed through the balance of the eighteenth century and the whole of the nineteenth-century until it achieved a place of prominence in the works of Ibsen, Strindberg and more recent writers such as Arthur miller, Tennessee*



*Williams, Lorraine Hansberry, Edward Albee, August Wilson, and Paula Vogel. Problems with society, struggle within a family, dashed hopes, and renewed determination, are typical characteristics of domestic drama.*

## **SELF-ASSESSMENT EXERCISE**

Discuss characteristics of domestic tragedy.

### **3.4 Synopsis of *The London Merchant***

George Lillo's *The London Merchant* is one of the most important plays written in the eighteenth-century. It is considered significant because "it successfully re-established the domestic tragedy as an important category of drama and its influence on writers on the continent was incalculable" (Vargas, 1960).

This rich prose play dramatises the story of an apprentice, George Barnwell who turns from a life of virtue and hard work after being led astray by Millwood. Once he is captured, Barnwell begins to rob his uncle and master Thorowgood, in order to maintain the woman. He sinks deeper and deeper into his crimes as the days go by until eventually Millwood requests him to kill Thorowgood as a way of proving his constancy in loving her. This will provide Millwood the chance of taking possession of Thorowgood's estate. After much anguish of the soul, Barnwell accepts the idea and eventually stabs his uncle where he is having a quiet work in a wood.

Thinking that he has killed his uncle Barnwell runs to Millwood for safety. However, on seeing that Barnwell does not come with gold, Millwood denies ever seeing him before. As a way of extricating herself from the murder issue, she gets Barnwell arrested.

When Barnwell and eventually Millwood are apprehended, Barnwell toes the pathway of penitence and repentance. He looks upon his past crimes with utter hatred, reconciled with his uncle and friends, and awaits the gallows with peace of mind. Millwood rejects the possibility of repentance and instead pours vituperations on men, and goes to her death in pain and horror.

#### **3.4.1 Critical Analysis of *The London Merchant***

*The London Merchant*, which echoes Shakespeare's *Hamlet* and *Macbeth* is a kind of sermon on the concept of virtue. It explains what cold wickedness entails through the malevolent activity of Millwood and

her servant Lucy, to some extent. The play articulates an array of sentiments on the problems facing the youth and the inexperienced in a world where decadence has got mixed up with civilisation. The first and most important sentiment that the play provokes is the consequences of unrestrained emotion. The playwright warns, that a profligate life may “ease our present anguish” or buy a moment’s pleasure”, but it can produce an “age of pain” (Act I Scene II). Millwood heaves and falls her breasts, collapses in the arms of the young man in order to inflame him and put him on “the rack of wild desire” (Act I Scene II).

This is a test for Barnwell’s steadfastness to virtue but he succumbs to the temptation. Though he suffers crisis of conscience and inner torment after his first night of passion with Millwood, unrestrained passion does not permit him to see the danger ahead. Evil is lifted to a towering height to show its inevitable consequence. Like Macbeth, Barnwell loses sleep because he makes himself a willing tool. His soul – searching exercises convict him, yet he ignores his own qualm of conscience to bid the wish of Millwood.

*The London Merchant* is not only a warning for the youth on the danger of sexual immorality, it equally exposes the problem inherent in poor – parenting and is therefore a lesson in that direction too. Thorowgood may have been posited as a quintessence of generosity; he may have good heart and understands the value of repentance and forgiveness, yet, he is extremely weak and incapable of seeing through events. He does not even know that his own daughter, Maria shuns courtly love because of his apprentice.

Thorowgood has an opportunity of saving George Barnwell but he wittingly allows the golden chance to slip through his fingers. After his first encounter with Millwood, Barnwell feels deeply sorry for losing his purity and innocence; a troubled conscience compelled to him let his uncle hear his confession but undue forgiving spirit does not allow Thorowgood to hear the young man out.

To me, it seems that the whole tragedy hinges on this refusal to hear the earnest desire of Barnwell to confess what is amiss. At this stage the young man is still redeemable. Unlike Thorowgood, True man made concerted effort to know Barnwell’s problem but he lacked the authority to force the truth out of Barnwell’s mouth. The only authority-figure in the play, Thorowgood, rejects the young man’s candid effort and plea for counsel and, therefore, ought to bear full responsibility. He is an indulging father whose undue sense of forgiveness points to the fact that an average human being’s virtue is somehow defective.

The play also reflects the ideals of the mercantile class. Drowner (1950) posits, that “in a sense, the play is a business man’s tragedy and it was annually revived on certain holydays as a warning to any idle young men who might be inclined to trifle with their responsibilities in the world of trade, or not show the proper respect for money”. In Act III, Scene I, Thorowgood tells Trueman that trading is methodical and must be studied as science since it is grounded on reason. In praise of Trueman’s industry, he tells him cheerfully and instructively too:

*Well, I have examined your accounts. They are not only just, as I have always found them, but regularly kept and fairly entered. I commend your diligence. Method in business is the surest guide. He who neglects it frequently stumbles, and always wanders perplexed, uncertain, and in danger.*

In a way, the text promotes the dignity of mercantilism, highlights the impediments to a successful business enterprise as well as gives credit to industry. It is a manual for good trading spirit as well as an instruction for apprentices that may wish to joke with their master’s business and their own future happiness.

### **SELF-ASSESSMENT EXERCISE**

Discuss any two themes in *The London Merchant*.

## **4.0 CONCLUSION**

The English drama of the eighteenth-century was a mixed – grill of new forms which made conscious effort to propagate the new morality and humanitarian belief in human goodness. Both the domestic tragedy and sentimental comedy departed from the traditional morality in a significant way. Both promoted virtue as against the lewd and unscrupulous tendency of the Restoration drama.

## **9.0 SUMMARY**

This study unit examines the English drama of the 18th century. Attempt is made to explain this drama as a result of the transition in English culture in which there was conscious effort to shun drama that promotes profligacy. Innovations in the dramatic forms are highlighted through the study of domestic tragedy and sentimental comedy. *The London Merchant* and *The Conscious Lovers* have been examined as the representatives of the two dramatic genres.

## 10.0 TUTOR-MARKED ASSIGNMENT

Discuss *The Conscious Lovers* as an example of sentimental comedy.

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## UNIT 4 VICTORIAN DRAMA

### CONTENTS

- 1.0 Introduction
- 2.0 Objectives
- 3.0 Main Content
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### 1.0 INTRODUCTION

The Victorian drama, that is to say, the English drama of the 19th century is not a memorable one in terms of dramatic literature. In fact, the English dramatic literature which began to decline in the 18<sup>th</sup> century reached its lowest ebb during this period in terms of artistic quality and originality. According to Downer (1950), “playwrights produced limp imitations of bygone successes”.

Brockett and Hildy (1999) observe that new plays written for the great theatres were “neo-Elizabethan in subject matter and approach, for they treated historical themes and sought to recapture Shakespeare’s glory”. The audience’s interest in theatrical extravaganza and craze for stage spectacle encouraged hack playwriting. As Downer posits:

*It must be said frankly that the managers were not aware of the loss. Hack writers were good enough for a theatre with other interests, and there was an ample supply of hacks to keep actors and stage carpenters busy. The emphasis was upon theatre and not upon drama, upon the actor and not upon the playwright, upon the production and not the script. No new play was as attractive as a great star in a favourite role, and the happiest weeks of the season were those when two stars performed the same role at the rival theatres.*

Since the period was equally marked by the aesthetic movement, the actor and the scenic effects were given undue attention. Coloured lights which were part of the innovations in the theatre caused producers to pay attention to the projection of scenic effects than in highlighting themes. The Victorian audience comprised largely men and women who

work in the industries and who see the theatre as a means of recreation, a good night out.

The Victorian taste was catholic, and as such, the theatre accommodated diverse dramatic forms such as comedy, tragedy, burlesque, and melodrama, etc. However, the audience was predominantly inclined to the melodrama. Downer (1950) gives reason for this preference as follows:

*It is perhaps difficult to realise how desperately the Victorian common man needed entertainment and escape from his grimy and hardworking life. He was a total stranger to the “comforts of home”, unable or unwilling to read, and the theatre was almost the only relief available. If he went to one of the great patent houses, he was thrust into a gallery, a block from the stage, where he could not see or hear what was going on. Scorned by the pit and boxes and ignored by the actors, he was told stories he could not understand. So he turned to the minors, the illegitimate houses like Surrey, the Lyceum, Sadler’s Wells, or the Royal Victoria, where he could afford the best seats in the theater, and where the stories thrilled him to the core and the sentiments of the characters could be understood and approved by every true-born Englishman, where the actors tore their lungs and throats – sheeted their passions for his exclusive benefit.*

## 2.0 OBJECTIVES

At the end of this unit, you should be able to:

- discuss the nature of dramatic literature during the Victorian period
- examine the origin of melodrama
- explain the meaning of melodrama
- describe the characteristics of melodrama.

## 3.0 MAIN CONTENT

### 3.1 What is Melodrama?

Melodrama is a drama of boisterous actions and extravaganza. It rings with excitement and sentiments but it is not interested in creating intellectual puzzle because it makes its point broadly and

unambiguously. In it, suffering does not emanate from fate but from the activities of a thoroughly evil villain who works assiduously to undermine a virtuous hero or heroine. Melodrama presents the world as it ought to be and not the world as it really is. It is a drama of reformation in which erring human beings are given an opportunity to turn a new leaf.

Melodrama is a drama on a fast lane. Events develop quickly, and characters usually face monumental and seemingly insurmountable obstacles, but “problems, despite their overwhelming odds, are overcome” (Schnupp 1993). According to Schnupp, over simplification of matters removes any “sense of ambiguity” since “issues are presented in a clear, simple fashion” (244).

In discussing the universe of melodrama, A.S. Downer (1950: 276) posits that:

*The world of melodrama is a gaudy world, rendered in a showcard colors, a world of rose-covered cottages and wealthy homes filled with gilt –and- ivory tables and chairs, with of course, some mechanical wonders to keep pace with nineteenth – century innovativeness... the people of this world are rarely kings and princes, but more commonly the types who moved within the real world of the audiences; policemen, sailors, farmers and farmers’ daughters, foundlings, revengers, rent collectors, bailiffs, and bankers. The society of the world of melodrama is divided into two classes, the rich and the poor; two conditions, the happy and the unhappy; and two evaluations, the good and the bad. That is to say; the world is made up of the bad, the unhappy rich, and the good happy poor.*

The term melodrama was first used in Germany and France in the late 18th century. According to Roberts (1971: 214):

*About the year 1780, the word melodrama was applied to two really opposite kinds of theatrical performance. In Germany, it was used to designate a passage in an opera which accompanied spoken words with music. In France melodrama meant a musical passage intended to convey a character’s emotional state while he was silent. The practice had been first used by Rouseau in his monologue*

*Pygmalion (1775). It was not until 1800 that it appeared in the playbills of Guilbert de Pixerecourt in Paris to designate the new theatrical form of a highly moral plot accompanied by music, ballet, combats, processions and intricate scenic effects which universally came to be called melodrama.*

It is important to note that the elements of melodrama were not, however, the products of one age. Its ingredients emanated from dramatic fares of many epochs. Roberts (1971) argues that by the time melodrama “became thus officially designated, no new ingredients remained to be discovered, and those which were used in varying combinations could trace a long line of decent”. He further states that:

*The conflict of virtues and in vices in symbolic form goes back at least to the medieval moralities, and the ranting, tyrannical, Herod of the cycle plays is a prototype of one of melodrama’s villains. The distressed heroines, the revengeful ghosts, domestic agonies, inflated language and physical sensations of much Elizabethan playwriting (The Spanish Tragedy, Titus Andronicus, The Jew of Malta, The Yorkshire Tragedy and Arden of Feversham) were just the kinds of things that melodrama would later used to good effect.*

In addition to the foregoing, the sentimental comedy and bourgeois tragedy of the 18<sup>th</sup> century provided melodrama with “ringing moral sentiments” as well as “pathos and distress designed to wring tears from the audiences”.

## **SELF-ASSESSMENT EXERCISE**

What is melodrama?

### **3.1.1 Characteristics of Melodrama**

Melodrama, according to Roberts, exercises both the visceral and cerebral parts of us vigorously. This means that it offers aesthetic delight as well as intellectual appeal. Michael Booth argues that “Melodrama must build on a firm foundation of absolute certainties and immovable verities”. The absolute certainties “are that virtue will be rewarded and evil will be punished; its immovable verities generosity, courage,



industry, honesty, chastity, humility, and repentance will always triumph over cupidity, contrivance, cowardice, cruelty, pride, sin and sex”.

- According to Roberts (1971): The conflict between virtue and vice is presented in a cartoon style – exaggerated and unmistakable, in black and white.
- The appeal to emotions is direct, and is underscored by musical accomplishment, either in songs or background music.
- Action is the life of melodrama; events are of overriding importance. *What* happens is far more important than the *whom* or the *why*, because the persons and the reasons are foreordained by the imperative of the genre. The issue is never in doubt; members of the audience can thrill with impunity to the direst of circumstances, the most heroic of escapes, the most grandiloquent of stances, perfectly safe in the knowledge not only that they are watching a play, but also that in the world of this play (as distinct from the actual world) neat poetic justice will prevail.

There is no intent in melodrama to bring the hero to the point of self-discovery or recognition; repentance and remorse (two occurring phenomena in melodrama of crime and fallen virtue) were usually brought about by external phenomena such as exhortations, dreams, lost children, mothers, wives, or sweethearts. The fundamental issue is not the reordering of self, but the readjustment of the individual in his relations with others.

The characters of melodrama are divided into polarities, the good and the bad, the happy and the unhappy. The hero or the heroine is the good while the villain is thoroughly bad. Other characters group under these two groups. Most characters usually align with the good or the hero, but Roberts (1971) argues that “the villain makes up in diabolical cleverness what he lacks in numerical superiority”.

Many 19<sup>th</sup> century melodramatic plays espoused chastity and fidelity as the essence of domestic happiness and attempted to make the heroine pursue this as the most essential quality in a woman. Roberts (1971: 223) maintains that:

*In spite of his centrality, however, the hero is more acted upon than acting. The prime mover of the action in melodrama is the villain who pursues the heroine, contrives to discredit or kill the hero, and keeps thinking up “dastardly plots”. He is strong – minded and bold, grim, determined, and immensely evil.... He usually has as accomplice a shifty, cowardly, half –*

*comic personage who occasionally foils his plot at the end of the play and goes over to the side of the Good.*

Music is a major element of melodrama. It is, as has been said, a tool for watering and heightening emotions. “sad and weary music for suffering heroines, agonising music for the deaths of children and old fathers, threatening music for the villain, mysterious music for ghosts, clashing music for storms, and joyous music for reunions of separated lovers” (Roberts, p. 225).

Melodramatic plot is diverse. It includes sensational detective stories, conspiracies, crimes, shipwrecks, burnings, murder puzzles, stories of profligacy, etc. The story is usually profuse and panoramic. Melodramatic language is highly elevated and inflated. The hero or the heroine has power of expression. According to Roberts, melodramatic language is rich in high – flown sentiments... inflated language full of inversions, circumlocutions, and metaphors”. However, the ordinary characters are permitted to speak the language of the everyday business.

Dazzling stage machinery helps to achieve spectacular effect in melodrama. Improved lighting system helps to create fascinating stage effect. In addition to improved lighting system in the nineteenth – century, the stage designers- for purposes of ensuring historical accuracy, “selected landscapes and architecture which were picturesque, striking, and very often spectacular rather than typical or classically beautiful” (Hewitt, 1970). Hewitt further adds that:

*Hills, woods, cliffs, waterfalls, rivers, lakes, oceans, storms, floods, fires, volcanic eruptions, and effects of sun, moon, clouds, and waves were created not only for the melodrama but also for Shakespeare’s plays, thus depicting what heretofore had been merely described by the characters or implied by the action.*

### **SELF-ASSESSMENT EXERCISE**

Discuss five characteristics of melodrama.

## **4.0 CONCLUSION**

The Victorian drama witnessed poor development in dramatic literature in terms of artistic quality and originality; but the art of acting and production flourished greatly causing the audience to ignore lack of originality and freshness in drama productions. Since most of the Victorian audiences see the theatre as a mere relief from tedious day’s

work, they see the drama mostly from aesthetic angle, hence their preference for melodrama that provides profuse spectacle.

## 9.0 SUMMARY

This unit has exposed you to the Victorian drama. It considered the nature of dramatic literature of the period and what makes the audience eminently susceptible to the melodramatic offering. The unit specifically examined the concept of melodrama, its ingredients and characteristics as the major dramatic fare of the time.

## 10.0 TUTOR-MARKED ASSIGNMENT

Trace the evolution of the ingredients of melodrama.

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## MODULE 4 19<sup>TH</sup> – 20<sup>TH</sup> CENTURY

Unit 1	The Well-Made-Play
Unit 2	<i>Bernard Shaw</i> and the English Drama
Unit 3	The Abbey Theatre
Unit 4	Modern Poetic Drama

### UNIT 1 THE WELL-MADE-PLAY

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#### 1.0 INTRODUCTION

This module examines English drama from the late Victorian period to the early part of the 20th century. It will specifically discuss the well-made-play on the English stage, the contributions of George Bernard Shaw, the Irish Abbey theatre, and the modern poetic drama in England. The study contains four units.

By 1843, The Act for Regulating the Theatre promulgated by the British parliament granted legitimate production right to the minor or 'illegitimate' theatres. This Act marked the end of the monopoly enjoyed by the two patent houses, the King's Company and the Duke of York Company since the beginning of the Restoration period in 1660. The implication is that the minor theatres now have the opportunity to engage in the production of legitimate drama hitherto exclusively enjoyed by the patent theatres.

The dignity accorded to the minor theatres created in them a new sense of responsibility towards their art, and this enabled them to undertake innovations in diverse aspects of the theatre especially in production techniques and playwriting. According to Downer (1950):

*The awakened consciousness of men and women of the theater to the relationship between art and the life of the time, their increasing attention to the minute details of production, soon created a demand for a new type of play, one to replace the loosely constructed rambling plots of melodrama and the unreal and antiquated language of the traditional repertory. For inspiration for models, and all too often – for plays, they turned to the French theater and its thriving innovation, the pièce – bien – faite*

The well – made – play, which is what the above French phrase means in English, is adopted as a way of pushing aside the romantic melodrama, which deals more with fanciful ideas than relating the drama to social issues of the time.

## 2.0 OBJECTIVES

At the end of this unit, you should be able to:

- describe the factor that gave birth to well-made-play on the English stage
- explain the concept of the well-made-play
- examine the characteristics of the well-made-play
- analyse the *Second Mrs. Tanqueray* as a sample of the genre.

## 3.0 MAIN CONTENT

### 3.1 The Concept of the Well-Made-Play

As the name indicates, well – made – play is the type of play built on clarity as a consequence of the logical arrangement of the play’s dramatic activities. It adheres strictly to Aristotle’s precept of plot construction in which new events grow out of what happened earlier, according to what is probable, or inevitable. The technique of foreshadowing enables future actions to be prepared far well in the past before they come to pass. The essence is to ensure that no improbable action occurs.

The well-made-play, in its “logical machine-like structure” replaced “the old jerry-built structure of romantic melodrama” (Downer 281) where imagination was allowed to run wild. The well-made-play made extensive use of suspense as usually “a piece of information was deliberately held back to make a thrilling curtain” (281).

The maximum use of suspense helped to keep the members of the audience glued to their seat. They waited in anticipation, eagerly wanting to know what would come next since the twists and turns in the fortune of the major character frequently make predictions very uncertain. The well-made-play is created to explain moral or ethical point of view. Originally, it dealt with the problematic of marriage and the thesis often embedded in it, is that it is unsafe for a bad woman, that is, a morally depraved woman, to marry into a good home.

### SELF-ASSESSMENT EXERCISE

Discuss the concept of the well-made-play.

### 3.2 Characteristics of the Well-Made-Play

Tom F. Driver (1970) examines the characteristics of the well-made-play, both formally and thematically. The main thrusts of his submission are as follows.

- The plot is based on a secret known to the audience and withheld from the major characters so as to be revealed to them in a climactic scene. This secret is achieved through the technique of dramatic irony.
- The plot usually describes the culmination of a long story, most of which happened before the start of the play. This late point of attack requires that the audience be informed of the antecedent material (action) through dialogue that is called “exposition”.
- Action and suspense grow more intense as the play proceeds, and this rise in intensity is arranged in a pattern achieved by contrivance of entrances, exits, letters, revelations of identity and other such devices.
- The hero (protagonist) in conflict with adversary, experiences alternately good and bad turns in his fortune. This creates an emotional rhythm for the play.
- The lowest point of the hero’s fortune is followed soon after by the highest. The latter occurs in a *scène à faire* (“obligatory scene”) that characteristically hinges upon the disclosure of secrets.
- The plot, or part of it is frequently knotted by a misunderstanding, a *quiproquo* (*qui pro quo*) in which a word or situation is understood in opposite ways by two or more characters.
- The *dénouement* (literally, “the untying”, the resolution) is logical and hence clear. It is not supposed to have any “remainder” or unsolved quotient to puzzle the audience.

- The overall action pattern of the play is reproduced on a small scale in each act. It is, in fact, the principle according to which each minor climax and scene is constructed.
- The play is almost always topical, or at least appears to be, even when the setting is remote in time and space, and even when, on analysis, it turns out that time and place have little to do with the essence of the story and the characterisations.
- The play avoids metaphysical issue especially those that cannot be reduced to logic.
- The well-made-play always, invariably, includes a difficulty between the sexes especially on issues that concern social incompatibility.
- It is preoccupied with the issues of fallen women, money and other such middle-class values. (47 – 50).
- However, the fundamental feature of the well-made-play is its logic of events. The clarity of the well-made-play is derived from the logical arrangement of the dramatic activities of the play.

It is important to state that the sense of economy inherent in the structure of the well-made-play, makes it an ideal model for introducing aspiring writers into playwriting. Downer (1950: 295) argues that working with the form the novice learns the “value of economy, preparation, and verisimilitude, and is instructed by precept and example that the play can and should support a theme of social or intellectual interests”. He also learns how to focus and concentrate dramatic action.

### **SELF-ASSESSMENT EXERCISE**

List and discuss any five features of the well-made-play.

### **3.3 The English Well-Made-Play**

In England, Bulwer-Lytton’s play entitled *Money* (1841) and Tom Taylor’s *The Ticket-of-Leave Man* (1863) are usually regarded as the English earliest attempt at the well-made-play. Although these plays handled certain affairs of the time in realistic fashion, “the genuine reform of the drama is usually credited to Wilton – Bancrofts production at the Prince-of-Wale’s theatre of T.W. Robertson’s *Society* in 1865” (Downer, 282). In other words, T.W. Robertson can arguably be said to be the father – figure of the English well-made-play. His works namely *Society*, *Caste*, *School*, *Ours*, and *M.P* demonstrate a significant step away from the older tradition of English playwriting. They are well-ordered in structure and realistic in their treatment of contemporary happenings. A remarkable thing about Robertson is that he tried to find a dramatic import of the small things of life, what one may call the trivia of life.

In his plays, characters are recognisable everyday people, “none superfluous and each carrying his full share of the whole action” (Downer, 283). Characters are made human to seem very much alive, the dialogue frequently “catches the flavour of contemporary speech” (283). Every bit of the stage property contributes enormously to the flow of dramatic action, none is decorative. Following the Anglicisation of the French well – made – play, the genre became the major staple of English drama, especially during the last two decades of the 19th century. According to Downer (1950: 287):

*The well-made-play was so ideally adjusted to the Victorian and post – Victorian society, and to their preferred theatrical subjects, that it effectively eliminated the older forms as models for contemporary playwrights and, in fact, very neatly put an end even to the revival of the classic plays which had long been the backbone of the theatrical repertory. Audiences quickly developed an insatiable taste for the “new realism”, for seeing themselves and hearing their problems discussed upon the stage. That the problems were nearly always those growing out of love and marriage did not, of course, diminish the popularity of the form.*

The well-made-play inaugurated an attack against the middle-class morality. It finds its mission as a tool of criticism of life. It shows that the middle-class that attacked the court never fared better morally. The middle-class is found to be guilty of preferring respectability to humanity. “Oscar Wilde was enamored by this and he devoted much of his life to administering shocks to the middle-class” (289).

His play, *Lady Windermere’s Fan* (1892) is used to demonstrate that the concept of “absolute right and wrong are impossible standards and that to compromise with the right and wrong is a human virtue” (Downer, 289). In the play, Lady Windermere who was taught not to live a life of compromise realised at the end when she was saved by a bad woman – Mrs. Erlynne, that, “There is a bitter irony in things, a bitter irony in the way we talk of good and bad women...”

However, Arthur Pinero is regarded today as the most popular playwright of the well-made-play genre. His *The Second Mrs. Tanqueray* (1893) is recognised as the best English well-made-play. In Pinero’s dramatic universe, no effort is made to mangle reality or to revise moral attitude. He believes in hard and fast rules on morality and



this makes him to be dogmatic in approaching moral issues. According to Downer (1950):

*Pinero is insistent upon reality. No effort is spared to make the audience comfortable in a recognisable world full of recognisable people behaving in a recognisable way.*

Pinero believes in calling a spade, a spade. In *The Second Mrs. Tanqueray*, he attempts to demonstrate undoubtedly that “marriage of an honourable man and a profligate woman could not work” (Downer, 295).

### **SELF-ASSESSMENT EXERCISE**

Discuss the nature of English well-made-play.

#### **3.4 Synopsis of *The Second Mrs. Tanqueray***

In the first Act, Aubrey Tanqueray, a handsome, young, rich, refined man, with “a winning manner, tells his friends of his intention to remarry in a dinner party. He informs them that he has decided to marry a woman not likely to satisfy society”. Cayley Drummle who joined the company of friends later tells them that George Orreyed of their class, has married Mabel Harvey, a woman described as “everybody’s property”. The news is a bombshell to the group which sees George’s action as “diving into a social Dead Sea”. This makes Aubrey’s friends to become extremely worried about the woman their friend seeks to marry, especially as his first marriage to Miss Herriot was nothing to write home about.

When Misquith and Jayne leave the group, Aubrey after much plodding tells Cayley Drummle that the lady he intends to marry the following day is Mrs. Jarman. The name jolts Drummle, causing him to groan in the spirit because the lady is a well known artful woman who has lived with many men as both wife and concubine. Aubrey tells Drummle that his action is a deliberate and defiant attempt to prove that it is possible to rear a happy life on a miserable foundation.

In the second Act, Ellean, Aubrey’s daughter by his first wife quits the convent and joins the family. Ellean’s first impression of Paula his father new wife is that she is a bad woman and this leads to her poor reception of the lady. This cold reception in addition to Aubrey’s fondness for Ellean as well as his lifestyle of reading newspapers and novels, make Paula restless, resulting to incessant quarrel between her and Aubrey. This leads her to begin to annoy Aubrey by doing the sort

of things he does not like such as corresponding with Mabel Orreyed and inviting the Orreyeds to their house without first discussing such idea with him. The matter worsens when Ellean decides to follow Mrs. Cortelyon to Paris.

In the third Act, the Orreyeds as planned by Paula are already guests to the Tanquerays with George's disquisting attitude. Paula has been intercepting Mrs. Cortelyon and Ellean's letters to Aubrey in which they seek to inform him of Ellean's relationship with Captain Hugh Ardale – a man who once kept house together with Paula in London. Not hearing from Aubrey, Mrs. Cortelyon and Ellean come home with Captain Ardale for formal introduction. This causes Hugh Ardale and Paula to meet face to face. Paula's insistence on telling Aubrey everything compels Ardale to write her and to travel back to Paris immediately.

In the fourth Act, Aubrey learns about Paula's past relationship with Captain Hugh Ardale. This throws him into a paroxysm of distress, leading him to curse Hugh Ardale for bringing misery to him and Ellean. He advises his daughter to keep the young man out of her mind but she tells him that she has already forgiven Ardale for his past indecent life. Incapable of swallowing again a big dose of misery in marriage, Paula kills herself in spite of Aubrey's suggestion that they go abroad to avoid the scandal.

### 3.5 Critical Analysis of *The Second Mrs. Tanqueray*

*The Second Mrs. Tanqueray* is a thesis play. The thesis of the play is spelt out by the playwright in Cayley Drumnle's discussion with Aubrey Tanqueray in the first act of the play. In that discussion Drumnle who is opposed to Aubrey's intention to marry Paula Ray, an artful woman, is told by Aubrey thus:

*I have a temperate honourable affection for Mrs. Jarman. She has never met a man who has treated her well. I intend to treat her well. That's all. In few years Cayley, if you've not quite forsaken me, I'll prove to you that it's possible to rear a life of happiness, of good repute, on a – miserable foundation (Act 1).*

Aubrey's action is deliberate and defiant. He wants to prove society wrong, to show that marriage between an honourable man and a lecherous woman can work, if the man becomes temperate and accommodating to the woman. His choice of woman is Paula Ray who at twenty-seven years has married Dartry and Jarman at different times, and has lived with Ethurst and Hugh Ardale as concubine.

However, the sign that the marriage will not work is demonstrated, very early, in the play. Paula's visit to Aubrey at the eve of their marriage shows that Paula has not freed herself completely of her past life. Her coming to Aubrey very late in the night is quite unsettling for Aubrey. Paula who is used to keeping late nights is not worried about Aubrey's unacceptability of such late visit. Instead, to show that she no longer feels for anything, she tells Aubrey to ignore what servants say, as for her, servants are mere "machines made to wait upon people – and to give evidence in the divorce court" (Act 1).

Paula's effort to make Aubrey to be fully acquainted with men she has had affairs with in the past, is rebuffed by Aubrey when he burns her letter containing such information without reading them. He tells Paula that focusing on the future, for him, is more important than ruminating over past experiences. He hardly believes that the past can influence the future.

However, during the spring time of their marriage, he discovers shockingly that the past cannot be totally ignored. He sees Paula's correspondence with Mrs. Mabel Orreyed as reviving her old ways of life. His effort to stop the relationship is resisted by Paula who is already sad about Audrey's middle class way of life, reading of morals and newspapers, as well as his fondness for his daughter. All this makes Paula to be horribly restless.

The appearance of Ellean on the scene unsettles everything and breeds incessant quarrel between husband and wife. While Paula develops feverish jealousy for Ellean, Aubrey is worried that Paula could negatively influence his daughter. His brief stay with Paula has revealed that the woman has lost touch with humanity. He realises that Paula has a careless nature. Of her ignoble disposition, he tells Drumnle:

*Cayley, there's hardly a subject you can broach on which poor Paula hasn't some strange, out-of-the-way thought to give utterance to; some curious, warped notion. They are not merely worldly thoughts – useless, good God! They belong to the little hellish world which our black guardism has created; no, her ideas have too little calculation in them to be called worldly. But it makes it the more dreadful that such thoughts should be ready, spontaneous; that expressing them has become a perfectly natural process; that her words, acts even, have almost lost their proper significance for her, and seem beyond her control (Act 1).*

The above statement indicates that for Aubrey, Paula's personality is a huge burden which he does not want Ellean to partake in bearing. Though Cayley Drummle shares this worry, he nevertheless, tells Aubrey that it is a mistake for him to believe that her daughter is an angel as it is possible she may have gotten "her white robe, shall we say, a little dusty at the hem". Drummle urges him to allow the young woman to experience the society she belongs to, "to walk and talk and suffer and be healed with the great crowd" (Act II).

Indeed, the outcome of Ellean's short visit to Paris with her mother's friend, Mrs. Cortelyon, proves Cayley Drummle right. In that short visit, she gets hooked up to Captain Hugh Ardale – a man who had kept house together with Paula in London. The past which Aubrey thinks he can wish away now stands in his way as an overwhelming obstacle to his happiness and that of his daughter. In recognition of the truthfulness of Cayley's position about life, he queries Ellean:

*Why, when was it you left us?*

It hasn't taken you long to get your robe "just a little dusty at the hem" Aubrey is now a disappointed fellow. A few weeks ago, he thought he could keep Ellean ignorant of evil, but even Ellean as young as she is reminds him:

*Father, it is impossible to be ignorant of evil.  
Instinct, common instinct, teaches us what is good  
and bad. Surely, I am none the worse for knowing  
what is wicked and detesting it (Act IV).*

Even the little Ellean, like Cayley Drummle, makes it plain to Aubrey that the world is lived through experiences. The young woman's bold effort to experience her society opens Aubrey's eyes to the reality that it is not possible to toy with the society's moral standards without one not finding himself in a "social dead sea". By cursing Captain Hugh Ardale for bringing a life of misery to his family, he indirectly curses himself for laying the foundation for such life. He, voluntarily, married Paula thinking that it is possible to live well with a whore, but he learns belatedly and bitterly too, that marriage to lascivious woman can hardly work.

*The Second Mrs. Tanqueray* is a typical example of a good well-made - play. In the first place, the play is very economical in terms of dialogue and characterisation. Nothing is superfluous and every speech and character helps to keep the plot flowing. Again, every event is well-prepared ahead of time. This is achieved through foreshadowing. For example, Aubrey's statement to his friends that his marriage is "not

likely to satisfy society”, his view of marriage as a “wasting disease”, as well as Paula’s dream – anticipate the disastrous end of their marriage. The dinner party at the beginning of the play is, therefore, a way of Aubrey saying goodbye to his good friends for it foreshadows the dissolution of friends he suffers later in the play.

Also, George Orreyed’s marriage to Mabel, which is said to be a kind of diving to a “Social Dead Sea”, suggests that Aubrey and Paula’s marriage will not end well. It anticipates the crisis that will characterise Aubrey and Paula’s future relationship. Paula’s death is anticipated in act one where she tells Aubrey that she will kill herself should her marriage again fails. This is because as she says, she is not ready to “swallow a second big dose of misery” (Act 1).

Furthermore, the first act of the play is enlivened by suspense. By withholding the name of the lady he intends to marry from his friends, Aubrey keeps the imagination of his friend running wild in guessing. There is hardly anything they do not imagine especially as Aubrey’s first marriage is nothing to write home about.

### **SELF-ASSESSMENT EXERCISE**

Discuss *The Second Mrs. Tanqueray* as a well-made-play.

## **4.0 CONCLUSION**

This study examines the English theatre of the late Victorian age. It shows how the Act for Regulating the Theatre which was passed in 1843, authorised the minor theatres to begin to get involved in the production of legitimate drama. This led to innovations in the theatre both in terms of production and playwriting. The well-made-play which is the new form borrowed from France is the subject of this unit.

## **5.0 SUMMARY**

This unit, specifically, examines the concept of the well-made-play, its characteristics as well as its Anglicisation. Finally, *The Second Mrs. Tanqueray* by Arthur Pinero, is analysed as a typical example of the English well – made – play.

## **6.0 TUTOR-MARKED ASSIGNMENT**

Discuss the characteristics of the well-made-play.

## 7.0 REFERENCES/FURTHER READING

Downer, A.S. (1950). *The British Drama: A Handbook and Brief Chronicle*. New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts.

Driver, T.F. (1970). *Romantic Quest and Modern Query: History of the Modern Theatre*. New York: Dell.

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## UNIT 2    **GEORGE    BERNARD    SHAW    AND    THE ENGLISH DRAMA**

### CONTENTS

- 1.0 Introduction
- 2.0 Objectives
- 3.0 Main Content
  - 3.1 Biography of George Bernard Shaw
  - 3.2 The Shaw Drama
  - 3.3 The Synopsis of *Heartbreak House*
  - 3.4 A Study of *Heartbreak House*
- 4.0 Conclusion
- 5.0 Summary
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### 1.0 INTRODUCTION

The focus of this unit is on George Bernard Shaw- one of the most remarkable English playwrights of the modern period. Since a study unit is not adequate to do a profound study of a man who has written over 60 plays on vast subject-matters, attempt will only be made to highlight his personality, polemics, and the nature of his drama. *Heartbreak House* will be succinctly examined as a play that deals with almost all the ideas that Shaw was occupied with in his dramaturgy.

### 2.0 OBJECTIVES

At the end of this unit, you should be able to:

- describe George Bernard Shaw's personality
- explain his polemics and philosophy of life
- explain the nature and universe of his plays
- describe Shaw's preoccupation in his drama of ideas
- highlight the theme of *Heartbreak House*.

### 3.0 MAIN CONTENT

#### 3.1 Biography of George Bernard Shaw

George Bernard Shaw, an Irish music and drama critic, novelist, essayist, political activist, and playwright, was born in Dublin, Ireland on 26 July, 1856, to George Carr Shaw and Lucinda Elizabeth Shaw, a professional singer. He was educated at Wesley College, Central Model

School, and Dublin English Scientific and Commercial Day School. One important fact to note about Shaw and education is that he had a great hatred for formal education. According to *Wikipedia*:

*He harboured a lifelong animosity towards school and teachers, saying “Schools and Schoolmasters, as we have them today, are not popular as places of education and learning, but rather prisons and turnkeys in which children are kept to prevent them disturbing and chaperoning their parents. Shaw’s major reason for hating formal education is detailed in his Treatise on Parents and Children. However, the summary of his argument is that “he considered the standardised curricula useless, deadening to the spirit and stifling to the intellect”. He favoured the idea of free exploration of knowledge.*

When Shaw came out of school, he found a job as a clerk in an estate office before joining his father in his unsuccessful business. However, when he became dissatisfied with life in Dublin, he joined his mother and sister in London. In London, Shaw spent his early years reading and searching for knowledge in British Museum and public libraries.

Shaw started his writing career as a ghost novelist. But he never succeeded as a novelist. However, by 1880s he had established himself as a renowned music critic first for the *Star* and then to the *World*. In 1895, he became a drama critic for the *Saturday Review*. He had earlier in 1891 published *The Quintessence of Ibsenism* at the period Henrik Ibsen was gaining popularity in England, to champion the works of this great Norwegian playwright. Shaw wrote the book in defence of Ibsen’s plays of which many Victorian critics had aversion for.

Clement Scott and others had described the first performance of *Ghosts* in England in 1891 in an unpalatable terms as “an open drain, a loathsome sore unbandaged, a dirty act done publicly, or “a lazar house with all its doors and windows open” (*The Quintessence of Ibsenism* 25) *The Quintessence of Ibsenism* was written to correct the above view of the plays of Ibsen which Shaw considered a misconception. He argues:

*When Ibsen began to make plays, the art of the dramatist had shrunk into the art of contriving a situation. And it was held that the stranger the situation, the better the play, Ibsen saw that, on the contrary, the more familiar the situation, the more interesting the play. Shakespeare had put ourselves on the stage but not our situations. Our uncles seldom murder our fathers,*



*and cannot legally marry our mothers; we do not meet witches; our kings are not as a rule stabbed and succeeded by their stabbers; and when we raise money by bills we do not promise to pay pounds of our flesh. Ibsen supplies the want left by Shakespeare. He gives us not only ourselves, but ourselves in our own situations. The things that happen to his stage figure are things that happen to us. (182).*

Shaw's argument is that the works of Ibsen enable us to be freed from the tyranny of idealism. Shaw's interest in political activism led him to join the Fabian Society – a society of which he rose to become its prominent member and composer of its pamphlets. Fabian society, a middle-class political organisation is a brand of Marxist school which promoted the spread of socialism by gradual means. The society rejected the idea of class struggle and supported gradual transformation of capitalism to socialism. The Fabians adopted the methodology of permeation which seeks change through peaceful means and through acts of parliament. However, the revolution of 1917 taught Shaw certain positive value of violence.

As a Puritan, George “Bernard Shaw exhibits all that is purest in the Puritan; the desire to see truth face to face even if it slays us, the high impatience with irrelevant sentiment or obtrusive symbol; the constant effort to keep the soul at its highest pressure and speed” (Chesterton 33), Shaw as a Puritan never wavers. According to Chesterton, Shaw:

*never gives his opinion a holiday; he is never irresponsible even for an instant. He has no nonsensical second self which he can get into as one gets into a dressing – gown; that ridiculous disguise which is yet more real than the real person (32).*

George Bernard Shaw believed in change and its inevitability. Tom F. Driver notes that Shaw was not a disciple of any philosopher “but he shared with several the conviction that all things are in process and that life cannot be adequately defined by reference to external verities, fixed orders of truth (whether in philosophy or science), or stable patterns in society” (253). He argues that all moral principles “are all relativised by a progressive force of life which carries men and institutions forward, some to fruition and some to wreckage, as on the current of an undammable stream” (253 – 254).

For Shaw, therefore, any conclusion is partial and tentative because it represents a stage in the development process. Shavian reality is a reality that is “ever changing, ever on the way towards new stages of being”

(258). For Shaw, nothing is stable, everything is passing away. Ideas perform like characters. They evolve and mutate. Decisions are guided by expediency. Shaw was an apostle of positive change. In a letter to Henry James in 1909, he observed:

*I, as a socialist, have had to preach, as much as anyone, the enormous power of the environment. We can change it; we must change it; there is absolutely no other sense in life than the task of changing it. What is the use of writing plays. What is the use of writing anything, if there is not a will which finally moulds chaos itself into a race of gods?*

Shaw was interested in life, in the goodness of life. This made him to hate cruel sports and to become a vegetarian at the age of 25. In fact, “The belief in the immorality of eating animals was one of the Fabian causes near to his heart and is frequently a topic in his plays and prefaces” (*wikipedia*). For him, “A man of my spiritual intensity does not eat corpses”.

Nevertheless, George Bernard Shaw had a shortcoming of self-praise. This “pose of arrogance” is probably the major factor many critics especially of the pre-war period hated his plays. Eric Bentley quotes Shaw to have written elsewhere about himself thus, “I dare not claim to be the best playwright in English language; but I believe myself to be one of the best ten and may therefore be classed as one of the best hundred”. In a different place, he placed himself above Walter Scott and even Shakespeare. The only person he considered superior to him in writing is Homer.

Though interested in self-praise, Shaw never showed concern for rank and public honours. G.K. Chesterton referring to this notes that Shaw “desires less to win fame than to bear fruit” (58). Yet the fruits Shaw bore in literature attracted him public honours. In 1925, he won the Nobel Prize in literature. He wanted to refuse that award but his wife compelled him to accept it in honour of Ireland. He accepted the certificate at the behest of his wife, but “he did reject the monetary award, requesting it to be used to finance translation of Swedish books into English” (*Wikipedia*).

Shaw became a popular name in England and Ireland. He did a lot to promote the creation of new English phonetics known today as Shavian phonetics. In fact, he willed a substantial part of his wealth to fund the project. He equally donated money to the British Museum and the Ireland National Art Gallery.

Bernard Shaw was a co-founder of the famous London School of Economics. The Fabian *Window* designed by Shaw, hangs in library named after him in the school. Today, there is the Shaw Theatre in Euston Road London, opened in 1971. His home, known as Shaw's corner, located in Ayot St. Lawrence, Hertfordshire, is a National Trust property open to the public. The Shaw Festival in Ontario, Canada hosts over eight hundred performances annually.

Shaw died of renal failure in 1950 at the ripe age of 94 years. His remains were cremated and "his ashes mixed with those of his wife Charlotte Payne Townsend, were scattered along footpaths and around the statue of Saint Joan in their garden" (Wikipedia).

### **SELF-ASSESSMENT EXERCISE**

Briefly discuss the personality of George Bernard Shaw.

### **3.2 The Shaw Drama**

Bernard Shaw began a career in playwriting in 1891, with *Widowers' Houses*. By 1910, he had become well-established as a playwright and his fame had spread to Germany and the United States of America. He wrote over sixty plays with a vast subject – matter on the "paradoxes of conventional society" (Downer, p.303). Shaw's themes include the evil of capitalism, the struggle of the sexes, professional hypocrisy, marriage as a procrustean bed, individualism versus collectivism, the goodness of life, averted love interest, life as a process, reality and idealism, etc.

According to Eric Bentley, Shaw's interest in playwriting is to depict "human situation as he found it and not simply as he desired". Shaw perceived human society as plagued by hypocrisy and that everyone poses. For him therefore, the goal of the theatre is to discover the man or woman under the pose. In line with this, G.K. Chesterton observes that Shaw's major business as a theatre person is "the pricking of illusions, the stripping away of disguises".

Apart from *Mrs. Warren's Profession* where he made a frontal attack on capitalism, Shaw as an observer of human situations, deals with the "struggle between human vitality and the artificial system of morality" (Bentley, p.105). Shaw finds the conventional ethics of modern life to be synonymous with those of stage melodrama. Like Shakespeare he sees the world as a stage where people pretend to be what they are not in reality. According to Bentley:

*He ridiculed the unreality of Victorian melodrama by letting a flood of "natural history". But he found that*

*the unreality was the real: the illusions of melodrama were precisely those which men fall victim to in "real" life. Hence the inversion of melodrama – a device found in Shaw from the beginning to the end was not an arbitrary trick but an integral part of an interpretation of life.*

Shaw's characters are lively and filled with unusual energy and intellect. For Shaw, the credible human being is not wholly good or completely bad. Man is a bundle of opposites. In one person, there is a constant interaction of reality and illusion. Eric Bentley states:

*The upshot is that Shaw repudiates the villain and hero system, not in sheer contrariness, nor yet out of love for that drab naturalism which replaces black and white with an even gray. Shaw wanted to bring in "reality", and reality for him was neither black, white, nor gray but all the colors of rainbow.*

In Shaw's plays, people do wrong not as villains but "only for ends they regard as right". The implication for Shaw is that every person is right or wrong from his or her own perspective. He believes that an individual in the context of the tragi-comedy of the real has a multiple personality. A good man sometimes does outrageous deed and a bad woman can perform a gracious deed. So to be normative in his characterisation, "Shaw abandoned the totally black villain and substituted a human being, shaped by heredity and environment, and able to justify his behaviour in terms acceptable to the society in which he lived" (Downer, p.304).

Shaw's plays examined the relationship between the ideal and practice and as such, we find in them men of the mind on one hand, and on the other hand, we find practical men who are devoid of speculative life. The first group speculates about the world but hardly does anything to help it out, while the second group which Shaw represents with professionals is made up of impostors.

Shaw's major contribution to the theatre is that he helped to bring into fashion, a type of drama known as drama of idea, discussion, or *disquistory* play. Drama of idea is a drama of the mind. It makes its appeal directly to the mind. With reference to discussion plays, Tom F. Driver observes that "The drama in them consist of the dialectical conflict among the ideas themselves". In fact, ideas are in the foreground. What is particularly intriguing and fascinating in Shaw's drama of ideas, lies in his handling of the ideas. Bentley posits that:

*Shaw's handling of ideas is "of the theatre" most obviously because he so well knows how to confront spokesmen of different outlooks. To this task Shaw brings his unequalled gift of sympathising with both sides... This is not a matter of fair-mindedness merely, it is a matter of a particular mentality, a particular way of observing life. Shaw's way is the dramatist way. For him, ideas perform like characters.*

In Shaw's plays, each character speaks and acts as life affects him or her and this makes it possible to be drawn to different magnetic poles in quick succession. Because conflicting ideas are at issue, Alan S. Downer argues:

*The intellectual rather than the physical complication is the dramatist main concern, and it is Shaw's distinction that he has made the conflict of ideas as exciting as any of Boucicault's last – minute rescues. The secret may lie in the fact that Shaw is no abstract philosopher, but one who sees ideas always as part of human problems.*

Shaw's plays are full of wit, humour, and irony. These elements function to demonstrate that appearance is highly deceptive and that man is a malleable creature with more than one self. In fact, Chesterton regards a Shavian play as an extended paradox because truth is gained indirectly. For Shaw the human mind may not be totally depraved, but "unable to face reality except in the disguise of comforting illusion" (Bentley, p.178).

## **SELF-ASSESSMENT EXERCISE**

Discuss Shaw's contribution to the modern theatre.

### **3.3 The Synopsis of *Heartbreak House***

*Heartbreak House* is written in three acts and it is set in the ship-like house of Captain Shotover, a very odd house full of surprises and impossible characters. In Act 1 Ellie Dunn visits Hesione Hushabye but her hostess keeps her waiting without anybody to even say welcome. The Nurse who stumbles on her apologises and assures her that she will get used to the house.

As Ellie rescinds her intention to leave, Ariadne, now Lady Utterword, daughter to Captain Shotover, the father of the house, comes in after a

long period of absence occasioned by her marriage. She chats with Ellie and after a long time of nobody in the house coming to welcome her, she gets angry telling Ellie about the chaotic state of the house and its inhabitants.

In a moment, Mrs. Hesione Hushabye another daughter of Captain Shotover and Ellie's hostess bursts in, apologises to Ellie but does not recognise her sister Ariadne. Worse still, the Captain sees Lady Utterword as a stranger and treats her as such in spite of the lady's explanation. This is followed by the coming of Ellie's father Mazzini Dunn of which Hesione regards as brute for wanting his daughter to marry an old man because of money, even though she herself has an eye for the same man. The Captain mistakes Mazzini Duun to be Billy Dunn – a sea pirate that had robbed him.

A chat between Ellie and Hesione reveals that Ellie actually longs for one Marcus Darnley. She is only bound by honour and gratitude to marry Mangan because of his financial assistance to her father. When he appears, Marcus Danrley happens in reality to be Mr. Hector Hushabye, Hesione's legally married husband. The knowledge shocks Ellie and merely surprises Hector that a young woman he shortly fell in love with is his wife's acquaintance.

As the noise about the afore-mentioned issue dies down, Boss Mangan appears. Captain Shotover without hesitation bluntly tells him that he is too old at 55 years to marry Ellie, but Mangan tells him that Ellie does not feel so. The discussion is interrupted by the appearance of Randall Utterword, a younger brother to Hastings, the husband of Lady Utterword. The young diplomat is treated shabbily by Lady Utterword for coming uninvited.

Nevertheless, Randall joins the company. When all have gone out of the room except Lady Utterword and Hector Hushabye who is described as "splendid – looking and irresistible", the two begin to talk love, consummating it with a kiss. In respect to this kiss, Ariadne tells Hector, "Oh! That was a little more than a play, brother – in – law!" and Hector replies, "In effect, you got your claws deeper into me than I intended" (Act 1). When the Lady leaves, Hector, alone, begins to gesticulate on the affair – all this he turns immediately into a pretended exercise on the entrance of the Captain.

In Act II, Mangan and Ellie engage in a verbal duel of which Mangan gets more than he bargains for. Hesione had attempted in vain to make Dunn to stop the idea of marrying Ellie to Mangan. While Mangan is in a pretended sleep owing to his encounter with Elie, Hesione tries to dissuade Ellie herself from accepting Mangan, saying all sorts of things

against him. Mangan wakes up and confronts the ladies especially Hesion for saying awful things against him. He threatens to leave, but Captain Shotover tells him:

Go, Boss Mangan, and when you have found the land where there is happiness and where there are no women, send me its latitude and longitude; and I will join you (Act 11).

As the company of men and women are digesting the foregoing, there is a noise of a burglar attack. The burglar is caught by Hector and he begs to be sent to jail but the people not willing to engage the court decide against the idea. Captain comes to identify the culprit as Billy Dunn the pirate that had robbed him and who once married Nurse Guinness.

When the hullabaloo of the burglary settles down, Mrs. Hushabye forces Mangan to have a walk with her. Captain Shotover and Ellie talk about Ellie's intention to marry Mangan. When Ellie learns that Shotover's claim of selling his soul to the devil is a pretense, she tells Shotover that she will pretend to sell herself to Mangan in order to save her soul from poverty that is destroying it by inches. Randall reveals his jealousy over Hector and Lady Utterword's relationship because he has been secretly longing for her too. Lady Ariadne gives him a bit of her tongue for meddling into her private affair and this lashing of the tongue keeps Randall angry causing him to, see women as the most hateful animals in the world.

In Act III, everything appears to be dissolving like a candle. Hector talks about heaven being unhappy with earthly creatures. Everyone's pose is unmasked where danger hovers in the air. An explosion blows up the rectory while another yet gets the glasses of the window of the house shattered. Mangan and Billy Dunn who run into Shotover's gravel pit, denotate the dynamite he keeps there and get killed. This is followed by a distant explosion signifying impending doom. At the end nobody gets what he or she has been longing for. More important is that those safe in the house now live in a haunted environment.

### **SELF-ASSESSMENT EXERCISE**

Briefly give the synopsis of *Heartbreak House*.

### **3.4 A Study of *Heartbreak House***

*Heartbreak House* is not the best of George Bernard Shaw's plays. The best is *Saint Joan*, but *Heartbreak House* is the best of Shavian drama of

ideas. It is described by Eric Bentley as “the clock – full of Shavian ideas”. According to Bentley:

*Heartbreak House might be called the Nightmare of a Fabian. All Shaw's themes are in it. You might learn from it his teachings on love, religion, education, and politics. But you are unlikely to do so, not only because the play is not an argument in their favour. It is a demonstration that they are all being disregarded or defeated. It is a picture of failure.*

The play is, undoubtedly, a picture of the civilised Europe before the first world war, “muddling through, heedless of the fact that its days are numbered” (Mendelson, p.399). This idea of muddling is underscored very early in the play precisely in Act I where Lady Utterword “sitting down with a flounce on the sofa”, tells Ellie:

*I know how you must feel. Oh, this house, this house! I come back to it after twenty – three years, and it is just the same: the luggage lying on the steps, the servant spoilt and impossible, nobody at home to receive anybody... and what is worse, the same disorder of ideas, in talk, in feeling (Act I).*

The picture painted above is the character of Europe that is spiritually dead. The chaotic state of affairs anticipates social catastrophe. Even though Shaw gives his play a comical spirit, Michael J. Mendelson argues that Shaw:

*employed the methods of comedy to state his case. But the result of all his playfulness in this work is not comic at all, is not actually much different from the accumulation of spiritually dead things in “The Wastelands” or the resignation nada in Hemmingway. Heartbreak House almost reeks with decay, pessimism, and futility.*

The ending of the play leaves one more disturbing than its beginning. The melancholy strains of Randall's flute, the explosions in the skies, and the detonated dynamite, all leave us with an impression of “a society withering away”. In fact, the play depicts a picture of a failed world, a world in a state of moral bankruptcy, where everyone is drifting to the point of no return. The text showcases irreconcilable ideas and irresolvable differences.

There is no agreement on what should be the basis of existence. For example, Ellie Dunn wants to marry Boss Maugan in order to be free



from the clutches of poverty but Captain sees the idea as mortgaging one's soul which may give one an opportunity to eat but not to live. So the problem of what to do in a world that lacks standards of existence is very much at issue here. In this regard, Robert W. Corrigan observes that it is in *Heartbreak House* that Shaw:

*first came to grips without equivocation with those questions which had haunted Ibsen, Strindberg, and Chekhov before him. How is one to live in an irrational world? How is one to give meaning to life in a world where one doesn't know the rules? How are human relationships to be maintained meaningfully when one cannot be sure of his feelings and when one's feelings can change without one knowing it? How can man live without being destroyed when irreconcilable conflict is the central fact of life?*

Harold Clurman explains that in the text, "characters are ideas – conceptions of people, theatrically and comically coloured". Even though characters represent ideas, they seek escape from their condition. The implication is that no idea satisfactorily explains their existence. Hector Hushabye says that everyone poses. Shaw's interest is to find or reveal the man under the pose. In respect of the behaviour of characters, Clurman says:

*They are all aware that they are living in a looney world, which they are expected to take seriously but cant. As they progress they become aware of the need to act mad in order to approximate reality.*

This accounts for sudden entrances and exits and the hectic or rapid movement of the play. Lack of agreement on issues makes everyone to fly off the handle. Each character appears to be shot off from anything apart from his or her thought about things and life generally. In fact, Shotover typifies the tempo of the play "He moves with nervous energy, sudden shifts of pace to absolute quiet or concentrated energy – as when he sits down to work on his drawing board" (Clurman, p.410). With respect to the universe of the play and the characters as well, Robert W. Corrigan notes:

*The world of the Heartbreak House is one that has permanently misplaced life, vitality, and victory of Major Barbara. The people who whirl before us in this mad "dance of death" rapidly lose whatever veneer of virtue they have had and stand revealed as vain, insipid, blind, and vapid men and women who have made their society*

*into an economic, political, and as far as practical, a moral vacuum.*

Though they display dazzling intelligence, wit, and knowledge of the world, the men and women of the play failed to move their society positively forward. Corrigan says that difference between this play and those “written before it is that man not only does not succeed in *Heartbreak House*, but the possibility of his succeeding is flatly rejected”. *Heartbreak House* counters Shaw’s optimistic view of life in his previous plays. Shaw had believed in the salvaging power of the life force. He had believed that “salvation was possible if only we are bold of heart and clear in mind”. However, in “*Heartbreak House*, that hard-won optimism disappears never again to return”... as such hope went up in smoke with the bomb that falls at the final curtain.”

However, it is necessary to state that the neurosis, disillusionment, and decay suggested in the play are not peculiar to Europe alone. The play is essentially a picture of the entire modern world where our chosen values keep everyone gasping. To lend authority to this, Clurman says:

*The thought and warning which informs the play stated in a frolic of entertaining word and postures – is wholly appropriate to our day and our theatre. Though the people of Heartbreak House are English, it is not merely a play about a certain class or a certain country. Time has turned it into a play about practically all of us, everywhere.*

## **SELF-ASSESSMENT EXERCISE**

Discuss the theme of *Heartbreak House*.

### **4.0 CONCLUSION**

George Bernard Shaw, a Puritan, Fabian, critic, vegetarian, etc, attained a very high altitude in playwriting, leaving behind him over sixty plays with vast subject matter. His drama of ideas such as *Heartbreak House* examines the confusion inherent in human thought. Here a man that has been very optimistic about life concludes that humanity has lost focus as a result of irreconcilable ideas and is therefore, drifting to the point of utter dissolution. In *Heartbreak House* considered by Bentley to be the clock – full of Shaw’s ideas, man has no hope of salvation but is at the brink of disaster.

## 11.0 SUMMARY

This study examines the personality of George Bernard Shaw and his perception of drama. It precisely examines Shaw's biography, the Shaw drama, and the factors that shape his dramatic vision as well as attempt to analyse *Heartbreak House* as a play that contains most of the themes the playwright has been concerned with.

## 12.0 TUTOR-MARKED ASSIGNMENT

Examine the theme of *Heartbreak House*.

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## UNIT 3 THE ABBEY THEATRE

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### 1.0 INTRODUCTION

According to Brockett and Hildy:

*Although Dublin has been one of the major British theatrical centers since the seventeenth century, it saw no significant attempt to create an independent Irish drama until 1898 when the Irish Literary Society was established (449).*

The founders of this literary society William Butler Yeats (1865 – 1939), Lady Augusta Gregory (1863 – 1935), George Moore (1853 – 1933), and Edward Martyn (1859 – 1923) aimed at galvanising literary and creative works around Irish identity which the English world was seeking to eclipse. The leader of this group W.B. Yeats states that:

*A play should tell the people of their own life or the life of poetry where everyone can see his own image. To ennoble the man of the roads, write about the roads, or of the people of romance or the great historical people.*

As the Yeats' group was championing plays with Irish flavour, another group, the Ormond Dramatic Society led by W.G. Fay, (1872 – 1947) and Frank Fay (1870 – 1931) was equally pursuing the same goal. Soon, like-mindedness drew the two groups together to form the Irish National Theatre Society. The “appearance of this new group in London in 1903 won the support of Miss A.E.F. Horniman, who acquired a building for the company and remodeled it into the Abbey theatre, which opened in

1904” (Brockett, p.449). This study unit examines this theatre that developed as part of the Irish Renaissance.

## 2.0 OBJECTIVES

At the end of this unit, you should be able to:

- identify the spirit behind the formation of the Abbey theatre
- outline the nature of the Irish Folk drama
- describe some of the playwrights of the Abbey theatre and their theatrical bent
- deduce the personality of John Millington Synge regarded as the best playwright of the Abbey theater
- examine his *Riders to the Sea*, a one – act play considered to be one of the best short plays written in English language.

## 3.0 MAIN CONTENT

### 3.1 The Irish Folk Drama

The Irish Abbey theatre was established when Realism was the hub of theatrical activities throughout Europe, but this theatre followed a different pathway dedicating itself to writing and production of plays that examine Irish cultural identity. Alan S. Downer talked about the reason why the Irish theatre concerned itself with the creation and production of folk drama thus:

*It was not that the Abbey management was unaware of the heritage of Ibsen or was willfully blind to the problems concerning society. But the Irish National Theater was only one part of a general literary, cultural, political renaissance intended to awaken the nation to its responsibilities and potentialities.*

The folk drama is informed by “love of fantasy grounded on a sympathetic understanding of the ways of nature and man” (Downer, p.321). It examines the life of the peasants and how they grapple with natural forces. While Yeats paid attention to poetic drama, Lady Augusta Gregory – a co-founder of the Abbey theatre was fascinated by folk drama. Her one-act comedies on this genre include *Spreading the News* (1904), *The Rising of the Moon* (1907), *The Work house ward* (1907).

Lady Augusta Gregory’s plays are simple in plot and action. “The development of the action often depends as much upon circumstance as

upon character: the original impetus to the catastrophic rumor of *Spreading the News* comes from the deafness of an old woman”.

In folk drama, the peasants are quick – witted, sentimental, articulate, and superstitious. It exhibits economy of action and characterisation while frankness is the hallmark of speech. In most folk plays, the idea of nature as a part of the folk spirit is pervasive. In fact, its theme is frequently the endless struggle between man and the forces of nature.

However, the Irish folk drama is not altogether non-realistic, for the events in them are very much real to the people. The Irish drama was a drama of tremendous national flavour. According to McGowan and Melnitz:

*New Irish writers turned to the stage because the Abbey was there to welcome them. Their work, from the plays of Synge to the plays of O’casey, was rooted in the actualities of Irish life. (The Living Stage, p.420).*

The Irish playwrights expressed both provincial and peasant experiences. They did so in remarkable Irish speech. In fact, the relatedness of the plays to the Irish lifestyle was responsible for the many riots that greeted the Abbey theatre.

### **SELF-ASSESSMENT EXERCISE**

Discuss the nature of Irish folk drama.

### **3.2 Biography of John Millington Synge**

John Millington Synge is a typical example illustrating that a man is not measured by the length of years he lived on earth, but what he is able to achieve within his span of existence. Synge’s life on earth was a very brief one. He wrote only six plays but his name and works have remained evergreen in the discussion of English drama.

John Millington Synge was born into a protestant family of a lawyer in Dublin Ireland on 16<sup>th</sup> April 1871. He attended the Trinity College and the Royal Academy of music in Dublin. In 1895 he left music to study languages and French literature in Paris. During this period, he met a fellow Irish man W.B. Yeats in Paris. This encounter led him to refocus his attention, to the study of Irish language.

Consequently, between 1898 and 1902 he visited Aran Island his home province five times to experience life there. It was during this period that

Irish dramatic movement was born. The premiere production of *In the Shadow of Glen* in 1902 by the Irish National Theatre society provoked wild-spread resentment because of its realistic depiction of an aspect of Irish life. *Riders to the Sea*, produced in the same year did not arouse resentment.

When the Abbey theatre was refurbished by Annie Horniman, Synge became one of its playwrights and directors. In 1905, his *The Well of Saints* was produced. *The Playboy of the Western World* produced in 1907 again sparked public riots and resentment, but it brought the name of Synge into limelight. Synge's other plays include *The Tinker's Wedding*, and *Deirdre of the Sorrows* which was published posthumously in 1910. John Millington Synge died prematurely in 1909.

### **SELF-ASSESSMENT EXERCISE**

Briefly discuss J.M. Synge's Biography.

### **3.3 Synopsis of *Riders to the Sea***

*Riders to the Sea* is a dramatic recreation of J.M. Synge's observation of the lives of peasant fishermen in the Aran Island situated at the West Coast of Ireland. According to Bernard Beckerman, "The bleakness and precariousness" of the Aran Islanders' "existence matched only by their fortitude and resignation, impressed themselves upon Synge's", imagination and led to the composition of *Riders to the Sea* (*Dynamics of Drama*, p. 64).

In the play, Maurya, an aged wife of a fisherman already bereft of her husband and four sons is pensive, awaiting the news of yet his fifth son Michael, who again is missing and being suspected to have been drowned in the sea like his father and four brothers. Meanwhile, Bartley the youngest and the only remaining son of the family is preparing to ride to the sea on his way to a horse – fair in the mainland town, Connemara. Maurya's premonition of doom could not stop Bartley from embarking on the journey.

Since he failed to be persuaded to stay at home, his mother refused to bless him and to wish him journey mercies. Shortly after Bartley left, his two sisters Cathleen and Nora remembered that they forgot to give him any food for the journey. Maurya who has not been comfortable with the way she parted ways with Bartley decides to run after him, to give him the food and her blessing.

Immediately the old woman leaves the house, Cathleen and Nora begin to examine the clothes which were found on the body of a drowned man

that the water washed up on the coast of Donegal. On examination the clothes were found to be Michael's. In a moment, Maurya returns looking very disturbed. She has been prevented from delivering the food and her blessing to Bartley by the vision of the missing Michael she saw. As she is finishing her story, a group of women enter the cottage to announce the death of Michael to Maurya. Michael has been found drowned and has been buried in north of the island.

As the death of Michael is being mourned, the body of Bartley who has been discovered drowned is brought into the cottage in confirmation of Maurya's premonition. Having been forcibly deprived of a husband and her six male children, Maurya whose sorrow is beyond description utters in resignation:

*Michael has a clean burial in the far north, by the grace of the Almighty God; Bartley will have a fine coffin out of the white boards, and a deep grave surely. What more can we want than that? No man at all can be living for ever, and we must be satisfied.*

### **SELF-ASSESSMENT EXERCISE**

Give a brief summary of *Riders to the Sea*.

### **3.4 Critical Study of *Riders to the Sea***

*Riders to the Sea* is an eerie drama on the precariousness of depending on the sea for livelihood. In the text, the sea is, according to Maurice Bourgeois, "identified with doom and death; it is sea whose formidable presence is felt all about the play; the sea that lurks behind stage; the sea that throws loaded dice in the game of human existence". The contact with the sea is direct and immediate. It is portrayed ambivalently as an incredible ally as well as a sworn enemy. As an ally the sea serves as the major source of livelihood and as a bridge to the mainland. The Islanders are mainly fishermen and they must ride to the sea if they must survive.

Bartley's refusal to stay at home portrays him as a courageous man who is not deterred by the hazards of the sea. As the only surviving man of the house who must provide food for his two sisters and aged mother, Bartley must grapple with the sea. According to Donoghue:

*The sea represents the only terms in which Bartley can live with a purpose. The sea is his life as well as his livelihood. The issue between Maurya and the Sea, therefore, is not merely a straight fight between*



*Good and Evil for the soul of Man: the Sea may be Evil but it constitutes Bartley's only way of real life: to stay at home to side with Maurya, would be for Bartley the yielding up of the source of meaningful living.*

The implication is that Bartley's insistence on riding to the sea is an acceptance of responsibility. As the only man of the house he must demonstrate responsibility. Beckerman observes that by insisting on going to Connemara to participate in the horse-fair because of its economic promises; Bartley is only "attempting to fulfill his role as the only man of the house". Bartley understands fully well that as Alan Price states:

*Men must risk their lives to keep all alive; the cost in human life and suffering merely to maintain existence of the community is enormous, but unless one wants to lie down and die without an effort, this cost must be paid.*

However, the people's contact with the sea leaves a trail of woes. With the sea, "we are confronted with an impersonal note of impending terror – perception of power intense, irresponsible, unfathomable, consigning humanity to utter destruction". The picture which the sea paints is that life is ultimately tragic. The drowning of all of Maurya's male children as they seek to fend for themselves and their entire family signifies the futility of man's struggles and toils. Bartley even have to starve occasionally, yet all his toiling does not amount to anything.

Bartley's death is pathetic on principally two accounts. In the first place, it forecloses any idea of procreation in the family from patriarchal perspective. Secondly, Maurya has no more male child to cater for her in her old age. This is Maurya's fear. And this account for her question to Bartley:

*What way will I live and the girls with me, and I an old woman looking for the grave?*

Maurya's worry is deep and grounded. She needs at least a son to lay her to rest when the bell tolls. For her Bartley being alive to perform this function is more important than anything else. This is why when Bartley tells her the economic benefit of his journey, she retorts:

*What is the price of a thousand horses against a son where there is one son only?*

Maurya's reality is a dismal one. Her world is a world where things go anti-clock – wise. Inheritance, for example, is supposed to be from parents to the children but hers is a reversed order, she laments this before her daughters:

*In the big world the old people do be leaving things  
after them for their sons and children, but in this  
place it is the young men do be leaving things behind  
for them that do be old.*

The above statement underscores Maurya's hopelessness and perception of life as meaningless; but *Riders to the Sea* is not an individual tragedy but the tragedy of humanity as a whole. It is a frightening tragedy of the fate of man. Thomas F. Van Laan posits in this direction that "Maurya's defeat by her antagonist is the defeat of us all". This is because the play appears to be saying that death will forever keep consigning man to the abyss of no return, no matter the effort to ward it off.

### **SELF-ASSESSMENT EXERCISE**

Discuss the image of the sea in *Riders to the Sea*.

## **4.0 CONCLUSION**

This study examines the Abbey theatre of the Irish people. It sees its emergence as part of the effort to promote interest in Irish identity and way of life. The study illustrates the point with John Millington Synge's *Riders to the Sea*.

## **11.0 SUMMARY**

This unit specifically examines the origin of the Abbey theatre, Irish folk drama, the biography of J.M. Synge, as well as *Riders to the Sea* as one of the exciting plays produced by the Abbey theatre.

## **12.0 TUTOR-MARKED ASSIGNMENT**

Discuss the theme of *Riders to the Sea*.

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## UNIT 4 MODERN POETIC DRAMA

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### 1.0 INTRODUCTION

This study examines the effort to revitalise poetic drama on the English stage by notable English poets like W.B. Yeats, W.H. Auden, Christopher Isherwood, etc. It will look at the purpose of the attempt and analyse *Murder in the Cathedral* by T.S. Eliot as the best example of English modern poetic drama.

### 2.0 OBJECTIVES

At the end of this unit, you should be able to:

- describe the essence of modern poetic drama
- examine the personality of T.S. Eliot
- explain the basic theme of *Murder in the Cathedral*.

### 3.0 MAIN CONTENT

#### 3.1 Modern Poetic Drama

During the early part of 19th century, certain theatre managers requested and even advanced money to their friends who had established themselves as great poets to create poetic plays for them. According to Downer (1950):

*In the 1830's Macready was begging his poetic friends to write for him, and got for his pains Browning's A Blot in the Scutcheon and a dozen crabbed imitations of Shakespeare. Charles Kean advanced the unheard of sum of £400 to G.W. Lovell for The Wife's Secret in 1848, and promised J.S.*

*knowles £1000 for a poetic drama that never materialised. Henry Irving tried to make stage worthy vehicles out of the dramatic poems of Tennyson and treated the hack – written works of W.G. Wills as if they were genuinely poetic. In 1901, George Alexander commissioned Stephen Philips to write Paolo and Francesca.*

The above statement is an eloquent commentary on the hunger and enthusiasm demonstrated by theatre managers at the material time for a new poetic drama. The hunger, notwithstanding, the effort failed to yield wonderful dividends because these poets either aped Shakespeare or failed to catch the spirit of the time. According to Alan S. Downer, a “modern poetic drama could only be created by men aware not only of the spirit of their times but of the poetic style which had been developed to give expression to that spirit”. The credit of creating a new poetic drama for the English stage is usually given to William Butler Yeats – a renowned Irish poet. Downer states that:

*The necessities of the Irish Renaissance, however, drove him to thinking more precisely on the problem of the creation of drama which would so move the hearts and minds of men that they would depart with new understanding of their nature and destiny.*

Although Yeats used Irish folklore and legends, his aim is to create plays that affect the soul, plays that are universal in appeal, plays that are a living thing, not encumbered by “artificial problems of a particular society”. He seeks to capture the nature of man’s existence. Yeats captures his intention in *On Baile’s Strand* (1904). Downer (1950) observes with respect to this play that:

*The interpretation Yeats wishes to put upon his action is made clear by a dramatic device of wonderful simplicity. The play is opened and closed by two grotesque characters, a fool and a blind man; the fool can see without understanding, the blind can understand without seeing. They serve as chorus, through never in artificial sense since they are a natural part of the locale and the situation. “Life drifts between a blind man and a fool”, says one of the minor figures, and this little heroic drama is a tragic picture of the bitterness and bewilderment of existence.*

The effort of Yeats was followed by unsuccessful attempts by Gordon Bottomley, Laurence Binyon etc., to revitalise poetic drama in the 1920s. Their failure is attributed to the fact that they were more skilled

as poets than playwrights. Downer is of the opinion that, this has been “the constant problem of poetic theater, of course, since both poetry and drama demand technical equipment and skills that are rarely united in a single author”. These poets create beautiful poetry which sometimes fails to move the action forward or fits the character it is written for. The idea of balancing speech and action is a major problem that frequently confronts poets in the theatre.

However, the major effort to revive poetic drama in England occurred in the 1930s when established poets such as W.H. Auden, Christopher Isherwood, T.S. Eliot, Stephen Spender, Macneice, among others, ventured into playwriting with the intention of dominating the theatre as its master.

*In seeking a suitable dramatic form and poetic medium for the expression of their ideas they have not thrown out the baby with the bathwater by ceasing to imitate the panoramic form of the Elizabethans or discarding blank verse. Instead, they have created their forms out of whatever parts of the old traditions seemed useful and have chosen to write in a half – colloquial modern verse medium free of the glaze of the antiquity.*

Their powerful poetic spirit and enthusiasm, notwithstanding, it was only T.S. Eliot that was able to make an indelible mark on the English stage in the direction of modern poetic drama with his *Murder in the Cathedral*. Tom F. Driver notes that “None of the four plays he wrote after *Murder in the Cathedral* comes near that work in power or in ‘relevance’, in spite of its technical weakness as a drama and its remoteness from the ostensible concerns of modern secular man” (*The Theatre in Search of a Fix*, p. 333). In fact, its splendid poetry makes it, according to Luis Vargas (1960), to be “commercially successful, and gave quite a fillip to the efforts of struggling verse dramatists”.

T.S. Eliot’s motivation for opting for poetic drama is similar to that of Yeats. He sees poetry as a natural utterance for intense and powerful feeling. According to him, “The human soul, in intense emotion, strives to express itself in verse”. In distinguishing prose drama and poetic drama, Eliot further states, “The tendency, at any rate, of prose drama is to emphasize the ephemeral and superficial; if we want to get at the permanent and universal, we tend to express ourselves in verse”. Poetic drama, therefore, aims at transcendence, for it seeks to take the audience from the mundane plane to the realm of the soul where emotions originate.

## SELF-ASSESSMENT EXERCISE

Discuss the essence of the modern poetic drama.

### 3.2 Biography of T.S. ELIOT

Thomas Stearns Eliot, popularly known as T.S. Eliot in literary circle, was born on 26 September, 1888 in St. Louis, Missouri, to Henry Wax Eliot and Charlotte Champ Stearns. Eliot was the youngest son of the seven children of the family and was born with a congenital problem of hernia and this necessitated the constant attention given to him by his mother and his old female siblings.

He was educated at Smith Academy and Milton Academy before proceeding to the Harvard University in 1906 for his bachelor's and master's programmes in Comparative literature and English literature. He equally did graduate studies in philosophy at the Sorbonne, Harvard and Merton College, Oxford. Between 1910 and 1911, Eliot confirmed his vocation as a poet with "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock", "Portrait of a Lady", "Rhapsody on windy Night", etc.

In 1914, he traveled to England and got married to Vivien Haigh – Wood in 1915 at Hampstead Registry office, an idea not approved by his family. In 1916, he completed his Ph.D. Thesis in Philosophy but could not travel to Massachusetts for the defense. In London, he sustained himself temporary as a teacher; but in 1917, he got a permanent job as a bank clerk. This job gave him the financial security that enabled him to return to poetry. He published his first collection of poems entitled *Prufrock and other Observations* that same year. In 1920, he published his second collection entitled *Poems*.

However, in 1919, he lost his father without reconciling with him over the marital problem. This, in addition to Vivien's worsening health problem, caused him to experience nervous breakdown. After his recuperation in Switzerland, he completed a long poem entitled "The Waste land". This poem which is regarded as a masterpiece captures Eliot's horror of life. "The waste land" and the *Criterion* published in 1922 made him very popular in London.

In 1923, he left the bank and became the editor of Faber and Faber publishing company. In 1927, he got baptised in the Church of England and became British citizen that same year. From this time of his attachment to the church, he began to write religious poems starting with "Journey of the Magi" (1927). The much celebrated *Ash Wednesday* was published in 1930.

The dramatic writings of T.S. Eliot came late in his career. He wrote *Sweeney Agonistes* which now appears in fragments in 1932, *The Rock* (1934), *Murder in the Cathedral* (1935), *The Family Reunion* (1939), *The Cocktail Party* (1949), *The Confidential Clerk* (1953), and *The Elder Statesman* (1958). In 1948, T.S. Eliot's contributions to literature earned him the Nobel Prize for Literature. Arnold P. Hinchcliffe notes that "His plays brought him fame and honour, and money too, but he got the Nobel Prize for his poetry" (11). Apart from poetry and drama, Eliot was a wonderful critic, philosopher and anthropologist. He died in 1965 at the age of 77 years.

### **SELF-ASSESSMENT EXERCISE**

Briefly discuss the personality of T.S. Eliot.

### **3.3 Synopsis of *Murder in the Cathedral***

The play, *Murder in the Cathedral* is a dramatic recreation of the killing of Thomas Becket – the Archbishop of Canterbury on 29 December, 1170, by men loyal to King Henry II, at the Cathedral of Centerburg. The play is an abstract of the story written in two parts.

Part 1 takes place in the Archbishop's hall the very day he returns from exile from France following a truce championed by the Pope and the King of France. It begins with the chorus of Canterbury women expressing forebodings and misgivings about the Archbishop's homecoming. The priests, three in number, equally express how they felt in those seven years the Archbishop passed away. They also talk about the recklessness of the government. In a moment, a messenger appears to announce the arrival of the Archbishop. As the second priest encounters the chorus for anticipating the death of Thomas Becket, the Archbishop appears and on learning the issue at stake, he tells them that he is willing to accept death than to surrender to the Crown.

This is followed by the appearance of the Four Tempters. The First Tempter promises the Archbishop of physical safety; the second promises him riches and power if he submits to the King; the Third Tempter wants him to join forces with the barons to fight the King, while the Fourth Tempter impresses on him to accept martyrdom.

Part 1 is closely followed by an interlude which is the Archbishop's sermon on the morning of the Christmas day; the sermon is all about the idea of Christmas as a period of both rejoicing and mourning. It also examines the question of peace and martyrdom. He hints at the end of the sermon that he may soon follow the way of martyrs.



In Part II, which takes place on 29<sup>th</sup> December, 1170, the knights who claim to have been ordered by the King come to accuse the Archbishop of betraying the King. Becket is neither willing to accept their suggestion of absolving the suspended bishops nor to proceed on exile again. The Knights storm out angrily to arm themselves. The priests force the unyielding Archbishop into the Cathedral and barred the door but the adamant Becket compels them to unbar the door. The door is unbarred and the knights rush in, and after some verbal exchanges, kill the Archbishop. After the murder they tell the people that they killed the Archbishop for not being loyal to the state.

### 3.4 A Study of *Murder in the Cathedral*

*Murder in the Cathedral* is a religious drama which draws its material from the killing of Thomas Becket – the Archbishop of Canterbury in December 1170 A.D. The play which was commissioned by George Bell, Bishop of Chichester for the Canterbury Festival of June 1935, was used by Eliot to highlight certain presumptions of Christianity and specifically the tortuous path a true Christian can walk for the sake of heavenly glory. The play centers on the antagonism between the crown and the church. In the text, we find the temporal power seeking to undermine the church in order to realise certain pragmatic political goals.

However, Archbishop Becket sees the world order as a cesspool of evils which the church ought to shun. He, therefore, advocates a complete sequestration of the church from worldly entanglements. For him, there is no compromise, it is either you are for the church, or for the state. His position is unmistakable; a friendship with the world is enmity with God. In fact, the Archbishop's faith in a peaceful eternity endues him with enormous boldness and courage to dare the knights (assassins) for accusing him of treason and for wanting him to absolve the bishops who are on suspension, or to proceed on another exile. Instead of being deterred by the threats of the assassins, or by the priests' appeal for safety or the forebodings of the chorus, Thomas who has experienced "a tremor of bliss, a wink of heaven" (Part II, p. 76), tells the knights:

*For my Lord I am now ready to die  
that his church may have peace and liberty  
Do with me as you will, to your hurt and shame  
but none of my people in God's name  
Whether layman or clerk, shall you touch. This I forbid  
(Part II, p. 81).*

The Archbishop is resolute in following the will of God. He has served as the Chancellor of the realm and understands what the lust of the flesh

entails. He is not prepared as a holy shepherd of the flock to condescend to be “living and partly living” like the Canterbury women who “fear the injustice of men less than they fear the justice of God”. His acceptance to die instead of surrendering to the laws of man is an affirmation of the Christian faith; it is “the triumph of the Cross”.

The text, convincingly, conveys the idea of the ruggedness of the christian faith. It places two cards on the table, earthly life and eternity, but for the playwright, the choice is unmistakable. Becket is used in the play to demonstrate that a true christian is an exceptional man. In his article entitled, “Theatrical Ingenuity and Tact” (1965), Howarth posits that *Murder in the Cathedral* “examines the *agon* of one man, and presents his struggle and its difficult choice without concession to the frailty of our understanding.

Becket conquers the lust of the flesh symbolised by the First, Second and Third Tempters, but the Fourth Tempter’s suggestion that he follow the way of martyrdom is seen by Thomas Becket as “the greatest treason”. He remembers his years as the Chancellor of the realm; how he used power and was unwilling initially to “become servant of God”. Realising that as a man it is not easy to submit oneself to be killed, he prayed to his guardian angel to “hover over the swords’ points” (Part 1, p. 51). The problem posed by the fourth temptation constrains Howarth to note:

*Becket’s resistance to the three of his tempters is clear, his victory over them perfectly clear. But his resistance to the Fourth Tempter involves a problem beyond the common experience, at any rate, beyond the common awareness: in what state of mind will he receive the death on which he has resolved?*

This is the crux of the matter. It is not as if Becket really hates life, but as the one who holds “the pastoral commission”, he submits himself courageously to death in order to “teach his flock... how a Christian can die” (Gardner, p. 95). In this regard Becket is posited as a Christian attitude; a symbol of martyrdom, his submission to death is a token that christianity is not a bed of roses. One must be prepared to make the supreme sacrifice of even accepting to die for the sake of heavenly glory, if need be.

Apart from Christian values, the play has a political undertone. Maurice C. Bradbrook states that “Eliot has said that he wrote the play as a protest against totalitarianism in Europe and the final speeches of the Knights now bear only too familiar a sound”. In *Murder in the Cathedral*, Eliot’s voluble aristocrats are haunted by fear that their

society is disintegrating” (Lawson). The issues of exploitation and oppression harped on by Becket in his last speech in part one of the play, forced, the people to grumble and to live in fear. In fact, as the chorus intones, the people are “living and partly living”. The Third Priest tells his colleagues, in part 1 that:

*I see nothing quite conclusive in the art of temporal  
government  
But violence, duplicity and frequent malversation  
King rules or barons rule  
The strong man strongly and the weak man by caprice  
They have but one law, to seize the power and keep it  
And the steadfast can manipulate the greed and lust of  
others  
The feeble is devoured by his own (Part I, p. 25).*

The King is seeking or even compelling the Archbishop’s support because he sees danger hovering, violence looming in the sky. He urgently needs Beckett to give moral force to the temporal realm. The Knights epitomise the desperation of government to get the Archbishop by all means. According to the Fourth Knight:

*While the late Archbishop was Chancellor, no  
one, under the King did more to weld the country  
together, to give it the unity, the stability, order,  
tranquility, and justice that it so badly needed.*

In fact, one can argue that the recklessness of the Crown is symbolised by the killing of the Archbishop, even in the cathedral, in the full gaze of the people.

## **SELF-ASSESSMENT EXERCISE**

Discuss any theme of *Murder in the Cathedral*.

## **4.0 CONCLUSION**

This unit examines attempts to revive poetic drama by writers who aim to affect the soul. Esslin (1977) argues that “Verse removes the action from the everyday familiar sphere and makes it clear that no attempt is being made to portray life in all its humdrum pettiness”. The richness and rhythmic flow of poetry is expected to carry the audience beyond the trivia of mundane existence to demonstrate that the essence of life is far beyond the limit of materiality.

## 11.0 SUMMARY

The study examines the essence of the effort to restore poetic drama to the English stage. It looks specifically at the purpose of poetic drama, traces the series of effort to revive the genre. It briefly examines the personality of T.S. Eliot whose *Murder in the Cathedral* gave fillip to the struggle to restore poetry in the theatre. Finally, the same text is analysed as the best example of the English modern poetic drama.

## 12.0 TUTOR-MARKED ASSIGNMENT

Discuss the essence of poetic drama.

## 7.0 REFERENCES/FURTHER READING

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## MODULE 5 20<sup>TH</sup> CENTURY AND AFTER

Unit 1	The Drama of Samuel Beckett
Unit 2	The Anger Period and After
Unit 3	The English Audience and Playhouse
Unit 4	English Drama and the Challenge of Censorship

### UNIT 1 THE DRAMA OF SAMUEL BECKETT

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#### 1.0 INTRODUCTION

This module examines English drama from the middle of the 20th century to the present. It shows how the Second World War and its consequences changed the face of the English drama and, in fact, the conception of what the theatre has been deemed to be.

Samuel Beckett is among the most influential writers of the 20th century. His plays which offer a dark and tragicomic perspective on human existence revolutionised the world of the theatre, opening up new vistas and possibilities in playwriting, unprecedented in the history of the theatre. This unit takes a cursory look on the man and his drama, focusing attention on his most popular play, *Waiting for Godot*.

#### 2.0 OBJECTIVES

At the end of this unit, you should be able to:

- describe the personality of Samuel Beckett
- examine his outlook on life
- explain the nature of his drama
- explicate the play, *Waiting for Godot* thematically.

### 3.0 MAIN CONTENT

#### 3.1 Biography of Samuel Beckett

The *Sui generis*, Samuel Barclay Beckett, an Irishman who lived mostly in Paris, was a poet, novelist, translator, linguist, essayist, playwright, philosopher, and theatre director. He was born on Good Friday April 13, 1906 into middle-class family of William Frank Beckett, a civil engineer (quantity surveyor) and May Barclay – a nurse.

In 1911, Beckett was sent to a nursery school from where he was moved to Earls fort House School where he had his primary education. In 1919, Beckett gained admission into Portora Royal School, a boarding school in Enniskillen, County Fermanagh. Between 1923 and 1927, he earned a bachelor's degree in French, Italian, and English language at the Trinity College in Dublin. He later earned a master's degree.

Following an outstanding performance in the university, Beckett was “nominated by his university as its representative in a traditional exchange of lecturers with the famous Ecole Normale Supérieure in Paris”. Thus, “after a brief stint of teaching” at Campbell College in Belfast, he went to Paris for two years, as a *lectur d' anglais* at the Ecole Normale in autumn of 1928 (*The Theatre of the Absurd*, p.30).

Apart from outstanding academic performance, Beckett excelled in sports especially in cricket as a left-handed batsman and a left-arm medium pace bowler. His name appears in the ‘bible’ of cricket – *Wisden Cricketers' Almanack*.

In Paris, Beckett's friend, Thomas MacGrevy, introduced him to a fellow Irish novelist James Joyce. This meeting has a long lasting effect on the young Beckett. In fact, in 1929, Beckett published his first critical essay “Dante... Bruno... Vico... Joyce”, in which he defended the works of Joyce against the accusation of their being wantonly obscure and dim in meaning. Also, during this first stay in Paris, Beckett made a mark as an excellent poet by winning the first prize in poetry competition with his poem, “whorescope” which subject is time.

In 1930, Beckett returned to the Trinity College, Dublin to take up appointment as an Assistant Professor of Romance Languages, but he gave up the job after four years, considering routine job or “habit as a great deadner”. According to Esslin (1987: p.33):

*To one who felt that habit and routine was the cancer of time, social intercourse a mere illusion, and the artistic life of necessity a life of solitude, the daily*

*grind of a University lecturer's work must have appeared unbearable. After only four terms at Trinity College, he had enough. He threw up his career and cut himself loose from all routine and social duties. Like Belacqua, the hero of his volume of stories More Pricks Than Kicks, though indolent by nature, "enlivened the last phase of his solipsism...with the belief that the best thing he had to do was to move constantly from place to place", Beckett embarked on a period of Wanderjahre.*

When he abandoned routine job, he moved from Dublin to London, Paris, and Germany etc., writing poems, novels, stories, and then plays, sometimes engaging in odd jobs. "It is surely no coincidence that so many of Beckett's later characters are tramps and wanderers, and that all are lonely".

Early in 1938, Beckett was stabbed in the chest and got his lung perforated by an underworld element who had accosted him for money in vain. When he recovered, he went to the prison to see the miscreant to know why he had to stab him. On the question of why he stabbed him, the fellow responded – "Je ne sais pas, Monsieur". Esslin argues that it might be the voice of the young man that we hear in Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*.

When the Second World War broke out in September, 1939, Beckett who was visiting his widowed mother in Dublin returned to Paris to join a resistance group against the Germans. In 1942, his group was betrayed and he escaped to *Vaucluse* for safety. There too, he assisted the resistant group in storing their armaments. At the end of the war, the French government gave him many awards for his role during the war.

In 1945, he paid a short visit to Dublin, and during the visit he had a revelation that would change the course of his literary endeavours. This revelation caused him eventually to part ways with Joycean principle that knowing was a creative way of understanding and controlling the world. In Beckett's own words:

*I realised that Joyce had gone as far as one could in the direction of knowing more (being) in control of one's materials. He was always adding to it; you only have to look at this proof to see that. I realised that my own way was in impoverishment, in lack of knowledge and in taking away, in subtracting rather than in adding (wikipedia).*

From this time forward, Beckett's work would concentrate on poverty, failure, exile, and loss. They portray man as Beckett himself puts it, a "non – knower" and as a "non – can – er".

In 1961, he got married to Suzanne and in 1969, while husband and wife were away in Tunis on holiday, Samuel Beckett was announced the winner of the Nobel Prize for literature. On 17 July 1989, Suzanne died, while Beckett himself died on 22<sup>nd</sup> December of the same year. They were buried together, sharing a simple granite gravestone in *Cimetiere du Montparnasse*, Paris, as directed by Beckett.

### SELF-ASSESSMENT EXERCISE

Briefly discuss Beckett's biography.

### 3.2 Beckett's Drama

Samuel Beckett was a multi-media playwright. He began writing plays for the stage, radio, television, and cinema after the Second World War. He produced about 20 plays for the stage; seven for radio; seven for television; and one for the cinema. Beckett's plays inaugurated fresh dramatic taste and sensibility. They make fun of all hitherto known dramatic conventions by shunning story – telling kind of plot, character development and intrigue, as well as straight theme and easily digestible moral, etc. They are instrumental to the idea of 'theatre of the absurd' by humorously examining themes that appear similar to those of the existential thinkers.

Esslin argues that his plays have little affinity with the existentialist philosophy for even though they deal with despair, loneliness, and anguish, the will to survive in spite of the despair, in an uncomprehending world, appears everywhere evident. Though the plays "spring from the deepest strata of the mind and probe the darkest wells of anxiety" (*The Theatre of the Absurd* 38), the characters frequently hope for an uncertain salvation. It is this hope of salvation that restrains Vladimir and Estragon from committing suicide in *Waiting for Godot*. Beckett's drama assaults the audiences with new idea about human existence, with a disorientating spirit. In his plays:

*Characters often engage in a seemingly meaningless dialogue or activities, and as a result, the audience senses what it is like to live in a universe that doesn't "make sense". Beckett and others who adopted this style felt that this disoriented feeling was a more honest response to the post World War II world than the traditional belief in a rationally ordered universe.*



*Waiting for Godot* remains the most famous example of this form of drama ([www.endnotes.com](http://www.endnotes.com).)

### SELF-ASSESSMENT EXERCISE

Discuss Beckett's perspective to the theatre.

### 3.3 Synopsis of *Waiting for Godot*

*Waiting for Godot* is a play in two acts. The activities in the two acts occur at a country road at the same time and with a tree forming the background set. It has five characters, which in order of their appearance are Estragon (Gogo), Vladimir (Didi), Lucky, Pozzo, and a boy. In Act I, Estragon is sitting on a low mound trying to pull off his boot. As he is getting frustrated by the exercise, Vladimir enters. They chat about the boot, mysterious people that beat Estragon, the thieves on the cross, indulge in reminiscences of the past glory. Their inglorious present constrains them to think of suicide but the hope that Godot will come and save them from their terrible condition causes them to refrain from the act.

As Estragon eats the carrot offered to him by Vladimir, lucky and his master, Pozzo appear. Pozzo controls Lucky with a whip and a rope he ties round his neck. In addition to the strangulating rope, Lucky is carrying his master's bag, folded stool, coat, and a picnic basket. While Lucky stinks because of "A running sore' caused by the rubbing" of the rope, Pozzo enjoys himself with chicken, wine, and tobacco. Estragon and Vladimir are scandalised by this inhuman treatment but Pozzo who appears to be certain of himself, tells them that it is chance that places them in their different state. "To each his due', he says.

Upon a harsh order, Lucky was forced to entertain the team and to think aloud about the world, until he is compelled to stop. As Pozzo and Lucky leave the scene, a boy, the messenger of Godot arrives and tells Vladimir and Estragon that Godot has postponed his coming to the following day. This annoys them but they nevertheless resolve to wait for him.

In Act II, Estragon experiences loss of memory and refuses to be spoken to by Vladimir who comes to the scene agitated. They soon reconcile and Vladimir learns that Estragon has been beaten by mysterious people. As they chat and wait for Godot, Lucky and Pozzo appear again. Lucky is dumb and Pozzo is blind and extremely feeble, constantly tearing the air with cries of agony. As Pozzo and Lucky wobble out of sight, a boy – messenger appears to inform Vladimir and Estragon that Godot has again shifted his coming the following day. The tramps resolve to buy a

strong rope in readiness to commit suicide if Godot fails to keep his appointment.

### SELF-ASSESSMENT EXERCISE

Summarise the play, *Waiting for Godot*.

#### 3.4 Thematic Study of *Waiting for Godot*

The greatest stir in the European theatre of the modern period was caused by the production of Samuel Beckett's 'Waiting for Godot' which was first premiered in Paris in 1952 and London in 1955. Lawson (1960 Xii) argues that in this play, "The unseen power' that has destroyed the humanity of the characters", compels "them to do nothing but comment, philosophically and often with comic vigor, on their fate". The early productions of the play got the audiences very disconcerted and alarmed. The initial feeling of outrage that greeted the play is due largely to its absconding from preconceived and previously known dramatic conventions.

Lawson notes that another reason is that Beckett "adopts the principle of indeterminacy which denies all dramatic meaning" (xiii). Characters are not certain that they exit, that they have met each other. Estragon and Vladimir are waiting for Godot whom they do not know or are sure that he will ever meet their appointment. According to Robbe-Grillet (1965: iii):

*To say that nothing happens in it is an understatement. Besides, the absence of plot or intrigue of any kind had been met with before. But here less than nothing happens. It is as if we were watching a sort of regression beyond nothing. As always in Beckett, that little we are given to begin with, and which we thought so meager at the time, soon decays under our very eyes – disintegrates like Pozzo, who comes back bereft of light, dragged by a Lucky bereft of speech; like the carrot, which as if in mockery has dwindled by the second act into a radish.*

The reason for the initial shock produced by *Waiting for Godot* is understandable. A play savagery addicted to philosophical despair is strange to the English audience at the materials time because the "bourgeoisie hold" does not permit the people to see "the fading glories of their great past" as well as "the tensions that indicate the breakdown of old certitudes" (Lawson, p.xiv). In fact, the play is a daring adventure which shatters the old notion of what drama entails both in content and

form. This accounts for the difficulty in comprehending the play during its early productions. However, when the veil is removed, *Waiting for Godot*'s fame spread like wild fire during the harmattan.

Thematically, the play *Waiting for Godot* is an inexhaustible mine for criticism because it embodies diverse ideas and points of view. In his seminal book, *The Theatre of the Absurd*, Esslin (1987: 61 – 62) states that:

*It is the peculiar richness of a play like Waiting for Godot that it opens vistas on so many different perspectives. It is open to philosophical, religious, and psychological interpretations, yet above all it is a poem on time, evanescence, and the mysteriousness of existence, the paradox of change and stability, necessity and absurdity.*

Apart from the above, the text paints a gruesome picture of poverty, the evil of a slave – holding society, and abysmal touch of capitalism. Denis Johnston argues that *Waiting for Godot* encapsulates “the message of the church”. G.S. Fraser who shares the same view notes that the play is full of Christian imagery. For him:

*The tramps with their rags and their misery represent the fallen state of man. The squalor of their surroundings, their lack of a “stake in the world”, represent the idea that here in this world we can build no abiding city. The ambiguity of their attitude towards Godot, their mingled hope and fear, the doubtful tone of the boy’s messages, represents the state of tension and uncertainty in which the average Christian must live in this world, avoiding presumption, and also avoiding despair.*

Those who explore Christian themes in the text hinge their argument on “incidental symbolism and dialogue”. The first exchange that occurs between Vladimir (Didi) and Estragon (Gogo) borders on the idea of Heaven and Hell or salvation and damnation symbolised by the two thieves who were crucified together with Jesus Christ at mount Calvary. The tree equally symbolises the Cross. With reference to what the tree can stand for in christianity, Fraser posits:

*The tree on the stage, though it is a willow, obviously stands both for the Tree of the knowledge of Good and Evil (and when it puts on the green leaves, for the Tree of life) and for the Cross. When Didi and*

*Gogo are frightened in the second act, the best thing they can think of doing is to shelter under its base. But it gives no concealment, and it is perhaps partly from God's wrath that they are hiding; for it is also the Tree of Judas, on which they are recurrently tempted to hang themselves.*

Indeed, the copious use of Christian imagery compels some critics to view Godot as God. Vladimir and Estrogen keep waiting for Godot (God), in spite of several disappointments because they believe that he is the only one capable of delivering them from the suffering of “the given world.... already well along in the process of dissolution” (Havey, p.144).

Looking at *Waiting for Godot* from the absurdist perspective, Cornish and Ketels (1985: xxxi – xxxii) state:

*In Becket, the universe is shrunken, claustrophobic; individuals huddle in dread inside their own skins; helpless in the face of imminent doom to do anything except to go on surviving. The repetition of meaningless daily rituals depletes all their energies, yet their actions seem purposeless. They seem alone on earth, even when, as often, there is another character in the same plight. In fact, their plight is made more fearful by the presence of the other, whom they can't trust or really reach, and whom they would betray to save themselves. The interchangeability of their external realities makes communication impossible. They have no souls, no fixed identities. They're lost in an existential void without compass, centre, or orientation point.*

The text demonstrates that the whole idea of indeterminacy of things makes existence meaningless and incomprehensible. Vladimir and Estragon, for example, are waiting for Godot, whose identity they do not know. They lack knowledge of who they are, where they come from, and whether they have met before. They yearn for a better life yet they contemplate suicide. Martin Esslin who argues that *Waiting for Godot* is the culmination of the existential thought notes that in the text, “the only certain evidence of being is the individual's experience of his own consciousness, which in turn is constantly in flux and ever changing” (*Samuel Beckett, p. 9*). The notion of uncertainty of the human condition creates and heightens tension in the play. When we first see Pozzo in the play, he seems so sure of himself, but in his second appearance, we see him in sore need of help.

In *Casebook on Waiting for Godot*, Alfonso Sastre expresses the view that:

*Waiting for Godot is above all a strangely lucid dramatic representation of the rending apart of the human being. That is the ultimate ontological basis of Waiting for Godot. The human being is nothing more than bloody, broken shreds and patches. This business of the "analogy" of being is nothing more than the sophistry of logic to cover up the tearing apart, to hide the wound, to lessen the hemorrhage. But the human being continues to lose blood and we witness this horrible bleeding. The beings grow pale because they need one another and they do not succeed in communicating. They send out SOS. No one answers. Neither Godot, nor his fellow man.*

The above clarifies the notion that the play surveys mankind in an irremediable quagmire. This accounts for a nostalgic feeling expressed by Vladimir and Estragon about the glory of the past years. This is nostalgia for a lost paradise "when the rending asunder had not taken place"; when man lived in solidarity and equanimity of the mind. But the text suggests that the yearning is futile as "the rending asunder of being" is real and the chance of correction, or redemption quite uncertain. This is what the continual postponement of Godot's coming implies. The theme of Time is explored by Martin Esslin. According to him:

*The subject of the play is not Godot but waiting, the act of waiting as an essential and characteristic aspect of human condition. Throughout our lives we always wait for something, and Godot simply represents the objective of our waiting – an event, a thing, a person, death.*

He argues that it is in the context of waiting that "we experience the flow of time". We do not remain the same for time changes us as it flows through us, ensuring that we become different things at different times. The first time we see Pozzo and Lucky in Act I of the play, Pozzo the inhuman capitalist and slave – holder, appears very healthy, rich, boastful, and with a wonderful sight; but when he reappears in the second Act, he is blind, helpless, and tearing the air with cries of pain. The action of time gets him deformed; reducing him to a crawling thing instead of the swaggering bourgeoisie he thinks that he will forever be. The idea that Time makes human condition indeterminate infuriates Pozzo and compels him to talk about it sarcastically at the end of the

play. When Vladimir asks him to tell them the time he became blind, he violently answers him:

*Don't question me! The blind has no notion of time.  
The things of time are hidden from them too (Act II).*

Pozzo is used in the idiom of the play to explain two facts about human existence. In the first place, “he represents the worldly man in all his facile and shortsighted optimum and illusory feeling of power and permanence” (Esslin, 48). In the first act when he is rich and powerful, he appears to be certain of himself. He imagines all sorts of things, including the idea of selling-off Lucky for outliving his usefulness. But in the second act, he becomes as blind as Fortune—thereby illustrating the impermanence of earthly life and its condition.

### **SELF-ASSESSMENT EXERCISE**

Discuss any one theme of *Waiting for Godot*.

## **4.0 CONCLUSION**

Samuel Beckett is a champion in the tradition of the theatre Esslin calls “the theatre of the absurd”. An influential writer, his plays and other writings posit human condition as uncertain, regressing, and absurd. He sees life and the quest for knowledge as a chase after the wind. He believes that there is nothing at the root of our being. Hence, Esslin (1987) argues with reference to his plays that, “the hope of salvation may be merely an evasion of the suffering and anguish that spring from facing the reality of the human condition”.

## **5.0 SUMMARY**

This unit examines the personality of Samuel Beckett, his basic assumptions about human existence, and how they are reflected in his plays, especially *Waiting for Godot*, which is analysed thematically. The study reveals that this play caused a major stir in the theatre because it charts a course for new theatre sensibility.

## **6.0 TUTOR-MARKED ASSIGNMENT**

Discuss *Waiting for Godot* as a Christian message.

## **7.0 REFERENCES/FURTHER READING**

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## UNIT 2 THE ANGER PERIOD AND AFTER

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### 1.0 INTRODUCTION

The 'Anger Period and after', marked a turning-point in English dramatic history. From the 1950s, something unexpected began to stir up in English drama. Young playwrights like Osborne, Delany, Pinter, Tom Stoppard, Ann Jellicose Wesker, Bolt, Simpson, a new John Whiting etc., began to shun the theatrical sensibilities of the upper and middle – classes, something already happening in the theatrical universe of continental Europe. Cornish and Ketels (1985: ix) state that "A novel self – awareness burst with peculiar intensity upon young writers seeking a forum for their message of dissatisfaction with things as they were".

This need for a change, of consciousness was provoked by John Osborne's *Look Back in Anger*-a play "rejected by twenty-five managers and agents by the time George Devine" of the Royal Court Theatre, "rowed himself out of the barge where Osborne was living to announce that *Look Back in Anger* would be the third production of the court". The staging of this play on May 8, 1956, changed the face of the British theatre. This brash drama lashed out against the prejudices and morality of the bourgeoisie. Cornish and Ketels observe that the play:

*sparked an extraordinary renaissance in playwriting, acting, directing, and stage design. It put into the language of the theatre criticism new phrases... "Kitchen sinks drama" and "angry young men". It established a working class milieu and made some acerbic criticism of society a dramatic staple. A generation of playwrights was*



*emboldened by Osborne's success to write about life in the rented bed – sitters of London and the workers' cottages of grimy industrial towns across England. Gas, Stove, sink, creaking wooden chairs and bare kitchen tables replaced the earlier fashionable decors with their over – stuffed comforts, velvet draperies, and stylish paintings. At last the stage was beginning to suggest the quality of life enjoyed by the majority rather than the chosen few.*

The galvanising influence of *Look Back in Anger* is quite enormous. It gives the British theatre a nudge to become more political in resonance, to question fresh subjects like homosexuality, feminism, sexual permissiveness, and other problems of a disintegrating society. In fact, since the premiere of *Look Back in Anger* in 1956, the British theatre becomes what Herbert Blau calls “The Public Art of Crisis” (Corrigan). As Corrigan notes, the theatre that emerged has been “a theatre which reveal man detached from the machinery of society, one in which man is defined by his solitude and estrangement, and not by his participation, one in which man is left face to face with himself” (*The Theatre in Search of a Fix*, p.270).

## **2.0 OBJECTIVES**

At the end of this unit, you should be able to:

- explain the idea of the ‘Anger period and After’
- define the motives of the young writers
- outline the biography of John Osborne
- describe Osborne’s concept of drama
- examine *Look Back in Anger* in terms of theme.

## **3.0 MAIN CONTENT**

### **3.1 Biography of John Osborne**

The playwright, actor, activist, critic, film, and television script writer, John James Osborne was born on 12 December, 1929 in London, to Thomas Godfrey Osborne and Nellie Beatrice Cockney – a barmaid. Osborne’s formal education ended in secondary school, but the young man was said to possess native intelligence. After schooling he tried business and then journalism but could not make it.

He made his appearance in the theatre through a company of junior actors, but he later joined Anthony Creighton's touring company. He co-authored his first play *The Devil Inside Him* with his theatre mentor – Stella Linden who directed the play in 1950 at the Royal Court Theatre, Huddersfield.

Before 1956, Osborne was extremely poor. In fact, he was living on a leaky houseboat on the River Thames with Anthony Creighton, by the time George Devine of the newly formed English Stage Company (ESC) sought him to inform him that his company has chosen *Look Back in Anger* for production. *Look Back in Anger* first produced on 8 May, 1956, changed Osborne's social and economic status. Its commercial success made him wealthy, while its fame won him the *Evening Standard* Drama Award as the most promising playwright of the year. As Cornish and Ketels note:

*Osborne is a prolific, multi – talented writer, not a one – play wonder. He has written at least twenty – two plays, a number of television and film scripts, including the Oscar – winning Tom Jones. He is a political activist, who crusades for his causes and fulminates against public policy in frequent letters to the Times.*

Osborne loved his father and hated his mother. He said that his mother taught him “The fatality of hatred... she is my disease, an invitation to my sick room” (wikipedia). Osborne transferred this hatred to many women he had affairs with, including those he had marital relationships with. In fact, he married five times and was never happy in the first four marriages. He married Pamela Lane (1951 – 1957), Mary Ure (1957 – 1968), Penelope Gillett (1963 – 1968), Jill Bennett (1968 – 1977), and Helen Dawson from 1978 to 1994 when he died. Apart from Helen, all the other marriages ended in fiasco and divorce. Of the fourth, wife wikipedia notes:

*Osborne endured a turbulent nine – year marriage with Bennett, whom he loathe. Their marriage degenerated into mutual abuse and insult with Bennett goading Osborne, calling him “impotent” and “homosexual” in public as early as 1971. This was cruelty which Osborne reciprocated, turning his feeling of bitterness and resentment about his waning career onto his wife. Bennett's suicide in 1990 is generally believed to have been a result of Osborne's rejection of her.*

In fact, it is widely believed that mistreatment of women in Osborne's plays is autobiographic; it arises from his hatred of women in physical reality.

### SELF-ASSESSMENT EXERCISE

Briefly examine Osborne's biography.

### 3.2 Osborne's Drama

As we have pointed out, Osborne's foray into the world of the theatre began around 1950, but it was the production of his *Look Back in Anger* in 1956 that brought him to limelight. Altogether, he has to his credit twenty – four stage plays, nine television scripts, and two film scripts.

His plays appear to be influenced by his angry disposition towards his disintegrating society as well as his personal lifestyle. Many critics opine that his plays are, to a very large extent, autobiographical. He reflects the time of his life and the effects of the Second World War especially on the youths. He attacks the politics of the day and almost all the existing mores and social institutions. He pours venom on the smoldering Victorian middle-class whose social conventions hold the youths and the poor perpetually down-trodden, preventing them from realising their dreams and aspirations. Osborne's plays, indeed, capture the anger, disillusionment, and frustration of the post-war young men. According to Gradesaver.com:

*Osborne uses the examples of the world, the development of the atomic bomb, and the decline of the British Empire to show how an entire culture has lost the innocence that other generations were able to maintain.*

The universe of Osborne's dramaturgy is filled with angry outsiders with disintegrating psyche and who bully their perceived offenders physically and verbally. With respect to *Look Back in Anger*, Cornish and Ketels state:

*Oshorne's play lashed out against the establishment with such compelling energy that not only fellow writers, but also audiences and critics have to take note. Artistic forms, like entrenched societies, do not yield easily to displacement, yet Look Back in Anger seemed to revolutionalise the British theatre overnight. Minority quibbles outside, revolutionalise may*

*not be too strong a word. For Osborne attacked theatrical and social conventions at the same time and managed to shake up both artists and audiences. Unsavoury subjects and gutter language became permissible. Questions that might have seemed closed were really opened; attitudes hardened by decades of acceptance could be changed.*

Both emotional distress and material poverty condition Osborne's plays. He, like Jimmy Porter of *Look Back in Anger*, lost his father when he was very tender in age. His mother—a barmaid “reared him in an atmosphere of brawling, rough jokes, and drinking”. In fact, he was expelled from Belmont College at Devon, for slapping his headmaster who had struck him for listening to a forbidden broadcast by Frank Sinatra. All this accounts for the somber atmosphere of his plays and the emotional flip – flop of his characters.

### **SELF-ASSESSMENT EXERCISE**

Discuss the nature of John Osborne's drama.

### **3.3 Synopsis of *Look Back in Anger***

*Look Back in Anger*, written in three acts, centers on the anguish of Jimmy Porter – a young man of about 25 years. Jimmy Porter is a poorly self – employed graduate. He lives with Cliff who proclaims a lower – class bravado and used to brawling. Jimmy's wife, Alison is a daughter of a rich middle – class couple. This marriage epitomises class struggle because Jimmy has deep hatred for the middle – class and its social conventions. Because of class difference, Jimmy abuses Alison, calling her all sorts of degrading and annoying names.

When Alison could no longer take Jimmy's insult, she goes home to have her baby who later died. In her stead, Jimmy turns Helen Charles, Alison's friend into a bed – fellow. Deeply pained by the child loss, Alison returns to Jimmy who receives her with a rare demonstration of tenderness. Cornish and Ketels observe that:

*In the final image of the play they huddle together in a squirrel and – bear fantasy as if, by hiding in each other, they can escape the ravages of the world outside. For all their childish playacting, they are old, never having been young. Their world's been out of joint all the days of their lives.*

Of course, when Alison returns, Helen who is in doubt of Alison's authority in the house leaves, without Jimmy bothering about her exit, a bit.

### SELF-ASSESSMENT EXERCISE

Give a short summary of *Look Back in Anger*.

### 3.4 Thematic Study of *Look Back in Anger*

John Osborne's *Look Back in Anger* injects new blood and uplifting hormones into the withering nerves of the British theatre of the post-war period. Its touching on the circumstances of the time, its realistic portrayal of the frustration and the precarious existence of the toiling class and unemployed youths in contemporary setting and the living language of the people, cause the play to generate an excitement, which attempts to restage Shaw and Shakespeare fail to produce in the audience.

*Look Back in Anger* is a peculiar play in the English dramatic canon. Lacey argues that its "setting can be considered as a challenge to the iconography of the bourgeois living – room and the country – house drawing room" (qtd in Tecimer 2005). To further explain this, Emine Tecimer in her M.A. thesis on the three plays of John Osborne, which include *Look Back in Anger*, states, it is clear that Osborne uses a "realist-naturalist setting in *Look Back in Anger* in order to reinforce his point which is to present the living circumstances of post-war generation especially the younger generation of working and lower middle-class origins". The play is anti-establishment and anti-middle-class dramatic sensibility and social convention. Indeed, it is the first voice of opposition against things as they are and accepted.

Cornish and Ketels (1985: 285 – 286) state, unequivocally, that:

*On the thematic level Osborne paints an alarming picture of a world in which the social order in its political and economic realities, its establishment assumptions and mores, almost inevitably destroys what is alive and humane in people. It is an order in which people cannot find the strength or wisdom necessary to remake it so that it might encourage what is best in human potential or even allow what is natural and healthy. Those within the system lose their souls and their goods, but so do the rebellious deviants.*

A number of themes are discernible in *Look Back in Anger*. They include but not limited to anger, frustration, disillusionment, quest for love and compassion, class struggle, self – pity, feminism, political decadence, lack of communication, and moral duplicity.

However, all these themes can be subsumed in the theme of anger. Jimmy is chiefly angry because his generation is being frustrated and denied the right and possibility of decent living. In spite of their education, the youths as the cramped apartment of Jimmy Porter shows, are consigned to squalid existence. According to Tecimer (2005: 7):

*Psychologists agree with the fact that anger is an emotional state that varies in intensity from mild, irritation to rage and fury that might lead to aggressive behaviour. Therefore, aggression can be considered a way of expressing anger.*

Sigmund Freud and his adherents examine the notion of aggression in psycho analytic theories. For them, aggression is provoked by anything that induces pain and hinders pleasure or self – preservation and maintenance. Objects of painful feeling, sexual repression, lack of love, and death – wish are pinned down as major causes of aggression by the psychologists.

What factors are responsible for Jimmy Porter’s anger and aggressive behaviour?

- In the first place, Jimmy Porter is angry against British class system which denies him good school and rewarding employment. He hates the middle – class which is the symbol of the establishment. His marriage to Alison – a daughter of a rich middle – class family, is a kind of revenge. He treats her so, uncharitably, because she reminds him of everything he despises in terms of class distinction. Alison clarifies this when she tells Helena how Jimmy and his friend Hugh regard her. According to her:

*They both came to regard me as a sort of hostage from those sections of the society they had declared war on (Act II, Scene I).*

Jimmy seeks to make life appear as nightmarish to Alison as it does appear to him and his class. For Alison, therefore, living is like being on trial. In fact, with respect to her relationship with Jimmy, she tells her father, “I’ve been on trial every day and night of my life for nearly four

years” (Act II, Scene II). She deeply regrets this marriage of inconvenience saying:

*Well, for twenty years, I'd lived a happy, uncomplicated life, and suddenly, this – this spiritual barbarian – throws down the gauntlet at me” (Act II, Scene II).*

- Jimmy is angry against the church because of its hypocrisy and for taking side with the middle – class in oppressing the poor. Indeed, his sexual encounter with Helena is a sort of retaliation against the church – a way of unmasking it. He hates Bishop Bromley for supporting the rich against the poor and for getting entangled with civilian affair and for encouraging the production of atomic – bomb. He hates the church for its apathy towards the suffering people.
- Jimmy Porter is angry because no one sees things from his perspective. According to him, ‘Old Porter talks, and everyone turns over and goes to sleep” (Act I). Jimmy seems to be afflicted by loneliness and the notion of being a persona non – grata.
- He is angry that the youth is getting nowhere. He tells Cliff:

*We never seem to get any further, do we?... Our youth is slipping away (Act I).*

Jimmy is so sad that his generation has been reduced to sub – human species. This idea compels him to tell Cliff:

*Why don't we have a little game? Let's pretend that we're human beings, and that we're actually alive. Just for a while. What do you say? Let's pretend we are human (Act I).*

- Jimmy is very angry that people are complacent, even getting used to awful conditions of existence. For Alison not resenting the awful smell of his pipe, he tells Cliff:

*She is a great one for getting used to things. If she were to die, and wake up in paradise – after the first five minutes, she'd have got used to it (Act I).*

For him, people must resent things they don't like and make conscious efforts to change them, not accepting them as normative.

- Jimmy hates the “American Age” but regrets the passing of the Edwardian culture when Britain was at the peak of its power. For him, “that brief little world look tempting. If you’ve no world of your own, it’s rather pleasant to regret the passing of someone else’s (Act I).

As documented on GradeSaver.com:

*The character of Colonial Redfern Alison’s father represents the decline of and nostalgia for the British Empire. The colonel had been stationed for many years in India a symbol of Britain’s imperial reach into the world. The Edwardian age which corresponded to the Britain’s height of power, had been the happiest of his life. His nostalgia is representative of the denial that Osborne sees in the psyche of the British people. The world has moved on to an American Age, he argues, and the people of the nation cannot understand why they are no longer the world’s greatest power.*

- Jimmy is angry about the slothfulness of the people of his time. His society lacks warmth and enthusiasm. His anger is here geared towards waking his people from emotional slumber and inactivity. With regard to this, GradeSaver.com states:

*The slothfulness of emotion is best seen in the relationship between Alison and Cliff. Alison describes her relationship with Cliff as “comfortable”. They are physically and emotionally affectionate with each other, but neither seems to want to take their passion to another level of intimacy. In this way, their relationship is lazy. They cannot awaken enough passion to consummate their affair. Jimmy seems to subconsciously understand this, which is the reason he is not jealous of their affection towards one another.*

The above is rather ironical because Jimmy describes Alison as a sex maniac. At the end of Act one of the play, Jimmy attacks Alison’s sexuality while explaining his sexual relationship with her:

*Do you know I have never known the great pleasure of lovemaking when I didn’t desire it myself. Oh, it’s not that she hasn’t her own kind of*



*passion. She has the passion of a python. She just devours me whole every time, as if I were some overlarge rabbit. That's me. That bulge around her naval – if you're wondering what it is – it's me. Me, buried alive down there, and going mad, smothered in that peaceful looking coil. Not a sound, not a flicker from her – she doesn't even rumble a little.*

- Jimmy is angry against the politicians for not being useful to anybody, including their supporters. For Jimmy, Nigel Alison's brother who represents this institution is incapable of feeling. Of Nigel, he says:

*And nothing is vaguer about Nigel than his knowledge. His knowledge of life and ordinary human beings is so hazy; he really deserves some sort of decoration for it – a medal inscribed "for Vaguerly in the field". But it wouldn't do for him to be troubled by any stabs of conscience, however, vague (moving down again). Besides, he's a patriot and an Englishman, and he doesn't like the idea that he may have been selling our countrymen all these years, so what does he do? The only thing he can do – seek sanctuary in his own stupidity.*

- Apart from sexual gratification, Jimmy hates women owing to his mother's waywardness and her mistreatment of his father. He loathes women especially for their narcissism and noisy tendency. Of the last reason, he tells Cliff:

*I had a flat underneath a couple of girls once. You heard every damned thing those bastards did, all day and night. The most simple, everyday actions were a sort of assault course on your sensibilities. I used to plead with them. I even got to scream the most ingenious obscenities I could think of, up the stairs at them. But nothing, nothing would move them. With those two, even a simple visit to the lavatory sounded like a medieval siege. Oh, they beat me in the end – I had to go... slamming their doors, stamping their high heels, banging their irons and saucepans – the eternal flaming racket of the female (Act I).*

Jimmy releases his pent-up emotions arising from the problems of his society against Alison, Cliff, and Helena, both physically and by means of intransigent language. He constantly brawls with Cliff and lashes both him and Alison with bitter tongue. While he wishes that Alison gets into his shoes by having a dead child, he throws echoes of death – wish to his mother – in law. He lashes out against the woman for being militant, arrogant, full of malice, and for objecting and turning to the east when he got married to her daughter. Jimmy calls Alison all sorts of decadent names, pusillanimous, dirty old Arab butcher, etc. Jimmy employs every derogatory verbal means to make Alison feel bad. He is not even happy to find her a virgin. In fact, Alison says:

*And afterward, he actually taunted me with my virginity. He was quite angry about it, as if I had deceived him in some strange way. He seemed to think an untouched woman would defile him (Act I).*

### **SELF-ASSESSMENT EXERCISE**

Discuss any two reasons why Jimmy Porter is angry in *Look Back in Anger*.

## **4.0 CONCLUSION**

The ‘Anger Period and after’ is a revolutionary moment in the history of the English theatre. It is, as we have shown, a period of reaction against the ideals of the middle class both in terms of social conventions and artistic tradition. Osborne spearheaded this urgent need for change in his *Look Back in Anger*. This play is a milestone and a turning – point. Cornish and Ketels posit that it liberated the English stage from its preoccupation with the privileged classes; and inspired writers to explore social and political issues, including the smoldering resentments of the working class.

It symbolises need for change. It is a play about a world that is out of joint. Cornish and Ketels find it an ironic play. For them, it is “a powerful study of the collapse of a whole way of life, as much as a frightening and prophetic indictment of the “psychic and social paralysis” of the rising generation”.

## **13.0 SUMMARY**

The study examines the nature of drama in the “Anger Period and After”. It examines the concept of the anger period and after, briefly

outlines the biography of John Osborne, the nature of his drama, and finally explicates the theme of *Look Back in Anger*.

#### **14.0 TUTOR-MARKED ASSIGNMENT**

Discuss any theme of *Look Back in Anger*.

#### **7.0 REFERENCES/FURTHER READING**

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## UNIT 3 THE ENGLISH AUDIENCE AND PLAYHOUSE

### CONTENTS

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### 1.0 INTRODUCTION

This unit discusses the role of the audience in the theatre before explaining the nature of English audience -from the Elizabethan period to the contemporary time. It points out the features of each audience and their behaviour in the theatre; as well, it examines the English playhouse in terms of its evolution and development.

### 2.0 OBJECTIVES

At the end of this unit, you should be able to:

- describe the role of the theatre audience
- explain the nature of Elizabethan audience
- examine the make-up of the Restoration, 18<sup>th</sup> century, and Victorian audiences
- explicate the nature of the English audience of the modern age
- describe the development of the English playhouse.

### 3.0 MAIN CONTENT

#### 3.1 The Role of the Audience

The audience is a crucial aspect of the theatre because as Styan (1968: 251) argues, “the interplay between the actor and his audience brings the play to life”. The understanding is that drama is not possible without the audience. Jerzy Grotowski insists that at least one spectator is needed to make a performance.

The actors are aware that the audience is the first judge of the drama. Eze (2011: 25) states that “the dramatic event mandates the audience to get involved in the business of appreciation, interpretation and reaction. In full knowledge of this, the performers work assiduously to impress the audience by satisfying its needs, interests, and expectations. Vargas (1960: 12) underscores the role of the theatre audience thus:

*Actors will tell you how important the audience is to them. But they are not only interested in whether the house is packed to capacity. Their interest is in the type of the audience before whom they are going to perform. Do they look lively and intelligent enough to catch the subtle shades in the play? Do they appear to have a sense of humour? Nothing is more chastening to an actor's soul than to perform an excellent comedy before an audience who sit glumly in rows, with defiant expressions on their faces which seem to say; “Go on try, try and make me laugh”.*

The audience can electrify a performance as much as it can lower its standard and quality. To further drive home the value of the audience in a dramatic presentation, Vargas notes further:

*A lively and intelligent audience eager for the play to begin and tense and alert throughout the play, will elicit from the players the finest performance of which they are capable. A dull, unresponsive crowd in the front will give the players extra work to do, and tend to lower the standard of performance.*

The implication is that the response of the audience can make or mar any drama. And this is the reason the actor does not take the audience for granted. Martin Esslin (1981: 25 – 26) elaborates on this when he posits that:

*Positive reaction of the audience has a powerful effect on the actors, and so has negative reaction. If the audience fails to laugh at jokes, the actors will instinctively play them more broadly, underline them, and signal more clearly that what they are saying is funny. If the audience responds, the actors will be inspired by the response and this in turn will elicit more and more powerful responses from the audience. This is the*

*famous feedback effect between the stage and the audience.*

The electricity that is usually at the heart of any good theatre experience is not generated by the actor alone as Edwin Wilson suggests in his *The Theater Experience*. It results from the interplay between the actor and the audience body chemistry. Walter Kerr is cited by Wilson to have explained the actor – audience relationship in a dramatic encounter as follow:

*It doesn't just mean that we are in the personal presence of performers. It means that they are in our presence conscious of us, speaking to us, working for and with us until a circuit that is not mechanical becomes established between us, a circuit that is fluid, unpredictable, ever – changing in impulses, crackling, and intimate. Our presence, the way we respond, flows back to the performer and alters what he does, to some degree and sometimes astonishingly so, every single night. We are contenders, making the play and the evening and the emotions together. We are playmates, building a structure.*

The pull and fascination of personal contact between the actor and the audience when at its best, creates a bond that elevates the dramatic experience into a kind of ritual. According to Esslin (1981: 26):

*At its best, when a fine play in a fine performance coincides with a receptive audience in the theatre, this can produce a concentration of thought and emotional intensity that amounts to a higher level of spiritual insight and can make such experience akin to a religious one, a memorable high – point in an individual's life.*

### **SELF-ASSESSMENT EXERCISE**

Discuss the function of the theatre audience.

### **3.2 Elizabethan Audience**

The Elizabethan audience was a warm and enthusiastic kind drawn from people of all classes – the court, the middle – class gallants and their ladies, as well as the working class or the groundlings. Vargas notes that the Elizabethan audience was made up of people for who “playgoing had

become a passion”. He further remarks that “Even frequent showers of choice English rain (for these playhouses had no roof) could not dampen the arduous of the Elizabethan playgoers”.

On the nature of the personalities and tastes of this lively and interesting audience, Downer (1950: 70) posits:

*Although the larger portion of the audience was made up of the lower income groups, shopkeepers and craftsmen, the other classes were by no means unrepresented. The nobility came and occasionally rented stools on the stage to the annoyance of the spectators but to the profit of the managers. Respectful ladies were plentiful as well as the less respectable. Apprentices and students mingled freely with the pick – pockets and nut – sellers. But in the main, the audience was middle – class, young (it required stamina to stand throughout a play), and respectable. Riots and crimes might occasionally be perpetrated in the theaters, and common vice make its appearance, but with less frequency than in other public gatherings. The child of a violent age, these audiences were pleased with violent delights, yet their taste was catholic. They enjoyed the bloody and bawdy, dueling and tumbler’s tricks, but they had also an incomparable ear for verse, an intellectual delight in word play, and a sympathetic reaction to spiritual suffering or exaltation.*

The multiplicity of the composition of the Elizabethan audience which informs the diversity of its taste may have posed enormous task for the playwrights. Alan Downer is of the view that “the variety of the backgrounds, classes of intellectual levels in the Elizabethan audience was both a challenge to the playwrights and an unmatched opportunity for them”.

### **SELF-ASSESSMENT EXERCISE**

Discuss the nature of the Elizabethan audience.

### **3.3 Restoration, 18<sup>th</sup> Century, and Victorian Audiences**

The Restoration drama was a courtly affair, with a narrow and notorious audience. Every theatre historian appears to recognise and point this out. For example, MacGowan and Melnitz (1955: 220) express that:

*Restoration comedy was written about and for a small and effete circle of Londoners – wits, rakes, and ladies of frailty. It was a decadent society that paid to see its vanities and vices paraded on the stage... instead of pleasing and profiting from a full and hearty audience such as Shakespeare knew, the restoration theater lived by and for the bemused playgoers of a fool's paradise.*

The meaning of the above is that the public was excluded from the drama of the period. The passions of the morally depraved gallants failed to appeal to the common people and most of them had to shun the theatre. With respect to the bawdy nature of this audience, Downer (1950: 193) writes:

*Shadwell, in The Virtuoso (1676), describes the spectators who “come drunk and screaming into the playhouse, and stand upon the benches, and toss their full periwigs and empty heads, and with their shrill, unbroken voices cry, “Damme, this is a damn'd play”.*

The theatre audience was a noisy type and because it composed mainly of aristocrats and the wealthy ones, the peace officers stationed at the auditorium found it extremely difficult to maintain order. In fact, as Downer observes, it took the efforts of outstanding performers like Thomas Betterton to “still the quarrelsome, exhibitionistic gentlemen and raucous cries of orange Moll and the girls who assisted her hawking the fruit which had replaced nuts as playhouse refreshment”.

However, Avery and Scouten (1973: 445) argue that the “Restoration audience was not of a single complexion”. They opine that “the range of social classes, professions, and cultural attainment was fairly great, and the taste of the spectators as well as their motives in attending the playhouses varied considerably”. It is on record that King Charles II and his noble men as well as a handful of intellectual attended performances regularly, yet it is widely accepted that in spite of the presence of an attentive group, the audience was actually dominated by a “disturbing breed”. Of this, Avery and Scouten comment:

*The satirists strike at characteristics of audiences lamented by all players and playwrights: their inability to be quiet, to lend full attention to the play, and to subordinate their personal interests to the serious aims of authors and actors.*



The above, notwithstanding, Brockett and Hildy (1999: 261) identify a kind of rapport between the actors and members of the audience. This has to do with instant arbitration by the audience on matters affecting performance. According to them:

*The relationships between audience and performers were close. Actors often took their grievances to the spectators, who sometimes refused to let performances proceed until explanations from alleged offenders were forthcoming. Riots precipitated by changes in casting, in the evening's bill, or well – established costumes, were not uncommon. Thus, spectators believed firmly in their rights and did not hesitate to exert their power to correct any grievance, actual or supposed.*

The 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries were periods of a mixed-grill in terms of audience formation. By the end of the Restoration period, the aristocratic hold on the drama began to loosen. Drama of sense and sensibility ushered in by the 18<sup>th</sup> century paved way for a wider audience, “An audience not of gallants only but of citizens, merchants, and the rising middle class elements of English society” (Vargas, p.136). When the dramatic sensibility of the Captains of industries replaced the looseness and obscenities of the Restoration drama, the people thronged to the theatre. Vargas is of the opinion that the sentimental comedy of the period ensured that “Audiences were more in favour of shedding well – bred tear over the sufferings of a virtuous hero than of savouring a well – turned epigram or being amused by a satirical picture of the follies of the town”.

During the Victorian age, melodrama, farce, and extravaganza, “were pressed into service to dazzle the groundlings” (Vargas, p.158). Although enjoyed actually by a cross-section of society, these forms of drama, especially, the melodrama became a world of escape for the workers. The reason for this has already been explained elsewhere in the fourth module.

### **SELF-ASSESSMENT EXERCISE**

Discuss the Restoration audience.

### **3.4 The Modern Audience**

Until 1950s, the audience dictated the nature of the English drama to a very great extent. In pre-war English theatre, playwrights laboured to gratify the expectations, interests, and needs of the audience, sometimes,

pandering to their base taste as was the case during the Restoration period. However, from the 1950s, Samuel Beckett, John Osborne, and the “angry young men” of the British theatre, turned the movement of the theatre anti – clockwise by giving the audience, which comprised of the cross-section of English society, plays that provoked their dissent because they poked fun at their dramatic sensibility and their preconception of what drama should be.

They shocked their audience by presenting depersonalised characters that have lost touch with the mechanism of society as a result of an acute mental breakdown. The idea of merely being alive without actually living greatly perturbed an audience who was aware of the British imperial authority now being consigned to once upon a time.

It is no longer time to pander to the base taste of the audience. No, the audience is now led by the hand and compelled to enter the world of the playwrights. The production of Beckett’s *Waiting for Godot* in London in 1955, and John Osborne’s *Look Back in Anger* in 1956, caused a major stir in the British theatre. While the first is seen as denying all dramatic meaning, the second is viewed as a surge into nihilism. A London critic of the premiere of *Waiting for Godot* finds many faults with it. According to him, the play’s dramatic progression “does not lead to climax but perpetual postponement”. For him:

*‘Waiting for Godot’ has nothing to seduce the sense. The dialogue is studded with words that have no meaning for normal ears (Hobson, p.27).*

The British drama “was in the doldrums” before the appearance of *Look Back in Anger*. It failed to move with the time, merely gratifying “the prejudices and preferences of the middle-class, middle-ages patrons who were the typical West-End audience, a segment of society allied with the ruling class, complacent about their way of life, and likely to be hostile to new ideas as unmannerly if not subversive”.

The bursting of Osborne’s *Look Back in Anger* on the stage was a rude shock to the audience because “Jimmy Porter lashed out against all social icons: authority, tradition, class distinctions, and Tory politics, among others”. In fact, Osborne’s play changed the composition of the modern British audience at least temporarily. Cornish and Ketels state that:

*While respectable matrons and their mates quit the theatre, offended as much by the bluntness of the language as by its sentiments, other theatre – goers, especially the young cheered. Jimmy Porter*

*was mean, but he was absolutely alive. And there was an audience for what he has to say. The Renaissance of the British theatre was on.*

It does not take long for the audience to realise that the “angry young men” actually present authentic picture of their disintegrating society and to find out that their plays, indeed, showcase the major function of the theatre, showing us actually what *being* entails.

### **SELF-ASSESSMENT EXERCISE**

Explain the nature of the English modern audience.

### **3.5 The English Playhouse**

Before the establishment of permanent playhouses, theatrical performances were given in the courtyards of Inns such as The Boar’s Head, The Bull Inn, The Red Lion, The Cross Keys, The Bel Savage, and the The Bell Inn, among others. Performances were given in itinerant fashion. The idea of a permanent playhouse was engineered by professional performers during the Elizabethan period, Nicoll (1966: 97) explains:

*During the later 60 of the century we have evidence that their success with the public was such as to permit them to expand their acting personnel, and by 1576 they had reached position when they could determine no longer to be itinerants but to have homes of their own. Thus came the epoch – making creation of The Theatre in that year, followed by the building of other and better playhouses up to the close of the century: the appearance of the Globe and the Fortune marked the climax of their efforts.*

These first theatres constructed by the actor – carpenter, James Burbage and Philip Henslowe took after the courtyards of inns but with a modification influenced by the bear-baiting garden, bear-baiting being a prominent English sport at the time. MacGowan and Melnitz (1965: 161) elaborate that:

*South of the Thames there were buildings that may have suggested to Burbage a way of improving on the inn yards. These were the structures for bear – baiting. This popular pastime consisted in watching one or more mastiff dogs attack a tethered animal. Maps of*

*1560 and earlier show two circular buildings used for those purposes, and each appears to have galleries from which the spectators could watch in safety. The close relation of the baiting places and the theatre is obvious, for when Henslowe made the Hope theater out of his Bear Garden, he installed a movable stage, and used the building both for plays and for what the Elizabethan called "sport".*

The most popular playhouse of the time, the Globe, was built by James Burbage, in 1599, for the plays of William Shakespeare. The first theatres were built at the outskirts of the city because of the hostility of the city fathers who regarded the theatre as an immoral institution. It was also reasoned that "large gatherings were excellent means of speeding disease, inciting riot, and creating fire hazards". Whatever is the case, it is on record that the city council never tolerated the idea of sitting any public theatre within the city for many years.

The Elizabethan playhouse is octagonal in shape and as Downer (1950: 67) details:

*It was a large building, nearly a hundred feet in diameter and three stories in height. It was topped by a thatched roof, and at one end, above the stage, there was a cupola from which a flag was flown in the days of performance. The single entrance for the public was through the wall opposite the stage beside a sign which exhibited the symbol of the playhouse: Hercules bearing a globe.*

The stage is divided into inner and outer part which projected into the yard. The groundlings stand in the open yard throughout the play, while those who could pay extra money for the galleries stay there. As we have earlier pointed out, the rich often pay to stay on stools placed on the stage to the annoyance of the people. There was a general entrance fees for everyone before the status symbol fees discussed above.

The galleries, the open yard, the inner and outer stages, as well as the many trap doors encouraged multiple acting. Scenery in the contemporary sense was clearly absent. Descriptive words were used to denote locales of action. The only aspect of the technical elements of production that was paid adequate attention to, was costume. Apropos of this, Downer writes:

*In addition to exciting scripts, the theater specialised in gratifying spectacle. As in modern theaters, much money was regularly expended upon costumes than upon the plays themselves. This was partly due to the spirit of the age – the Elizabethans delight in gaudy display was not limited to stage performances. Non – professional costume was fantastic both in cut and in value, and the professionals were driven to the extremes to outshine their audiences.*

The outlook of the English playhouse began to change during the Restoration era. MacGowan and Melnitz note that “the Restoration replaced the Globe – type playhouse with the proscenium – type in a roofed – over theaters”. This was as a result of the exotic taste acquired by King Charles II in France. It is important to emphasise that what emerged as the Restoration playhouse was an entirely new creation because all the existing theatres were demolished following the edit of 1647 which outlawed all theatrical performances.

During the Restoration, Thomas Killigrew and William Davenant who were granted the monopoly of theatrical production in London constructed the Duke’s Theatre and The Theatre Royal (Drury Lane) after the image of the Italianate theatre that had come into vogue in Europe. The theatres had ample devices for scene – change, with scenery built of flats and which can be struck. Davenant’s The Duke Theatre was said to gratify spectacle through marvelous scenic effects. Unlike its French counterpart, the English stage has an acting platform that thrust into the auditorium. Brockett and Hildy (1999: 250) argue that, “In combination of features of the pre-commonwealth and Italianate stages, it foreshadowed in many respects the thrust stage of the 20th century”.

By the 18<sup>th</sup> century, the stage was deepened to about 50 feet while the auditorium was increased in size to accommodate more people, but “the basic arrangement remained constant”. However, interest in stage spectacle constrained David Garrick in 1771 to hire a professional French designer, Philoppe Jacques Deloutherbourg “to oversee all elements of spectacle”. It is on record that Deloutherbourg made enormous contributions in this direction. Breckett and Hildy explain that:

*He popularised reproduction of real places on the stage. To increase illusion, he broke up the stage pictures with ground rows and set*

*pieces to gain a greater sense of depth and reality and to avoid the symmetrical composition imposed by parallel wings. He used miniature figures at the rear of the stage to depict battles, marching armies, and sailing vessels; and sound effects such as waves, rain, hail, and distant guns, to increase the illusion of reality. He revamped the lighting system; installing overhead battens, using silk screens and gauze curtains to gain subtle varieties in color and to simulate various weather conditions and times of day.*

By the late 19th century, ‘industrial revolution’ had made England the leading manufacturing nation. As we have noted elsewhere, the working class attended the theatre in large numbers and this necessitated the expansion of theatre resources and the building of new theatres. The evolution of electricity, sophisticated lighting equipment, and complex stage machinery, helped to make the English stage a wonder to behold. In fact, since the nineteenth-century, steady improvement in stage technology has continued to enable theatre designers to dazzle their audiences with spectacular effects.

#### **SELF-ASSESSMENT EXERCISE**

Discuss the development of the English playhouse.

#### **4.0 CONCLUSION**

In this study unit, attempt was made to examine the role of the theatre audience, the nature of the English audience from the Elizabethan to the contemporary times, as well as the development of the English playhouse. The study shows that the audience is crucial to the theatre business because it is the interplay between it and the actor that brings a play to life. Also, it was noted that the English audience was a warm and enthusiastic one and that from time to time, it dictated the form the English drama assumed.

On playhouse, it was observed that the English playhouse evolved from the courtyards of inns and was later influenced by the bear – baiting garden. From its octagonal shape during the time of Shakespeare, the outlook of the English theatre began to change during the Restoration time when the octagonal playhouse was replaced with the proscenium-type, with marvelous scenic effects.

### 13.0 SUMMARY

This study discusses two aspects of the English drama – the audience and the playhouse. Certain undeniable roles of the audience in theatre productions are highlighted before going on to explain the characteristics of the Elizabethan, Restoration, 18<sup>th</sup> century, Victorian, and Modern English audiences. The study also takes a cursory look at the English playhouse, observing that this playhouse developed gradually from the open Globe-type prevalent during the Elizabethan times, to the roofed proscenium type evolved during the Restoration period, acquiring sophistication in design and equipment as the English people grow technologically.

### 14.0 TUTOR-MARKED ASSIGNMENT

Briefly explain the role of the theatre audience.

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## **UNIT 4 ENGLISH DRAMA AND THE CHALLENGE OF CENSORSHIP**

### **CONTENTS**

- 1.0 Introduction
- 2.0 Objectives
- 3.0 Main Content
  - 3.1 Censorship in English Drama
- 4.0 Conclusion
- 5.0 Summary
- 6.0 Tutor-Marked Assignment
- 7.0 References/Further Reading

### **1.0 INTRODUCTION**

The idea of censorship in theatre indicates that the drama has a close and deep relationship with society. It defeats the notion of “art for art sake”, for it demonstrates clearly and in practical terms that even the authorities are aware of the impact of drama as an undeniable means of socialisation. This unit explains the seemingly difficult terrain of censorship in English drama.

### **2.0 OBJECTIVES**

At the end of this unit, you should be able to:

- trace the origin of censorship in English drama
- explain the reason(s) for censoring drama in England
- describe the nature of censorship in Elizabethan and Restoration drama
- give the reason for the abrogation of the censorship Act
- explicate the nature of censorship in today’s English drama.

### **3.0 MAIN CONTENT**

#### **3.1 Censorship in English Drama**

In spite of the passion with which the English people embraced the theatre during the Elizabethan period, many, especially the city council and clergy—those often referred to as the Puritans, viewed the theatre as an immoral institution that needs to be proscribed. Vargas (1960: 101) opines:

*But many saw in plays nothing but wickedness and folly. They denounce the playhouses as pretexts for riots, nuisances, meeting places for thieves, vagabonds, and malcontents and other unsavoury characters.*

This group which sees the theatre as an abode of rogues and prostitutes shows great discontent against the drama. It finds the government link with the theatre totally unacceptable and holds such relationship with contempt. In fact, the manner in which members of this group pursue the theatre to destroy it compels some people to regard them as “kill-joys”. It is on record that the Puritans started issuing negative treatise against the theatre since the medieval times. The opportunity to destroy the theatre was opened to the Puritans during the Commonwealth era when they dominated the Parliament. According to Vargas:

*The Puritan triumph was a signal for the deathblow to be struck. In 1642 Parliament passed an ordinance abolishing all playhouses. The closing of the theatres was an end of the epoch, the greatest in the history of the English drama.*

To further ensure that performances were wiped out completely, it was declared that all actors should be captured and treated as criminals. Although playwrights and actors were chased away, and theatre’s property sold, the fascination of the drama never allowed it to be totally exterminated. Performances were given surreptitiously according to Brockett and Hildy who further note:

*The actors continued to perform nevertheless, using the Red Bull, which had escaped demolition, or, when that appeared too dangerous, private houses, tennis courts, or inns. Often officials were bribed to ignore violations. In these years, the usual type of entertainment seems to have been the “droll”, a short ply condensed from a longer work.*

However, when circumstances connived to bring the exiled Prince of England home to rule as King Charles II in 1660, he restored the theatre but made it, essentially, an affair for the aristocrats, gallants, and the courtiers. Yet, as Vargas remarks, “the Puritans outlook on the theatre was still one of unchanged opposition”. They even get more infuriated with the decadent displays of the Restoration comedy. In 1698, a clergy, Jeremy Collier published a diatribe against the theatre entitled, “A Short View of the Profaneness and Immorality of the English Stage”. In this

essay, he accuses the stage of misbehaving in matters of morality, religion, and of using action, music, and thought in a bad sense. He also attacked the stage for its intolerable use of language. On the immoral talk on stage, Collier says, “Such licentious discourse tends to no point but to stain the imagination, to awaken folly, and to weaken the defenses of virtue”.

Collier blames the stage for its wanton blurring of the distinction between virtue and vice; for making the major characters lewd, debauched, and atheistical. He argues that in so doing, “vice is thus preferred, thus ornamented and caressed”. He frowns terribly against the stage’s negation of poetic justice. In this regard, he intones with reference to the major characters of the Restoration drama:

*They keep their honor untarnished and carry off the advantage of their character. They are set up for the standard of behaviour and the masters of ceremony and sense. And at last, that the example may work the better they generally make them rich and happy and reward them with their own desires.*

It is necessary to point out that Collier is not averse to drama, *altogether*. His diatribe is squarely against the drama of his time, the Restoration comedy which he considered “offensive to standards of public decency” (Brockett and Hildy, p.426). In the same article, he praised Euripides for his drama of good sense and modesty, illustrating his notion of what a dramatic character should be with Phaedra. According to him:

*Euripides who was no negligent observer of human nature, is always careful of this Decorum. Thus Phaedra when possessed with an infamous passion takes all imaginable pain to conceal it. She is as regular and reserved in her language as the most virtuous matron. “Tis true, the force of shame and desire, the scandal of satisfying, and the difficulty of parting with her inclinations disorder her to distraction. However, her frenzy is not lewd; she keeps her modesty even after she has lost her wits (pp.394 – 395).*

Notwithstanding this, Collier’s brash unmediated criticism did portray the theatre in a bad light, igniting and fueling severe hatred against the stage in many quarters, in spite of attempts by lovers of the theatre to vindicate it in critical essays. Although the 18th century did push away the obscenities and the looseness of the Restoration comedy by ushering

in the drama of sense and popular taste, the outlook of the “kill – joys” never changed. John Gay’s *The Beggars Opera* and Henry Fielding’s plays which satirised Wapole’s administration were seen as extremely offending plays and this drove the authority to take a drastic action against the theatre by passing the Licensing Act of 1737. This Act reduced the number of the theatres in London to two, namely Drury Lane and Covent Garden. The small theatres were severely crippled. The Act equally banned *Polly*, Gay’s sequel to *The Beggars Opera*. In explaining the negative impact of this Act on the theatre as a whole, Vargas laments:

*The Licensing Act introduced stage censorship in England for the first time. All plays had now to be approved by the Lord Chamberlain before the performance. Wheels had been set in motion which would in time go far to weaken the life – blood of the theatre. Fielding was the first to turn away from the theatre. The clammy hands of the stage censorship still work their pernicious way in the world of the theatre, driving brave spirits into other fields of writing, emasculating and weakening the work of those who remain (p.141).*

However, the theatre is a restless and undying superman, a darling of the people. The idea of democracy and public opinion prevailed on the government in 1843 to pass The Theatre Regulation Act which enlarged participation. But the act merely abolished the privileges enjoyed by the two patent houses by legalising the activities of the smaller theatres and by permitting the building of more playhouses. Vargas submits that the Act “did nothing to disturb the incubus of censorship but clarify the ridiculous position of the theatre” (p.163).

In 1893, George Bernard Shaw’s *Mrs. Warren’s Profession* was banned for attacking the morality of the smug Victorian age. Banned for about thirty years, the play only received its first public performance in 1925. As Vargas observes, “Shaw’s thorough investigation of the economics behind prostitution was too much in earnest for the censor and the great axe fell”.

After the World War II and when life was injected into the British theatre that has been in comatose throughout the war period, young British playwrights- led by John Osborne, as we have noted earlier, burst – the facade of silence by launching severe attack against the middle – class and its dramatic tradition to the shock of everyone. As Cornish and Ketels admit:

*Plays that dominated the West End were substantially out of touch with the dislocations of the post-war world. They respected the taboos by the Lord Chamberlain against open discussion of sex, religion and the establishment, especially irreverent references to the royal family... The frank probing of character and social environment that was liberating drama on the European continent and in America was considered bad taste, if not morbid, by the English.*

It is this drama that tucks away the happenings of the time that Osborne and his group rebelled against. Although the hero of *Look Back in Anger*, the play which started it all:

*seems to have no positive solution to suggest for the long list of moral, social, and political betrayals he denounces. Although essentially negative in tone, the play caught the contemporary rebellious mood so well that Jimmy came to represent an entire generation of "angry young men" (Brockett and Hildy).*

However, as the office of the Lord Chamberlain, which has been responsible for the censorship of drama in England, was beginning to trade tackles with theatre managers, the government that has been in dire need of recognition, relied on the public opinion and made a law stripping the Lord Chamberlain the power of dramatic censorship on 26<sup>th</sup> September, 1968. And as John Nathan says, this marked an end to official "reactionary philistinism" against the English drama. Brockett and Hildy (1999: 560) note that in the spirit of freedom:

*A number of play previously forbidden were produced immediately, among them Hair (banned because of nudity and obscenity), Osborne's A Portrait for Me (forbidden because of homosexual scenes), Hochhuth's The Soldiers (banned because it was considered offensive to Churchill's memory), and Edward Bond's plays (forbidden because they were considered immoral).*

It is important to state that the cancellation of the censorship law in 1968 gives playwrights the liberty to exploit their imagination and experience in their plays, but does that entail that they can go on and do whatever they like? John Nathan's answer is "Not quite". For him "The issue of censorship will be thick in the air". He states that Gurpreet Kaur Bhatti's

*Behud* (Beyond Belief) caused “violent protests” in 2004 “at the Birmingham Repertory Theatre, known as the Rep”. In his words:

*One of the offending scenes involved a rape in Sikh temple. The protests were so violent that Bhatti had to go into hiding in fear of her life and the play was stopped.*

Nathan recounts that the artistic director of the company, Jonathan Church says that “The police locked the actors in their dressing room for safety”. And that unconfirmed reports suggest that “protesters ran through the building with swords drawn”. Nathan equally reports that Richard Bean’s play “with racial stereotypes including agricultural Irish, oyvey-ing Hasidic Jews and militant Bangladeshi Muslims” attracted widespread protests in 2009.

The issue of censorship now moved from the authorities to the citizens. To avoid clashes with the people, Nathan opines that playwrights now indulge in self-censorship. He says that Richard Bean has been doing this following the experience of his controversial play; but on this issue, Nicholas Hytner, the artistic director of the National Theatre and the director of *England People Very Nice*, appears to sit on the fence. Nathan cites him to have said:

*I'd prefer not to have to choose between my responsibility to a good play and my responsibility to the people whose boss I am and over whom I have a duty of care.*

Hytner’s position is borne out of the need to be cautious. Plays on religious and racial affairs are known according to Nathan to provoke “simmering tension” and frequently do “take their toll”. Yet, “their presence cannot be ignored in the theatrical landscape”, for that would amount to muzzling the freedom of expression.

## **SELF-ASSESSMENT EXERCISE**

Why does the English authority censor the drama?

## **4.0 CONCLUSION**

This study indicates that the English drama has its own share of censorship. It reveals that the idea of censoring the drama arose out of the Puritans’ accusation of the theatre as a breeding ground for rogues, vagabonds, and prostitutes.

### 13.0 SUMMARY

The unit examines the origin of censorship in English drama, explores the reasons advanced for proscribing drama; discusses the stages of censorship; the impact of the official clamp down on the drama; the abolition of the censorship law, and the new trend of censorship in English drama.

### 14.0 TUTOR-MARKED ASSIGNMENT

Discuss the role of the Puritan in the censorship of the English drama.

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