

**M.A ENGLISH**

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**AUTHOR-SULAGNA MOHANTY**

## Paper XII: Unit I

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### 1. Introduction to Modern Drama

#### 1.1 Romanticism and the Dramatic Subject

Until the nineteenth century, most European playwrights drew their tragic plots from ancient myths or legendary history and their comic material from a repertory of stock characters and attitudes. These choices of dramatic subjects reflect the priorities that endured from the days of Periclean Athens to the middle of the eighteenth century. On the one hand, these choices demonstrate a belief that truly important things happened only to those who were high on the social scale; on the other, they show that artists tested their abilities not so much through innovation as by imitation. Thus familiar plots and characters continued to be worth writing about; new talent revealed itself by finding new ways to dramatize old truths.

By the 1750s, however, the same changes that were brewing political revolution began to affect the drama. More and more plays began focusing on the trials and tribulations of those on the lower rungs of the social ladder. From this so-called bourgeois drama emerged a transformation that culminates in one of the great periods of theatrical activity, the modern era, which begins around 1870.

Interest in the experiences of ordinary people reached a high point with Romanticism and its exaltation of the commonplace. The poor invited little notice in pre-eighteenth-century literature; when nineteenth-century writers turned their attention toward these lives, they began by "romanticizing" them. However dirty and boring common life was, the

Romantic artist saw in it a trace of Edenic innocence. Lives not lived in palaces were somehow perceived as being unspoiled.

If the dramatic subjects chosen by the early Romantics were wider ranging than those chosen by the ancients, the treatment the subjects received, as we have suggested, was far from realistic. The tendency to idealize the poor also led to the glorification of the outlaw, a sign of the revolutions that were to come. Added to this, a newly self-conscious nationalism found expression in a variety of historical dramas that extolled two often-lost causes, liberty and nationhood.

## **1.2 A New Theoretical Basis for Drama**

Romantic ideas emerged early in Germany in the work of three major playwrights: Gotthold Ephraim Lessing, Johann Christophe Friedrich von Schiller (1759-1805), and Johann Wolfgang von Goethe. These writers articulated new theoretical justifications for their choice of dramatic material. As admirers of Shakespeare, to whom the neoclassicists had condescended on account of his indifference to rules, Lessing and Schiller in particular championed diversity and freedom in theatrical texts.

The most prolific playwright of the three, Schiller especially widened the range of theatrical plots. When he turned to the past for his subjects, he did not select the mythological figures who attracted Goethe, but rather the patriots of relatively recent European history. Prime among them are Joan of Arc, to whom the title *The Maid of Orleans* (1801) refers, and William Tell, the Swiss national hero (1804).

### **1.3 The Closet Drama**

At the height of the Romantic period, just as more elaborate theatrical performance became possible, many poets turned to neo-Shakespearean dramatic verse to write plays that they never expected to see performed. Inspired by the romantic quest for unreachable goals, these writers did not prefer to concern themselves with the practical problems of staging plays. Instead, they sought to explore philosophical issues in poetic dialogue that would have defeated credible acting before an audience. Such plays, written to be read rather than performed, are known as closet dramas. Wordsworth, Shelley, and Byron all wrote in this form.

### **1.4 Changes in the Methods of Theatrical Production**

Nineteenth-century playwrights proved as eager as nineteenth-century novelists to emulate the camera, but major innovations in technology were required before photographically accurate scene pictures could be mounted on stage. By the early 1800s, theatres could be equipped with substantial backstage storage space and revolving turntables; no longer did plays have to be presented against a single generalized painted backdrop. Gas lights were introduced into some theatres in the 1820s and by mid-century, lighting effects could be overseen by a technician stationed at a central control board. Sunlight could become moonlight and summer turn into fall in the course of a single performance; specific geographical locales could be reproduced on stage and shifted with ease.

At first, these resources were exploited in only a few extravagant productions. A famous early treatment of Schiller's *Maid of Orleans* recreated the French countryside and

churches of Joan's childhood, most spectacularly in a coronation scene that had hundreds of actors and musicians on stage in full view of the audience. A London production in the 1850s of *Sardanapalus*, written by Lord Byron, the English Romantic poet, actually set up on the stage a replica of an ancient Babylonian palace that seemed to be consumed by fire at every performance, thanks to intricate scenic construction and lighting devices.

In other words, the stage in the mid-nineteenth century was capable of providing audiences with the large-scale panoramas that we associate with historical films. The embrace of limits that had fuelled the imagination of earlier dramatists had been eclipsed by a fascination for decorative effect. This era of extravagant staging is notable as well for a new emphasis on the actor as celebrity, for star performers quickly learned to exploit the sophisticated lighting boards by commanding spotlights to follow their every movement onstage. Offstage, actors hired railroad cars and crossed Europe and America in hugely publicized personal tours. Stage image and star power drew so much attention that an entirely new theatrical professional, the director, emerged. The director's job was to coordinate the performances of self-absorbed actors and to oversee every detail of the expensive and complicated productions audiences increasingly demanded.

### **1.5 The Collapse of Revolutionary Ideals**

Earlier chapters have mentioned that the great hopes of the early Romantic period and of the early days of the French Revolution were dampened, and for many drowned, in the events of the Reign of Terror, the reaction, and the Napoleonic Wars. Generous liberal principles and gestures of the early revolution faded away in war and ultimately were defeated. Romantic hopes that the Revolution would unite the downtrodden vanished as

ideological differences among conservatives, liberals, and radicals instead divided classes, groups, nations, and individuals.

In the decades after the defeat of the Napoleonic forces at Waterloo (1815), European politics swung like a pendulum between conservative and liberal poles. The great powers (Prussia, Russia, Austria) used their armies to repress any sign of liberal ideas or politics both in international affairs and in the internal affairs of nations they could control, such as the German or Italian states.

In France especially, the conflicts between different visions of society and government were acute, and intensified as industrialization led to a new class of urban workers who were drawn to the talk of radicals, republicans, and democrats who remembered -- and romanticized -- the French Revolution. Hoping that the power of the vote would force government to end joblessness and homelessness, crowds of Parisians forced the deputies to grant universal manhood suffrage and a republican form of government in 1848. The dream of "the people," as their supporters called them, became to their detractors the terror of the "mob." The brutal repression of demonstrating workers in "the bloody June days" by the army signified a new alliance between conservatives and even many liberals -- landowners, factory owners, the Catholic hierarchy -- and small business against the democrats, republicans, and early socialists in the Second Empire.

Presiding over it all was Napoleon III, whom partisans of the defeated ruling families of France, the Bourbons and the Orleanists, considered the epitome of the social climbers who had replaced them. This alliance, it will be recalled, was built on new money, much of it banking or financial fortunes, not on aristocratic birth and landed wealth. The most

impressive achievement of the nouveaux riches was the modernizing of Paris, turning a crowded medieval city into a glamorous urban model.

### **1.6 Paris: *A Rainy Day*, by Gustav Caillebottte**

The new Paris, with its stately and beautifully laid out architecture, was the perfect backdrop for a complacent new class eager to show off its success in attention-getting dress and behaviour. The intention of urban planners, however, was not merely to beautify; for the new layout of the city made Paris easier to police. The same wide boulevards where the fashionable could promenade also provided quick access for the municipal authorities if crowds had to be controlled. Neighbourhoods were newly segregated by class, with the working poor shifted to the outskirts or moved six and seven flights upward, often into dark inner courts of quadrangle buildings. The extravagantly expensive public buildings attracted tourists from the whole of Europe who were eager to see the town where anyone and everything were for sale.

### **1.7 Boulevard Theatre**

Mid-nineteenth century Europe luxuriated in the profits of industrial progress; not only in France, but also in England (where this period is named after the long-lived Queen Victoria) and elsewhere on the continent, new ruling classes based on wealth rather than intellect or inheritance wielded power. The theatre, always a barometer of social change, celebrated its achievements, and moneyed audiences gloried in a style of drama that catered to their tastes. Since Parisian tastes were especially crucial to the development of modern drama, we will focus here on the evolution of the French theatrical scene.

Playwrights themselves became entrepreneurs in this climate, giving the public a saleable product. Unlike the realist novelists of this period who satirized the bourgeoisie, the dramatists Eugène Scribe (1791-1861), the younger Alexandre Dumas (1824-95), and Victorien Sardou (1831-1908) pandered to it. Scribe, Dumas, and Sardou wrote literally hundreds of plays that exemplify Boulevard Theatre. This term, like the comparable American designation, Broadway Theatre, denotes plays written less for art than for profit.

In place of myth and history, of tragic heroes and nationalist firebrands, Boulevard dramatists and other playwrights of the mid-nineteenth century focused on comfortable middle-class lives. Drama in the pre-Romantic era, as we have seen, had begun to extend the range of subjects to include sympathetic portraits of humble and ordinary people.<sup>(2)</sup> In the conservative middle of the century, however, melodrama, farce, and what were called well-made plays concentrated on the upper middle-class world of privilege funded by money and power rather than birth. The nouveaux riches were both envied and disdained by the old aristocrats, who responded with a heightened snobbery and avoided the gathering places where the new elite went to amuse themselves.

Well-made plays actually were the ancestors of the contemporary television series. Rarely exploring character development, the genre deployed instead stock figures involved in intricate plots that lead to last-minute dramatic revelations. Sacrificing human probability for theatrical effectiveness, these plays typically include a series of unbelievable coincidences that bring long-lost relatives together, or compromising letters that expose a villain's true motives. In other words, after an initial fright, true love and virtue (easily recognized categories in the relatively simplistic moral universe of melodrama and the well-made play) are rewarded in the end.

## 1.8 The Audience in the Theatre

The superior technical resources of the theatres built in the nineteenth century depended in large part upon the proscenium arch, which framed the stage and created a clean break between the playing area and the audience. Associated with the development of fixed perspective in Renaissance Italy, proscenium arches made possible the visually convincing realistic backdrops that proliferated in the 1800s. The first permanent theatre with a built-in proscenium arch was created for Cardinal Richelieu's palace in 1641. As new theatres were built throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, proscenium arches got higher and thicker and became more imposing. Paradoxically, a device that originally promised to draw the viewer's eye into the playing area had the opposite effect of detaching audiences from the action.

The amphitheatres of ancient Greece, the thrust stages of Elizabethan England, the court theatre rooms of classical India or seventeenth-century Europe, indeed almost every theatrical structure that the world had known up until this time had flourished by uniting spectators and actors in dramatic performances with important consequences for all the participants. The nineteenth-century European auditorium, however, had evolved into a place where socially ambitious members of the audience had better views of each other than of the stage. Hoping to lure customers to their theatres, owners installed upholstered chairs in place of wooden benches and began selling tickets in advance for these comfortable accommodations. This apparent improvement actually meant that people began going to the theatre at times when they had committed themselves to do so rather than when they most desired to do so.

Furthermore, the most expensive seats often afforded the worst perspective for watching the play itself; patrons paid dearly to occupy walled-off boxes with movable armchairs and private anterooms that circled the auditorium in several tiers. On the extreme sides of the stage, often in box seats built into the proscenium itself and facing toward the central royal box rather than the performance space, expensively gowned and bejeweled women displayed themselves to the gaze of those who sat opposite them. Other theatregoers, also more intent on personal matters than dramatic production, could sit in the dark recesses of the box and whisper to each other. During the lengthy intermissions, visits were exchanged from box to box; when the next act began, viewers often had moved from their own seats to be near those they had really come to see at the theatre.

### **1.9 Sarah Bernhardt**

So commonplace was these games of musical chairs that a theatre scene became a staple of nineteenth-century novels. Authors used their characters' attitude toward theatrical presentation as gauges of moral worth. Tolstoy, for instance, signals that Ivan Ilych has learned to detect the falsity of materialism by showing him cringe when his wife and daughter leave him on his deathbed to go see the great French actress Sarah Bernhardt.

Probably the ultimate theatrical form of the century was opera. In the size of its gestures and its direct appeal to the senses through music, dance, and spectacle, the opera filled ever-larger theatres. When Flaubert's *Madame Bovary* goes to see a performance of Donizetti's *Lucia di Lammermoor*, she is so swept away by the music and the melodramatic tale that she almost loses control of her senses. Indeed, it is no accident that many of the libretti (or scripts) of the greatest operas of the century were texts written by Scribe and

Sardou, specialists in lifting their audiences out of humdrum reality, thrilling and flattering them at the same time.

### **1.10 The Challenge of the Proscenium Stage**

The combination of the proscenium arch, the heavy curtain traditionally hung from it, and the darkened auditorium so segregated performers from audiences that the public's shift of attention from stage action to social interplay had become a formidable challenge to playwrights. Modern theatre artists have sought to restore the spectators' vital role in two diametrically opposed ways, either by disregarding the barrier separating audiences from actors or by insisting on it. Dramatic realists treat the space before the stage as the so-called fourth wall, with audiences in effect spying on the activities of their neighbours for the night, the actors appearing before them in essentially realistic settings. Other playwrights emphasize the gap between theatrical illusion and everyday reality. The early modern dramatists forced complacent and self-absorbed theatregoers to recognize the dilemmas of their own lives in the staged plays performed before them; the later modern dramatists force theatregoers to take account of the distance between them and the actors in front of them. In each phase of modern drama, however, the playwright strives to make theatrical experience integral to the life of the viewer and not simply a pleasant entertainment.

## **2. Introduction to Modern English Drama**

### **2.1 The Beginning**

The glorious days of the Elizabethan drama were followed by a long period of decline and eclipse. The post-Elizabethan vainly endeavoured to capture the graces of Shakespeare and other illustrious predecessors, while the heroic tragedies and the comedy

of love and intrigue during the Restoration hardly added any glorious chapter to the history of English dramatic literature. Goldsmith and Sheridan attempted a partial revival in the eighteenth century, but their sporadic brilliance was followed by a spell of darkness which spread for almost a century, for between 1779, the year of the performance of Sheridan's last important play, and 1876 when Pinero's first play was staged, English drama was practically barren. The later eighteenth century witnessed the rise of great actors but not great playwrights. And it is an accepted rule that when acting flourishes drama languishes. Melodramatic, sensational and unrealistic plays alone were popular. A play was written not with a view to depicting life and character but for providing sufficient scope for the lusty lungs of the declamatory actor. Play writing was done mostly by hack writers, who sacrificed both art and realism in trying to eke out a living by writing to the dictates of theatre managers, producers and actors.

English drama was at very low ebb when T.W. Robertson, a playwright and actor, appeared on the scene, fully alive to the lack of realism and low artistic tone of the drama of his day he determined to import realism into drama and raise its artistic level. The year was 1865 which witnessed the performance of his play. *Society*, proved a landmark in the revival of the English stage. The revival manifested itself in stress on realism both in subject matter and technique. In place of types and stock characters Robertson presented individual men and women, person of flesh and blood. In the matter of technique and form he discarded blank verse and rhetoric in favour of natural and human speech. Robertson however was not a bold or revolutionary spirit and he could not divest himself of the old traditions, such as romantic melodrama. He, therefore, failed to exercise any substantial influence on his

contemporaries and the much needed reform in drama required a more daring literary genius.

## 2.2 Significant Works

The darling genius was found, to some extent, in Arthur Wing Pinero and H. A. Jones who made pretty serious efforts to drive away undiluted romanticism from the English stage. An expert craftsman Pinero had the courage to introduce several innovations in dramatic technique. In his *The Second Mrs. Tanqueray*, produced in 1893, he played the pioneer in discarding the 'soliloquy' and the 'aside' along with certain other old stage conventions, thus bringing drama closer to life. Pinero and Jones, however, he could not be sufficiently daring to ignore public taste altogether. Though Jones wrote in his preface to *Saints and Sinners* (1884) that playwriting should not be merely the art of sensational and spectacular illusion but mainly and chiefly the art of representing English life, he could not avoid, in his plays, theatrical excitement and too much use of coincidence just to humor the audience. Hence, the realism of these dramatists was skin deep not the genuine stuff which subsequent playwrights were to provide.

The person who infused real new revolutionary blood into English drama was Henrik Ibsen, a Norwegian playwright. He was introduced to English audiences by J. T. Grein, a Dutchman, in 1890. In England, William Archer, the famous dramatic critic, enthusiastically espoused Ibsen's cause. Through Ibsen's genuine realism was introduced in English plays, Ibsen's characters are drawn from ordinary life and characterization in his plays receives more attention than the patching up of a well-knit plot. Moreover, the plot in his plays is essentially psychological leaving little room for pure action or incident. The Ibsenian play is essentially a drama of ideas, of characters swayed with ideas and struggling against the

forces of convention and society. Ibsen's ideas gave a rude shock to the susceptibilities of his contemporaries, but he was bold enough to stick to his theories and technique. Consequently, he exercised a great influence all over the continent and the drama of ideas of revolt against society and convention came to stay. The tyranny of the star system and the stranglehold of the commercial minded theatre managers could do no longer throttle true dramatic art. The renaissance of modern drama was in full swing with the advent of Ibsen.

If William Archer propagated the plays of Ibsen, it was Shaw who imported the real Ibsen spirit into English Drama. Highly original and independent in many ways, Shaw was immensely influenced by the plays of Ibsen and, like him; he became a champion of conferring the new freedom of subject-matter and technique on English drama. Since the appearance of his first play *Widowers Houses* in 1892, Shaw strode on the English stage like a versatile Titan almost till the end of his days. Among modern English dramatists, he proved the most zealous advocate of rationalism and realism, brushing aside Victorian cobwebs, a proper climate for a drama of ideas, enlarging the dramatists vision and, above all, slowly forging an appreciative and responsive intellectual audience for his problems plays. The volume of his dramatic production is so wide and varied that it is not possible within this limited space to do justice to the great services which he rendered to British drama. His *Arms and the Mans*, *Candida*, *Man Superman* *Saint Joan*, to mention only some of his best plays, brought English drama again into its own and provided inspiration and guidance to other playwright.

"I always have to preach", observed Shaw. "My plays all have a purpose." The plays of Shaw are inspired by a conscious iconoclastic Galsworthy the two other great luminaries in

the firmament of modern drama gave a version of realism in their work, which has no touch of the partisan spirit or the zeal of the propagandist. Their realism has been described as naturalism i.e. an attempt to present "both fair and foul, no more no less." The naturalistic play is intended to be objective and impersonal, though both Galsworthy and Barker could not be absolutely dispassionate. Both were revolutionaries in their own way. Barker revolted against the tyranny of Victorian convention over the individual and Galsworthy resisted against the heartless but mighty social forces which crush the individual. Barker expounds the ideal of self-realization, which Galsworthy strives to make out a case for tolerance and mutual understanding and accommodation.

Shaw's realism and the naturalism of Barker and Galsworthy have to be distinguished further. Shaw is essentially an intellectual, cold, penetrating, satirical, often flippant, but the latter have nothing of the imp or the mountebank in them. Moreover they do not banish emotion from their plays. *Shaw* is essentially a talker and his plays about in discussion and a display of wit but both *Galsworthy and Barker* subordinate sheer wit and talk to the possibilities of life and the strong undercurrent of emotion which eventually sways human life. Both deal with problems, mostly social in character, but despite all his legal training, Galsworthy is the more didactic of the two whereas *Galsworthy* tries to rub his moral home. Barker leaves the public to draw its own moral. Nevertheless, in all his best plays *Strife*, *Justice*, *The Skin Game*, *Loyalties*, Galsworthy shows himself at once a great artist and a great critic of society, far more balanced, reserved and impartial than Shaw.

The popularity of realism and naturalism did not oust the romantic element altogether from the domain of modern drama. Realism stimulates the brain but a touch of romanticism vivifies the heart. "The lies of romance relieve the tedium of everyday life." It was J. M.

Barrie, a Scottish novelist, who provided the lies of romance by turning his face away from drab and cruel reality. He found solace in magic isles and imaginary dream islands, Gifted with a child's fancy and make-belief, he was at best with children. And it is a children's play, *Peter Pan* (1904) in which he is at his best. Among his other plays, mention may be made of *Quality Street* (1903), which centres round a sweet love story full of his peculiar charm, humour and pathos, smiles and tears. *The Admirable Crichton*, *What Every Woman Knows*, *Dear Brutus*, *Mary Rose* are all plays far removed from realism, presenting impossible characters, who behave impossibly. Barrie created a new type of play, which can best be described as "Barriesque", a blending of romance, whimsicality and quaintness. A perfect master of technique, he produced plays which despite all their fantasy and romance, are compact and well-knit. Summing up his contribution to modern drama, Lynton Hudson observes: "*In an age of growing cynicism he guarded the guttering flame of Romance and kept it from being quenched by intellectualism.*"

No account of modern British drama can be complete without a reference to the Irish Movement and the Provincial Repertory Movement. The new Irish Theatre was founded in 1892 by a group of prominent Irish writers with W. B. Yeats at their head. Later on, Miss, A. E. Horniman, a wealthy English woman, joined this group of writers and provided funds with which the Abbey Theatre, Dublin, was constructed.

The Irish Movement, also known as Celtic Revival, was essentially national in character, and concentrated on Irish themes and ideas. It also aimed at reforming the stage and turning it into a thing of beauty. The movement, however, was not intended to espouse the cause of realism or naturalism. Lynton Hudson, describing this aspect to the movement, observes: "It did not think of a play as either a sermon or a debate, not as intellectual at all

as appealing primarily to the brain. It was not intended to make people think, but to make them feel to give them an emotional and spiritual uplifting such as they might experience at mass in a cathedral or at the performance of a symphony.”

Owing to these aims and ideals the Irish playwright turned to the past of their country, its myths and legends. In a sense, their approach was romantic and poetical. In his plays, Yeats glorified the national myths and legends and depicted primitive human emotions. Essentially a poet, he gave beautiful ideas and first-rate lyrical poetry but failed in characterization and plot construction. His contribution to drama lies essentially in the realism of poetry and symbolism.

The Irish Movement also inspired a new type of native comedy drawing its inspiration from Irish folk-lore and Irish peasantry. The best exponent of this comedy was the talented J. M. Synge (1871-1909), whom Yeats discovered in Paris, wasting his genius as a journalist, Synge drew his inspiration largely from the simple fishermen of the Aran Isles. There he saw human nature both at its best and at its worst. He also picked up the native speed and picturesque idiom of these people. *Synge's* best comedies are in the *Shadow of the Glen*, the *Tinker's Wedding* and particularly *The Playboy of the Western World*. The last was at once recognized to be his masterpiece after its performance at the *London Theatre* in 1907. *Synge* also wrote a few tragedies, the best of which in *Riders to the Sea* (1904). *Synge* wrote six plays. His dramatic work is limited but it is of such a high order that his place in British drama is assured for all times to come. “Synge had, like Shakespeare,” writes Hudson, “not only a sure dramatic instinct and a keen insight into the motive forces of human character, but also the gift of transmuting pathos and ugliness into poetry and beauty, and the exuberance inseparable from all great geniuses. Like Shakespeare, he never

moralizes, he is a dramatist pure and simple. He had no sympathy with the didactic school of drama.”

*Miss Horniman*, who had financed the *Abbey Theatre, Dublin*, also found money to start a repertory theatre in Manchester in 1907. Since then the provincial repertory theatre has played a significant role in both English and American drama. It became the chief centre for producing talented playwrights and actors. Other theatres notably the Liverpool Playhouse (1911), slowly came into existence. Unlike the *Irish Theatre*, the Manchester and other English theatres were not intended to arouse or revive local nationalism, nor were they inspired by the poetic and symbolic aspects of life. Their drama was highly realistic and intellectual in line with the work of Ibsen and Shaw. It did much to popularize the drama of idea and represent the social life both of the rich and the poor of the highly industrialized towns of Manchester and Birmingham. This drama was, of course, naturalistic and photographic but a bit too serious, even grim. “*A night in a repertory theatre*”, wrote *St. John Ervine*, “*was almost as cheerful as a night in a morgue. People went to repertory theatres as some Dissenters formerly went to chapel, woebegonely and as if they came to atone for lamentable sins.*”

### **2.3 The Features**

An important phase of modern drama is found in the revival of the poetic drama along side of the naturalistic and realistic plays. The plays of Yeats were poetic to a certain extent but the Irish Theatre eventually drifted from poetry towards realism. In England poetic drama found its first exponent in Stephen Philipps, whose blank verse plays enjoyed considerable popularity in the first years of the century. Stephen Philipps possessed

considerable dramatic genius, but his poetic talent was not equally high. So he failed to work a revival of poetic drama.

It were John Drinkwater and John Galsworthy who brought about the actual revival of poetic drama. Drinkwater did not attempt to write in blank verse and thus escaped comparison with the great Shakespeare. He produced four poetic plays, but used both prose and verse in them. Finally he gave up poetic drama altogether and wrote only in prose. Finally he gave up poetic drama altogether and wrote only in prose. His masterpiece is *Abraham Lincoln* a play on the life of the American president. His other plays *Cromwell* and *Mary Stuart* are also historical, but they didn't come up to the level of *Abraham Lincoln*. Galsworthy chose at first biblical or historical subjects and experimented with various lyric metres, including the rhymed couplet, but he finally evolved a poetic idiom in prose like Wordsworth's like Synge, he forged a new pattern of rhythmic speech, terse, figurative and rooted in the soil. His characters are simple, rustic folk. His best play is *The Tragedy of Nan* which presents a picture of rustic cruelty, though it is not without a certain element of tragic grandeur. The play though written in prose is essentially poetic.

Among other exponents of poetic drama John Galsworthy, with his oriental play *Hassan*, deserves special mention. It is written in highly coloured prose, but it is, like Galsworthy's *Nan* steeped in the spirit of poetry. Lawrence Binyon, Lord Dunsany, Galsworthy Bottomley and T.S. Eliot have also attempted poetic drama. T.S. Eliot's *Murder in The Cathedral* has proved a success, but the plays of the others have failed to elicit much appreciation.

There are some of the main tendencies and types of modern drama. Though the momentum of dramatic revival has not kept up a uniform pace during the century its future

is not dark. What it will be in the years to come is not altogether impossible to visualize. "One can only guess what form the new drama will assume when it eventually finds its equilibrium." Priestly is not alone in thinking that it will be more closely allied with music and the ballet. One thing is sure: it must recover some of the things that it has lost the obvious beauties of romance and poetry. It may be, as Galsworthy predicted, lyrical, and its province to describe the elemental soul of man and forces of Nature with beauty and the spirit of discovery. It will most likely to be a swing-back of the pendulum that oscillates eternally between Romance and Realism. The fallacy of Realism, as James Branch Cabell has put it, "is that it assumes our mileposts to be as worthy of consideration as our goal: and that the especial post we are now passing reveals an eternal verity."

## **2.4 An Overview**

Modern British Drama is a period of literature that can be difficult to place within a distinct beginning and end. Because history is never-ending, it can be hard to classify when one era starts and finishes; since literature does not change overnight, there is no straight-lined, apparent transformation of thematic elements or style. Therefore, people must look at a wide range of literary elements to find patterns and gradual changes, in order to categorize a specific time of literature. During the Victorian era, Britain was constrained by a rigid class system. Many people, including those related to the arts, dealt with the inability to obtain any sort of individualism. The elite dominated the British culture; therefore, they were at the forefront of the nation's expansion amongst the arts. For that reason, Modern British Drama became an era of British literature focused on finding and receiving its own identity. British tradition, language, and politics were only a few major topics sought out by illustrious Modern British Drama figures. It is because of these national, thematic issues that

Britain has been able to establish a strand of uniqueness, which sets them apart from decades of limited, confined literature.

Although the beginning of Modern British Drama has no specific start date, Christopher Isben, the author of *Modern British Drama: The Twentieth Century*, provides an untried timeline of events that follows Modern British Drama's history. According to Isben, 1890 marks the beginning of Modern British Drama with George Bernard Shaw's attack on the most previous, Victorian era. Around this time, the arts were expressing the need for a change in the disposition and role of theatre. Britain no longer wanted to follow the traditional genres seen on stage; they rejected logical structures and reasoning. Rather, writers wanted to use an approach that went beyond sheer entertainment; something that generated a message and spoke about society. On stage, Modern British Drama began to mirror everyday life. It took on an "anti-illusionistic" portrayal of the world. The characters tended to embody characteristics that epitomized humankind as a whole. Clearly, realism appears to be the ultimate driving theme throughout Modern British Drama. Almost every play I saw in London, during the summer of 2011, demonstrated some element of social realism.

For instance, *Betrayal*, *Pygmalion*, *Act without Words, II* and *War Horse* are plays that possess elements of realism and naturalism; they link characters, setting, and props to various social contexts. Specifically, Samuel Beckett's *Act without Words, II* is so blatantly vague, that his desire to address all humankind is made undisguised.

*Betrayal*, based off of Harold Pinter's real life love affair, instinctively highlights the play's realistic nature. Furthermore, the overall plot is one that anyone could easily relate to

and understands. The play's costumes, props, and setting were simple, average, and reflected every-day life.

*Pygmalion* is entirely focused on the British social structure, from language to etiquette. The basic storyline questions values, materialism, and social status, all of which are actual issues the average person must deal with, in society.

*War Horse* touches on a more political subject matter through the depiction of war and its effects on nature, humankind, and an entire nation. Throughout *War Horse*, Michael Morpurgo displays the terrible after effects of war and its damage to people, nature, and society. Morpurgo utilizes his story to highlight the devastating effects of a corrupt and flawed culture, government, and social structure.

However, Modern British Drama does not present these various social situations merely for the sake of exposure; instead, many writers take their political messages one step further in order to criticize and condemn the British social structure. To many Modern British Drama writers, the idea of a man-made social system was so limiting and irrational that it must be mocked. This apparent quip at a flawed British social structure can be seen within George Bernard Shaw's *Pygmalion*. This particular play reveals the ever so flawed British social system of the early nineteenth hundreds, something that Shaw continuously struggled with. By the end of the story, Shaw's keynote is made apparent: people will inevitably continue to be trapped behind a man-made, pretentious society that continues to self-destruct.

In *Betrayal*, Harold Pinter uses Jerry's wife as a mechanism to add a political feature of Modern British Drama to his play. Jerry's wife is always being talked about, but she never

shows up on stage. This could very well be intentionally done, in order to denote how completely absent she was from Jerry's life, despite them being married. In doing so, Pinter subtly mocks the social ideology of marriage. By displaying the complete absence of an actual relationship, while still claiming to be married, marriage acts as a social convention that is expected to occur despite there being any actual love in the relationship. This social ideology strips the emotion and passion from life.

Another unique aspect of Modern British Drama is its portrayal of ethical and unethical situations, which pushes the audience to contemplate morality. Betrayal is a fine example of using immoral material to provoke humour amongst the audience. In reality, there is nothing funny about betrayal and lying, but Pinter manages to keep the audience laughing by incorporating comedic material within the play. However, this humorous technique can also ignite a "questioning of morals", within the audience. While audience members are sitting there laughing at the lack of values these characters typify, more often than not, if they were the ones being cheated on or lied to, they no longer would be laughing.

With all these themes, elements, and features at play, it is ultimately the writing that drives this encompassing theme throughout Modern British Drama. Given the amount he wrote in combination with his social and political involvement, Shaw is considered the first and foremost figure of Modern British Drama. During his time, he analyzed European traditions and brought his critique to life, by putting it on stage. *Pygmalion* is a fine example of Shaw's ability to openly express his opinions on Victorian values.

The direct influence of one author on another was also an important aspect that shaped Modern British Drama. For example, Beckett's *Act without Words, II* focuses on the

idea that no matter how one lives, life is always moving forward. It does not matter how fast or how slow you move because time flows at one continual, relentless pace. One cannot control the rate at which life passes by. People wake up, complete their daily activities, and then, no matter what, the next day comes. There is no need for words or explanations because that is just the way life goes. However, if they stop responding to the prodding, could this represent death?

Undoubtedly, this is similar to Stoppard's questioning of reality and meaning of death. In *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead*, one can see the constant questioning of reality and being able to control destiny. Obviously, Samuel Beckett has had an influence on Tom Stoppard's style of writing.

Interestingly enough, Harold Pinter used to give his plays to Tom Stoppard for editing, commentary, and suggestions before he sent it to stage. The inability for one to control personal destiny or fate is a thematic link that can be seen between *Betrayal* and *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are dead*. *Betrayal* shows how one's attraction to another person is something that cannot be controlled, and in this case Jerry and Emma unpredictably fell for each other after they already married other people. As a whole, Tom Stoppard's *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead* questions the logic in reality and the forces which control fate. Clearly, there is a specific questioning of reason and logic, within both of these plays, that makes the influence of one author to another evident.

With that said, Stoppard's writing is a strong representation of a gradual change brought on by Modern British Drama. In *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead*, Stoppard questions logic and reasoning. He goes against traditional structure by using characters who

reject the concept of divine right and the ability to control fate. Stoppard utilizes the stage to voice these questions and challenge his audience to identify with what they truly believe.

Ultimately, a play reaches its fullest potential when carried out on stage. Seeing actors play the roles of characters who embody traits similar to your own, makes the play's overall meaning more influential and powerful. Understanding the thoughts and ideas of dominant writers, from the previous centuries, helps us better understand history and eventually current-day society. The ability to bring history alive not only enhances the content, but also increases its sustainability. Although Modern British Drama does not seem to have an apparent beginning or end, there is still a series of trends and events which illustrate and explain how Britain came to establish their own style of influential literature.

### **3. Unique Characteristics of Modern Drama**

#### **3.1 Theatre and the Modern World**

Dramatists often earned their reputation by confronting the audience with controversial subject matter and forms made to challenge rather than please the viewer. Advances in science and technology, expanding city life, nationalism, changes among social classes, and the move from an agrarian to an industrial economy influenced dramatic themes. Plays were often censored or banned due to their explicit or controversial content, leaving them performable only for small, private audiences. The Well-Made Play and Melodrama—genres of the nineteenth century—were ridiculed. Dramatists including Henrik Ibsen (1828–1906) and George Bernard Shaw (1856–1950) applied conventions of these plays but adapted them to social and psychological issues rather than incidents. August Strindberg (1849–1912) abandoned dramatic rules for the logic of dreams. Anton Chekhov

(1860–1904) abandoned stock characters and extreme drama for understatement and nuance.

### **3.2 The Independent Theatre Movement: Naturalism**

Naturalist theatres included André Antoine's Theatre Libre in Paris, J. T. Grein's Independent Theatre in London, Otto Brahm's Freie Bühne of Berlin, and Konstantin Stanislavsky's Moscow Art Theatre are among several independent theatres allowing modern playwrights to perform works outside of commercial theatres. Naturalism originated in 1860s France as a movement interested in science and social behaviours caused by biological factors as opposed to Romanticism's interest in emotion and personal experience. Naturalism grew out of an interest in Darwin's theories about creatures, their survivability, natural selection, and dependence on the environment.

### **3.3 Modern Acting**

Naturalist theatre emphasized realistic stage props and rejected histrionic acting, instead basing performance on the actor's psychology and emotions. Konstantin Stanislavsky (1863–1938), interested in realistic acting, brought in Norwegian furniture to help actors merge with their roles in the Norwegian dramatist Ibsen's plays. Georg II, the Duke of Saxe-Meiningen (1826–1914), introduced changes in ensemble acting and vivid crowd scenes. Daring female roles led to a new generation of modern actresses including Eleanora Duse, Elizabeth Robins, and Eva Le Gallienne; they often chose Ibsen's plays to develop their signature roles.

### **3.4 Aestheticism and Symbolism**

Aestheticism was associated primarily with Oscar Wilde (1854–1900), and focused on Art for Art's Sake—a movement that emphasized beauty over the social or political use of artworks. Symbolism was associated with Maurice Maeterlinck (1862–1949) of Belgium, Madame Rachilde (1860–1953) of France, and William Butler Yeats (1865–1939) of Ireland, and emphasized mysticism, subjectivity, and suggestion instead of direct, common speech. Stages such as Aurélien Lugné-Poe's Theatre de l'Œuvre in Paris championed simple sets over the Naturalists' cluttered stages; Edward Gordon Craig's abstract sets in London parallel Symbolist settings.

### **3.5 Theatre and the Avant-Garde**

Futurism, led by F. T. Marinetti (1876–1944) in Italy, removed the human character from theatre and relied on puppets, machines, and inanimate objects. Dadaism, led by Romanian Tristan Tzara (1896–1963), flourished in the Cabaret Voltaire in Zürich during World War I, and created nonsense poems, musical pieces, and masked performances. Surrealism, led by Andre Breton (1896–1966), focused on Sigmund Freud's psychoanalytical and dream theories. Alfred Jarry's *King Ubu* (1896) became an iconic surrealist play. Frenchman Antonin Artaud (1894–1948) became surrealism's most influential dramatist and created a Theatre of Cruelty—a primal theatre inspired by ancient rituals, as well as the Marx Brothers' film comedies. Artaud's *The Theatre and Its Double* (1938) discusses plague, primitive myths, and Balinese "animated hieroglyphics" in the context of curing the decadence of modern life. The avant-garde became associated with progressive art, particularly related to socialism and anarchism. In Italy futurists became associated with Fascism—extreme nationalism and advocacy of war. Dadaists opposed war and embraced

socialism to destroy class-based societies. Surrealists often joined communist parties.

Russian futurists participated in the Russian October Revolution of 1917 as socialists.

### **3.6 Political Theatre: Brecht**

Bertolt Brecht (1898–1956) is the most influential political playwright of avant-garde movements; he developed Epic Theatre. Epic Theatre relies upon techniques that interrupt the flow of plot and acting, which Brecht felt would lead to contemplation rather than observation of spectacle. Erwin Piscator taught Brecht the value of using film and other art forms in the theatre, which led to collaborations with composers including Kurt Weill (1900–1950).

### **3.7 Cultural Renewal: Ireland and the United States**

Dublin's Abbey Theatre focused on gaining cultural independence from England, including Lady Augusta Gregory's emphasis on using the Irish language. John Millington Synge (1871–1909) criticizes romanticized views of the Irish peasantry to the extent that his *Playboy of the Western World* led to riots in theatres. The Provincetown Players was a small theatre troupe in the U.S. devoted to presenting new plays by American playwrights including Susan Glaspell (1876–1948) and Eugene O'Neill (1888–1953). The Little Theatre Movement of the 1910s and 1920s provided space for experimental plays to be staged without the commercial and financial constraints of Broadway productions.

### **3.8 Tragedy, Meta-tragedy, Meta-Theatre**

Writers including Edward Albee (b. 1928), Arthur Miller (1915–2005), Tennessee Williams (1911–1983), and Eugene O’Neill explored tragedy in everyday American life, including economic, social, and personal challenges. Meta-tragedy (also called “meta-theatre”) focuses on role playing and the relationship between reality and theatrical illusions, and is based on the belief that tragedy cannot suit the modern world. Luigi Pirandello’s (1867–1936) *Six Characters in Search of an Author* and Jean Genet’s (1910–1986) plays are famous meta-tragedies.

### **3.9 War, Revolution, and Depression: 1900–1945**

The Russian Revolution of 1917, World War I (1914–1919), and the stock-market crash of 1929 showed the destructive potential of technology and industrialization. Franklin Roosevelt’s New Deal included a Federal Theatre Project (1935) that provided theatre sponsorship. African Americans flocked to Harlem due to racism and economic problems in the South. Harlem becomes a cultural centre for jazz, fine arts, and dramas by Zora Neale Hurston (1891–1960) and Langston Hughes (1902–1967). World War II ended the period of modern drama, generally placed between Edison’s demonstrations of the light bulb (1879) to the atomic bombing of Hiroshima (1945).

## **7. Suggested Essay Topics**

7.1 Discuss the evolution of modern drama.

7.2 How the Shakespearean drama is different from modern drama?

7.3 Discuss the development of modern British drama.

7.4 What are the important features and characteristics of modern drama?

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## Paper XII: Unit II

### George Bernard Shaw's *Pygmalion*

#### 1. Background

##### 1.1 Introduction to the Playwright

##### 1.2 Introduction to the Play

#### 2. Major Themes

#### 3. Summary and Analysis of Acts

#### 4. Character Analysis

##### 4.1 Major Characters

##### 4.2 Minor Characters

#### 5. Stylistic Devices

#### 6. Study Questions

#### 7. Important Quotes

#### 8. Suggestions for Further Reading

#### 9. Bibliography

### Structure

#### 1. Background

##### 1.1 Introduction to the Playwright

George Bernard Shaw, born in Dublin in 1856, began his writing career as a novelist and journalist, but gained his great fame as a playwright. Most people consider Shaw the second greatest playwright in the English language, after only Shakespeare. Growing up in Dublin, Shaw developed a wide knowledge of music, art and literature under the influence of his mother, a singer and vocal music teacher.

At age 20 he moved to London, where he spent his afternoons in the British Museum and his evenings pursuing his informal education by attending lectures and debates. He declared himself a socialist in 1882 and joined the new “Fabian Society” in 1884. Soon he distinguished himself as an effective public speaker, and an incisive and irreverent critic of music, art and drama.

As a critic, he grew weary of the fashionable but intellectually barren melodramas of the 19th century. His admiration for the Norwegian playwright Henrik Ibsen (about whom he wrote influential essays) encouraged Shaw to reshape the English stage with sophisticated comedies that presented what he considered important social issues.

Shaw’s first play, *Widowers’ Houses*, was produced at a private theatre club in 1892. It was followed by *The Philanderer* and *Mrs Warren’s Profession*. These three plays were published as *Plays Unpleasant* (1898). More palatable, though still rich with challenges to conventional middle-class values, were his *Plays Pleasant* published the same year: this volume included the plays *Arms and The Man*, *Candida*, *The Man of Destiny* and *You Never Can Tell*. In 1897 Shaw attained his first commercial success with the American premiere of *The Devil’s Disciple*, the income from which enabled him to quit his job as a drama critic and to make his living solely as a playwright.

In 1898 he married Charlotte Payne Townshend, an Irish heiress whom he had met through his Fabian friends Beatrice and Sidney Webb. Although Shaw’s plays were not popular initially, in the period 1904-07 he began to reach a larger audience through an influential series of productions at London’s Royal Court Theatre. His plays became known for their brilliant arguments, their wit, and their unrelenting challenges to the conventional morality of his time.

His best-known play, *Pygmalion*, was first performed in 1913. Two generations later, it attained even greater fame as the musical *My Fair Lady*. During World War I, Shaw’s anti-war speeches and a controversial pamphlet entitled *Common Sense About the War* made him very unpopular as a public figure. In *Heartbreak House* (performed 1920) Shaw exposed, in a country house setting, the spiritual bankruptcy of the generation responsible for the carnage. Next came *Back to Methuselah* (1922) and *Saint Joan* (1923) which led to his receiving the Nobel Prize for Literature for 1925.

Shaw continued to write plays and essays until his death in 1950 at the age of 94.

## 1.2 Introduction to the Play

*Pygmalion* has become by far Shaw's most famous play, mostly through its film adaptation in 1938. Shaw was intimately involved with the making of the film. He wrote the screenplay and was the first man to win both a Nobel Prize and an Academy Award.

Shaw wrote the part of Eliza Doolittle for a beautiful actress named Mrs. Patrick Campbell, with whom it was rumoured that he was having an affair. This rumour later turned out not to be true, and some critics read the disappointed love affair between Higgins and Eliza as reflecting Shaw's own romantic frustrations including a long, celibate marriage.

Shaw once proclaimed: "The English have no respect for their language, and will not teach their children to speak it. They spell it so abominably that no man can teach himself what it sounds like." Much of *Pygmalion* is wrapped up with the class identification that comes with having an accent in British society. As a socialist with strong convictions, Shaw used the stage to expose hypocrisies surrounding marriage, language, and convention. Shaw's preoccupation with language in this play may also have had something to do with the fact that the most frequent criticism of his earlier plays was that his characters engaged in witty banter that lacked depth. By making language the centre of this play, Shaw highlights the significance of something that his critics, despite their criticisms, were tending to downplay.

Shaw took his title from the ancient Greek legend of the famous sculptor named Pygmalion who could find nothing good in women, and, as a result, he resolved to live out his life unmarried. However, he carved a statue out of ivory that was so beautiful and so perfect that he fell in love with his own creation. Indeed, the statue was so perfect that no living being could possibly be its equal. Consequently, at a festival, he prayed to the goddess of love, Aphrodite that he might have the statue come to life. When he reached home, to his amazement, he found that his wish had been fulfilled, and he proceeded to marry the statue, which he named Galatea.

Even though Shaw used several aspects of the legend, most prominently one of the names in the title, viewers, writers, critics, and audiences have consistently insisted upon there being some truth attached to every analogy in the myth. First of all, in Shaw's *Pygmalion*, Professor Henry Higgins is the most renowned man of phonetics of his time; Higgins is also like Pygmalion in his view of women — cynical and derogatory: Higgins says, "I find that the moment I let a woman make friends with me, she becomes jealous, exacting, suspicious, and a damned nuisance." And whereas in the myth, Pygmalion carved something beautiful out of raw stone and gave it life, Shaw's Higgins takes a "guttersnipe," a "squashed cabbage leaf" up out of the slums and makes her into an exquisite work of art. Here, however, the analogies end. Shaw's "Galatea," Eliza, develops a soul of her own and a fierce independence from her creator.

In the popular film version and in the even more popular musical comedy version (*My Fair Lady*), the ending allows the audience to see a romantic love interest that blends in with the ancient myth. This, however, is a sentimentalized version of Shaw's play. Shaw provided no such tender affection to blossom between professor and pupil.

### **Preface to *Pygmalion***

Shaw ultimately wrote a preface to almost all of his plays that he considered important. In fact, sometimes the Prefaces, the Prologues, and the Afterword exceeded the length of the original dramas. In one of his prefaces, he comments that most dramatists use the preface to expound on things that have little or no importance to the drama. Here, Shaw's preface does not comment upon the drama that is to follow, but instead, since the play deals with phonetics, and since the character of Henry Higgins is based largely upon a man named Henry Sweet, and since Shaw ultimately did leave a large sum of money upon his death for a thorough revision of English spelling rules, he uses this preface to comment upon the absurdity of English spelling in connection with English pronunciation. Finally, Shaw sarcastically refers to those critics who say that a successful play should never be didactic; this play is obviously didactic, and it has been immensely popular ever since it was first presented.

## **2. Major Themes**

**a) Class**

The social hierarchy is an unavoidable reality in Britain, and it is interesting to watch it play out in the work of a socialist playwright. Shaw includes members of all social classes from the lowest (Liza) to the servant class (Mrs. Pearce) to the middle class (Doolittle after his inheritance) to the genteel poor (the Eynsford Hills) to the upper class (Pickering and the Higginses). The general sense is that class structures are rigid and should not be tampered with, so the example of Liza's class mobility is most shocking. The issue of language is tied up in class quite closely; the fact that Higgins is able to identify where people were born by their accents is telling. British class and identity are very much tied up in their land and their birthplace, so it becomes hard to be socially mobile if your accent marks you as coming from a certain location.

**b) Gentility and Manners**

Good manners (or any manners at all) were mostly associated with the upper class at this time. Shaw's position on manners is somewhat unclear; as a socialist, one would think that he would have no time for them because they are a marker of class divisions. Yet, Higgins's pattern of treating everyone like dirt--while just as democratic as Pickering's of treating everyone like a duke or duchess--is less satisfactory than Pickering's. It is a poignant moment at the end of *Pygmalion* when Liza thanks Pickering for teaching her manners and pointedly comments that otherwise she would have had no way of learning them.

**c) Marriage and Prostitution**

These institutions are very much related in Shaw's plays, especially in Mrs. Warren's profession. From his unusual standpoint of being committed to a celibate marriage, Shaw apparently feels free to denounce marriage as an exchange of sexuality for money similar to prostitution (even though this was not happening in his own marriage). Ironically, while her father expresses no regrets when he is led to believe that Liza will take up this profession, it is she who denounces it. She declares that she was less degraded as a flower-seller than as a "genteel" lady trying to make an appropriate marriage--because as a flower-seller, at least, she wasn't selling her body.

**d) Myths of Creation**

Of all Shaw's plays, *Pygmalion* has the most references to Greek and Roman mythology. Higgins represents Pygmalion, a Greek sculptor who lived alone because he hated women. Pygmalion created a sculpture of a perfect woman and fell in love with it; after he prayed, Aphrodite brought it to life for him. This statue is named Galatea, and it is represented in Shaw's play by Liza. Unlike the myth, Shaw's play does not end in a marriage between the pair, and Liza is infuriated with Higgins's suggestion that her success is his success and that he has made her what she is. She has worked to recreate her identity as well.

### **e) Language**

In this play and in British society at large, language is closely tied with class. From a person's accent, one can determine where the person comes from and usually what the person's socioeconomic background is. Because accents are not very malleable, poor people are marked as poor for life. Higgins's teachings are somewhat radical in that they disrupt this social marker, allowing for greater social mobility.

### **f) Professionalism**

At the time that this play was written, the idea of female professionals was somewhat new. Aside from the profession of prostitution, women were generally housewives before this period, and there is some residual resistance to the idea of normally male professions being entered by females in the play.

Moreover, Pickering is initially horrified by the idea of Eliza opening a flower shop, since being involved in a trade was a mark of belonging to the lower class. Pickering is shaken similarly after his experience of watching Eliza fool everyone at a garden and dinner party, saying that she played her part almost too well. The idea of a professional female socialite is somehow threatening to him.

### **g) Gender Solidarity or Antagonism**

Although British society is supposed to break down along class lines, Shaw makes a point of highlighting gender loyalties in this play. Although Mrs. Higgins initially is horrified by the idea that her son might bring a flower-girl into her home, she quickly grows sympathetic to Liza. As a woman, she is the first to express a concern for what will be done with the girl after the experiment--the idea that her training makes her highly unmarriageable by anyone anywhere on the social scale. When Liza runs away from Wimpole St., she instinctively knows that Mrs. Higgins will take good care of her. Higgins's mother sides with Liza before even her son, not revealing that Liza is in the house while Higgins is dialling the police.

In contrast, relations between people of opposite genders are generally portrayed by Shaw as antagonistic. Higgins and his mother have a troubled relationship, as do the professor and Mrs. Pearce. Freddy and Liza get along better perhaps only due to his more passive, feminine demeanour.

### **3. Summary and Analysis of Acts**

#### **3.1 Summary and Analysis of Act 1**

##### **Summary**

Act I opens in Covent Garden under the portico of St. Paul's Church during a heavy summer rain immediately after a theatrical performance has let out. All types and levels of society are huddled here to avoid the rain. Mrs. Eynsford-Hill is complaining to her daughter Clara that her son Freddy has been gone an intolerably long time in search of a cab. When he suddenly returns with the announcement that there is not a cab to be had for neither love nor money, they reprimand him for not trying other places and quickly send him off to try again in another direction.

As Freddy reopens his umbrella and dashes off, he accidentally collides with a flower girl, who is hurrying for shelter, and knocks over her basket of flowers. In a heavy, almost incomprehensible, Cockney accent, she familiarly calls him by his name (Freddy) and tells him to watch where he is going. She then sits and begins to rearrange her flowers, mumbling to herself about the carelessness of such people who knock others about.

Mrs. Eynsford-Hill, who has heard the entire episode, is consumed with curiosity as to how this low-class, badly dressed ragamuffin with such a dreadful accent could possibly know her son well enough to call him by his first name. The flower girl (Liza or Eliza) asks, first, if the lady will pay for the flowers that Freddy just ruined, and against Clara's objections, Mrs. Eynsford-Hill pays the girl generously and then learns that Eliza merely calls all strangers either Freddy or Charlie.

At this moment, "an elderly gentleman of the amiable military type" rushes in for shelter. Eliza immediately tries to sell him some flowers, but he refuses because he has nothing smaller than a "sovereign." Eliza badgers him by insisting that she can change a large coin. Suddenly, a bystander warns the flower girl to be careful because there is a stranger who is taking down everything she says. Frightened that she might be accused of soliciting for immoral purposes, Eliza loudly maintains her right to sell flowers "if I keep off the kerb." Her loud and continual protestation attracts everyone's attention until finally the notetaker (Professor Henry Higgins) tells her to "shut up." He resents the fact that she mistakes him for a policeman or a spy for the police. Eliza wants to see what he has written, and when she can't read the "shorthand," he reads off what he has written. It is an exact Cockney phonetic rendition of her speech patterns.

At this point, the elderly gentleman (Colonel Pickering) and others take the girl's side, and as the group begins to talk to the notetaker, he (Professor Higgins) begins to identify where each of the speakers was born and where they live. He can even identify their locality inside the city of London. When Mrs. Eynsford-Hill complains about the weather, the notetaker (Higgins) points out that the rain has stopped, and everyone disperses except the gentleman (Colonel Pickering) and the flower girl (Eliza).

When the gentleman inquires about the notetaker's talents, he discloses that he is a student of phonetics; in fact, his profession is teaching wealthy people who aspire to climb the social ladder to speak properly. While he explains his profession, Eliza continually makes unutterable, horrible sounds, even though Higgins constantly tells her to cease making these "detestable" noises; he then brags that "in three months I could pass that girl off as a

duchess at an ambassador's garden party." (In the next act, the time is "six months, three if she has a good ear.")

When the elderly gentleman identifies himself as a "student of Indian dialects," by the name of Colonel Pickering, author of *Spoken Sanskrit*, Higgins then introduces himself as Henry Higgins, author of *Higgins' Universal Alphabet*. It turns out that Pickering came to England to meet Higgins, and that Higgins was about to embark on a journey to India to meet Pickering. As they are about to leave together to discuss their mutual interests, Eliza interrupts with a plea for money saying, "I'm short for my lodging." Higgins reminds her she is lying because she had previously said that she could change a half-a-crown; nevertheless, he throws her a mess of coins which she excitedly scoops up, accompanied by all sorts of unintelligible Cockney sounds.

At this point, Freddy Eynsford-Hill returns with a cab, but doesn't know what to do with it since everyone has left. Eliza, thanks to the sudden windfall of money from Higgins, engages the cab to take her home, leaving Freddy alone and perplexed.

## **Analysis**

*Pygmalion* is perhaps Shaw's most famous play and, ironically, it is among his most abused and misinterpreted ones. Almost everyone knows the basic outlines of this story of the Cockney flower girl who is almost magically transformed into a duchess by taking speech (phonetic) lessons from her famous professor. The abuse comes partly from the fact that Shaw subtitled his play, "A Romance." In the popular adaptations (the film of 1938 and the musical *My Fair Lady*), "romance" was written into the script and inserted into the relationship between Higgins and Eliza — in fact, the title of the play, *Pygmalion*, being based on the legend of a person who fell in love with his creation, could easily give rise to this wrong interpretation. In fact, one advertisement claims that the play is one of the most "beautiful love stories" that the world has ever read. Yet, as noted elsewhere, Shaw used the term "romance" in its more restricted form, meaning the implausibility of actually transforming a flower girl into a grand duchess by the simple means of using phonetic instruction. Yet, in spite of Shaw's own pronouncements and in spite of all the evidence in

the play, readers and audiences still continue to sentimentalize over the outcome of the play and refuse to recognize the anti-romantic aspect of the drama.

The opening scene of the drama captures many of the diverse elements running throughout the play. Brought together by the common necessity of protection from a sudden downpour, such diverse types as the impoverished middle-class Eynsford-Hills, with their genteel pretensions and disdain, a wealthy Anglo-Indian gentleman (Colonel Pickering), who seems quite tolerant, a haughty egotistical professor (Higgins), who seems exceptionally intolerant, an indistinct group of nondescript bystanders, and a pushy, rude flower girl who embodies the essence of vulgarity gather. These diverse characters would never be found together except by the necessity of something like a sudden rain shower. This serves Shaw dramatically because he needs a variety of accents so that Professor Higgins can demonstrate his brilliance at identifying dialects and places of birth, according to his science of phonetics. Note also that his performance arouses both antagonism and appreciation in the crowd. The antagonism is based upon the fact that the crowd, at first, believes that he is a spy for the police, and second, even after identifying where they come from, he is intruding upon some private aspect of their lives which they might want to cover up — that is, due to false pride or snobbism, many people want to disguise the place of their birth; thus, Professor Higgins, they think, in identifying the backgrounds of some of the members of the crowd is also revealing something about their pasts. Ironically, Professor Higgins' occupation is teaching wealthy people how to speak properly so that they can conceal their backgrounds. In the next act, Eliza will come to him so that her own origins can be concealed from the public.

Shaw is also dramatically exhibiting two types of vulgarity here: first, the vulgarity of the lower class, as seen in Eliza, and second, the "refined" vulgarity of the middle class, as seen in Clara Eynsford-Hill. We should remember that one of the aims of the play is an attack (through the character of Alfred Doolittle) on middle class morality and restrictions. Eliza's vulgarity is a result of necessity, forcing her to wheedle a few coins from bystanders; it is both comic and pathetic. Her vulgarity is comic as she tries to cozen money out of the bystanders, and it is vulgarly pathetic when she is suspected of soliciting as a prostitute. Unjustly, Eliza can be falsely accused of prostitution because she belongs to a class of society where prostitution is an assumed practice, and she can also be pigeonholed in a

class of society which cannot afford a lawyer for protection. Consequently, Eliza can only prove her innocence of such a charge by loudly proclaiming to everyone "I'm a good girl, I am." Ultimately, the most vulgar thing about Eliza is her disgusting and animalistic use of the English language, a habit that elicits the wrath of Professor Higgins and thus sets up the dramatic premise for the rest of the drama.

In contrast to Eliza, Clara Eynsford-Hill would superficially seem to be without a trace of vulgarity. But she represents aspects of the middle class which Shaw and Doolittle reject — that is, Clara is pushy, unfriendly, and disdainful of people whom she considers beneath her, and she is offended unnecessarily by strangers (such as Higgins) who speak to her (notice her hypocrisy later in Act III when she meets Higgins socially and become a sycophant to him). Ironically, in the next act, Eliza will want to become very much like Clara and will come to Higgins to take lessons for that purpose.

It is Higgins who ultimately occupies centre stage. At first, he is only the bystander at the edge of the crowd. Then he slowly takes charge because of his talent, his wit, and his domineering character. In a play that will focus a great deal on the varying concepts of manners, Higgins is first noted for his lack of manners. On first sight, he is as rude in his outspokenness as Eliza is crude in her pronunciation. He seems to take pleasure in bullying other people, especially people who are socially beneath him; even though he maintains that he is not a snob. He can spurt out a tirade of venom when he hears the English language so completely and disgustingly vilified, and he directs his venom directly at Eliza:

A woman who utters such depressing and disgusting sounds has no right to be anywhere — no right to live.

Remember that you are a human being with a soul and the divine gift of articulate speech: that your native language is the language of Shakespeare and Milton and the Bible; and don't sit there crooning like a bilious pigeon. [We have standardized Shaw's unique grammar and spelling.]

Whether or not Higgins is right in his appraisal is not the point here; even though he is amusingly right, a man who would publicly utter such derogatory comments about another human being for the purpose of showing off in front of a crowd of people is certainly no gentleman. To the contrary, he is another type of vulgarian; he is a person without consideration for the feelings of others, one who is totally lacking in social manners, and his absence of manners will become the subject of Mrs. Pearce's concern in the next act, when Higgins decides to take Eliza into his house.

After the above speech, Higgins boastfully announces to the gathered crowd that "in three months I could pass that girl off as a duchess at an ambassador's garden party." Consequently, this sentence provides the impetus for the remainder of the play, and it will evoke the larger questions of the drama — that is, do speech patterns determine the quality of a person's manners and nature? Higgins will be able to teach her to pronounce words as a duchess would, but how important are phonetics in determining the true nature of a person's worth? Thus, as noted in the preface, Shaw somewhat misled the reader when he suggested that the play was about phonetics. Instead, Shaw is using phonetics only as a basis for a comment on manners in general. And Shaw's final comment on manners involves the comic display of manners as Eliza affects the manners of a grand dame in engaging the cab to take her home.

### **3.2 Summary and Analysis of Act II**

#### **Summary**

The scene shifts to Higgins' laboratory in his home in Wimpole Street. It is eleven o'clock the next morning, and Higgins has been giving Pickering some demonstrations of the types of equipment that he uses in recording sounds which can then be studied at leisure in a scientific manner. As Higgins finishes his demonstration, Pickering admits that he is impressed, but he hasn't been able to follow more than half of what Higgins has shown him. Mrs. Pearce, the housekeeper, enters to announce that there is a strange girl, "quite a common girl," downstairs asking for the professor. Higgins is puzzled, but he thinks that this would be a good opportunity to record her in Pickering's presence, particularly since she is reported to have an unusual accent. He will thus be able to show Pickering how he makes records, using various pieces of his equipment that he has been demonstrating.

Eliza, the flower girl from the preceding evening, enters. She is now dressed in an outlandish outfit, consisting of, among other things, three ostrich feathers of orange, sky-blue, and red. When Higgins recognizes her, he orders her away because he has already recorded enough of her type of "Lisson Grove lingo." Eliza, however, has come in a taxi, with a proposition. Higgins is not impressed and rudely inquires: "Shall we ask this baggage to sit down, or shall we throw her out of the window?" Pickering is more solicitous, and so Eliza turns to him and reveals that she wants to obtain a job as a lady in a flower shop, but she won't be hired unless she can speak in a genteel, ladylike fashion; thus, she has come to take speech lessons from Higgins because last night, he bragged about his ability to teach proper speech to anyone. She is even willing to pay as much as a shilling an hour (about twenty-five cents an hour, an absurdly ridiculous sum — so absurdly low, in fact, that it appeals to Higgins' imagination). Higgins calculates that Eliza's offer is a certain proportion of her daily income, and therefore represents, for her, a large payment. While he is considering the arrangement, Pickering, whose interest has also been aroused, makes a wager: "I'll bet you all the expenses of the experiment," he tells Higgins, that the professor cannot teach Eliza to speak "like a duchess" in six months' time and pass her off at an ambassador's garden party as a "lady." Furthermore, Pickering says, ironically, "And I'll pay for the lessons," since the lessons are only twenty-five cents an hour. Higgins is indeed tempted — the challenge is tremendously great because Eliza is "so deliciously low — so horribly dirty — ." Thus he decides to do it: He "shall make a duchess of this draggletailed guttersnipe" in "six months — in three if she has a good ear and a quick tongue." He then orders Mrs. Pearce to take her away, to scrub her down, to burn her clothes and to get her new ones. And if she makes any noise, he says, Mrs. Pearce should "wallop her."

Both Eliza and Mrs. Pearce are horrified over these suggestions. Mrs. Pearce suggests that perhaps the girl is married or that perhaps she might have parents who would object. But, as it turns out, Eliza's parents turned her out to earn her own living over two years ago. Once again, Higgins bullies the girl, ordering her about and ignoring her feelings to the point that Pickering reminds him that Eliza "has some feelings," but Higgins ignores the possibility and concentrates on the immediate problem with Eliza: it is not the pronunciation; it is the grammar that will be the problem.

Mrs. Pearce, before leaving, wonders what is to become of Eliza when they have finished with her. Higgins' response is a vague question about what will become of her if he leaves her alone; to him it makes no difference — when they are through, "we can throw her back into the gutter, and then it will be her own business again." When Eliza begins to revolt, Higgins tempts her with some chocolates and with the thought of some young man wanting to marry her. Eliza relents, and Mrs. Pearce takes her away to be washed.

Following up on Mrs. Pearce's suggestions, Pickering suddenly becomes interested in the morality of their adventure. He questions if Higgins is "a man of good character where women are concerned?" Higgins admits that he has never known how to deal with women, because the moment you "let a woman into your life," she becomes "jealous, exacting, suspicious and a damned nuisance." Furthermore, he says, the moment he becomes friends with a woman, he becomes "selfish and tyrannical." Thus, he is "a confirmed old bachelor" and plans to remain one, and he assures Pickering that he will not take advantage of Eliza.

Mrs. Pearce returns with Eliza's hat, which Eliza wants saved, and she asks Higgins to watch his behaviour around the young girl; that is, he should try to cease swearing, use better table manners and try to act more like a gentleman. Mrs. Pearce then answers the doorbell and informs Higgins that a dustman, Alfred Doolittle, is outside and that he maintains that Higgins has his daughter inside. Pickering warns Higgins that this might be a trap, that Doolittle might be a scoundrel. Higgins is not perturbed and has the man sent for.

Doolittle is an elderly but vigorous man with a remarkably expressive voice. To the contrary of all expectations, there is no dissension because when Doolittle announces that he wants his daughter, Higgins agrees thoroughly; he tells Doolittle to "take her away at once." This both shocks and surprises Doolittle, who definitely does not want his daughter; after all, he has taken the trouble once to get rid of her, and he certainly doesn't want her back now.

When Higgins maintains that it is "a plant — a plot to extort money by threats," Doolittle retracts. He maintains that he hasn't seen the girl for two months. As Doolittle talks, Higgins is captivated by the old man's Welsh accent and also by his "mendacity and dishonesty." Doolittle clearly does not want his daughter back; all he wants is a five-pound note in order to go out with his common-law wife and get drunk. When Pickering asks

Doolittle if he has no morals, Doolittle quite honestly answers that he can't afford morals, and, furthermore, "What's a five-pound note to you? And what's Eliza to me?" Higgins is delighted with Doolittle's cynical view of middle-class morality as Doolittle proclaims himself to be a member of the "undeserving poor"; there has been too much attention paid to the deserving poor, he says, and it is time for the likes of him, who are undeserving, to reap some of the benefits of money. "Undeserving Poverty" is his motto, and if Higgins and Pickering give him five pounds, he promises that he will not save it; by Monday, he will have spent the entire five pounds on one single drunken spree with his "missus." Higgins finds the idea and the person irresistible; in fact, he considers giving the man ten pounds, but Doolittle demurs, saying that ten pounds might cause him to feel prudent, whereas five pounds is just enough for a spree. Delighted, Higgins hands Doolittle five pounds and, at that moment, Eliza enters, dressed in a new Japanese kimono. Her father doesn't recognize her at first and is genuinely surprised that she could ever get herself cleaned up to look as good as she does. Eliza immediately warns them all that her father has come for no other purpose than to wheedle money out of them in order to get drunk. Eliza is willing to drop her relations with her father and also to lord it over her old friends, but Higgins warns her not to drop her old friends too quickly. New clothes arrive then for Eliza, and she utters one of those unspeakable noises as she rushes out to see the new clothes: "Ah-ow-oo-oo!" Both Higgins and Pickering acknowledge that they have indeed taken on a "stiff job."

### **Analysis**

Whereas the first act gave us only a cursory view of Higgins, this act begins to round out many aspects of his personality. Shaw calls him the energetic type who is "violently interested in everything that can be studied as a scientific subject." Consequently, this clue in the printed discussion of his character should warn the reader that Higgins' relationship with Eliza will be based upon scientific experiments and that the human element will not be foremost in his mind. Likewise, Shaw tells the reader that Higgins fluctuates from genial bullying and good humour to a stormy petulance when things go wrong. Above all, Higgins is totally frank and devoid of any artifice or malice. On the stage, however, Shaw has to present these character concepts to the audience. He does this by having Mrs. Pearce, who has been Higgins' housekeeper for a long time, constantly speak about his character and his habits. The arrival of Eliza and, later, Higgins' instructions concerning Eliza allow Mrs. Pearce

to make pertinent observations about Higgins' deportment, manners, language, and conduct. When she announces that a very common girl is at the door, we know immediately, from Higgins' reaction, that he is a bit eccentric. When he begins his dealings with Eliza, for example, he sees her not as a human being but as a "bit of baggage." In contrast, Colonel Pickering is more tender and solicitous. At one point, he reminds Higgins that the girl might have some sensitive feelings, despite her "guttersnipe" exterior. This basic contrast between the two men will continue throughout the drama.

Eliza's reactions during this first visit by her father are indicative of her character. As is consistent with her class, she believes that if she can pay for the lesson, then Higgins has to be polite to her. Furthermore, she is determined that she shall not be cheated (her offer of a suitable fee for an hour's lesson is, to her, very serious; of course, to us and to Higgins, it is comic); as the scene progresses, Eliza is wary of Higgins; she is suspicious of being mistreated, drugged, seduced, or rejected.

After Higgins decides that he will accept the challenge of teaching Eliza to become a lady, two matters emerge. First, Mrs. Pearce wonders "what is to become of her when you've finished your teaching? You must look ahead a little." This is the ultimate question for a practical woman, and it is a question repeated later by Higgins' mother. At the end of the play, it becomes the central point in Eliza's revolt from Higgins. Never during the course of the play does he seriously consider what is to be done with Eliza. Here, for example, he merely says that when he is done with her, "we can throw her back into the gutter." This view, however, will become the main topic for Eliza's later consideration, for by that time she will be trained in such a way that she will no longer be able to function in the gutter. Thus, already Higgins is insensitive and blind to his moral responsibility to another human being. The second matter involves not merely Higgins' teaching Eliza how to pronounce words correctly, but in teaching her the proper words to use and also the proper grammatical form. This concern will also prove to be the essence of the comedy in the next scene, when Eliza will narrate a story about the death of her aunt with impeccable pronunciation, but her choice of subject matter will be deliciously low and vulgar.

The original Pygmalion theme is now fully introduced. The creator, Higgins (Pygmalion) has found his stone Galatea in the person of Eliza (this sack of baggage, this

squashed cabbage) — whom he will "carve" and mould into a great duchess, someone whom he can control and command.

When Mrs. Pearce takes Eliza away, we are hardly prepared for the immediate appearance of her father. The audience and Higgins alike expect an irate father, anxious over the safety of his youthful daughter; we expect him to demand honourable protection for his offspring. Alfred Doolittle, however, is just the opposite — and he is also one of Shaw's most delightful creations. At the time of Doolittle's appearance, Mrs. Pearce has been lecturing Higgins on manners and etiquette: If Eliza is to be in the house, Higgins must watch his language, stop appearing in house robes, cease wiping his hands on his clothes, refrain from cursing, and begin performing other acts of proper manners. With the appearance of Doolittle, the questions of social manners become parodied. The subject is replaced by the idea of social morality and especially middle-class morality (or low-class morality).

As noted above, when Doolittle first appears, we expect the virtuous father, and we see the hypocritical blackmailer. When the blackmail plot is obviously going to fail, we are exposed to Doolittle's supposedly righteous indignation, and then we see it fade, and he becomes an unscrupulous and ingratiating pimp, willing to sell off his daughter's virtue for a mere pittance. Again, his bumbling attempts fail. But by now, Higgins is attracted to the resourcefulness of this intended blackmailer and to Doolittle's picturesque language; when Higgins demands an answer from Doolittle, the old man's rhetorical retort pleases Higgins. Doolittle says: "I'm willing to tell you. I'm wanting to tell you. I'm waiting to tell you." For Higgins, and for Shaw (who likes to take digs wherever possible), this sentimental rhetoric accounts for the Welsh dialect and also for Doolittle's mendacity and dishonesty.

When all else fails, thus, Doolittle resorts to speaking the plain truth, but it is a truth so original that it captures the imagination of both Higgins and Pickering. Whereas most charity goes to the "deserving poor," Doolittle dispenses with traditional morality and charity; he argues for some consideration of the undeserving poor. In a fanciful flight of philosophical oratory, Doolittle maintains that his type of people has been ignored, and it is now time to contribute money to someone like him who will take the money, go out on a weekend binge, spend it all on booze, and then be ready to go back to his miserable job on

Monday. He maintains that he too has a right to this type of debauch, and yet he has been denied it by the narrow-minded prejudices of middle-class morality.

Higgins is so taken aback by this unique, bizarre logic that he offers to give Doolittle ten pounds, but Doolittle rapidly rejects this offer because that large a sum would entail middle-class responsibility, whereas the smaller sum would be just enough to go out on a binge with no regrets and no responsibilities. The irony of Doolittle's logic is that at the end of the play, Doolittle will be forced to accept middle-class responsibilities and morality because by then he will have inherited enough money that he will be encumbered for the rest of his life and will have to forever abandon his free and easy ways as a member of the "undeserving poor."

With Eliza's re-entry on the stage, Shaw returns to his social criticism. Eliza's father doesn't recognize his daughter because he "never thought she would clean up as good looking as that. . . . She's a credit to me, aint she?" Since Shaw didn't believe in a genuine poor class, he is making a gentle point that the possession of "hot and cold water" and "woolly towels," soft brushes, and soap can make a ragamuffin look entirely different. This scene emphasizes the basic difference between Eliza and her father: Doolittle likes being a part of the "undeserving poor," while Eliza yearns, above all, to escape from this class and to join the respectable middle class. This is the reason why she has come to Higgins: to take lessons in order to escape the stigma of her class. We are now able to review what we have read and see the significance of Eliza's howling when Higgins says that if Eliza misbehaves they will simply throw her in the dustbin — that is, her father's job is collecting the ashes and refuse of dust bins, and since he has already thrown Eliza out many years ago, she has no desire to be "collected" by him again. In fact, at the end of the drama, one of the options that is open to Eliza is that she can return to her father, but she resolutely refuses to do so. And at the end of this particular act, Eliza shows her first bit of humorous class snobbism: now that she is clean, she would like to ride back to her old district and parade in front of her old cronies and lord it over them now that she "has risen in the world."

### **3.3 Summary and Analysis of Act III**

#### **Summary**

This act opens in Mrs. Higgins' drawing room on the day that she is receiving guests. She is frustrated and upset to find that her son has paid a call on her during her "at-home day." He promised her never to come when she had company because he and his manners always offend her guests. Today is no exception. He distresses his mother immediately by telling her that he has invited a girl to call on her, a girl whom he "picked up" and taught to speak properly in the matter of only a short time. Higgins wants his mother to notice not only how the girl pronounces her words, but also what she pronounces as she speaks.

The parlor maid enters and announces the arrival of Mrs. and Miss Eynsford-Hill, whose accents Higgins remembers, but he cannot remember where he actually met them. After introductions, Colonel Pickering is shown in, and he is followed shortly by Freddy Eynsford-Hill. Higgins is delighted that the company has expanded so that Eliza will be better tested in front of a moderately large group. After some brief exchanges, Miss Doolittle is announced, and Eliza, exquisitely dressed, enters with remarkable poise and distinction, exuding an air of complete self-possession. She has been warned to speak about only two subjects — the weather and health. (This will be especially comic later when she does indeed confine herself to the topic of her aunt's health, but her aunt's health is indeed bizarre.)

As Eliza is introduced, she greets each person with an elaborate "How do you do"; her pronunciation is uttered with impeccable precision. When the subject of the weather is mentioned, Eliza volunteers her observations in such an erudite and precise manner that it astonishes everyone. To the simple question, "Do you think it will rain?" Eliza answers: "The shallow depression in the west of these islands is likely to move slowly in an easterly direction. There are no indications of any great change in the barometrical situation."

Having exhausted the subject of the weather, she thus ventures onto her other restricted subject — health — and announces the circumstances surrounding her aunt's death in the most precise English. The precision of her diction, of course, only heightens the lurid aspects of her aunt's death as Eliza narrates her tale in perfectly enunciated slang terms from the slums, exposing all of the bizarre and extraordinary aspects of her aunt's death. Higgins tries to cover some of Eliza's mistakes by referring to her language as the "new small talk," but Freddy, however, is delighted with the entire performance. He is

clearly anxious to hear more and to accompany Miss Doolittle home, but Eliza, noticing Higgins' "Ahems," announces that she must go, that she must catch a taxi. "Suffering from shock" (Shaw's phrase), Mrs. Eynsford-Hill sighs, "Well, I really can't get used to the new ways."

After Eliza leaves, Mrs. Eynsford-Hill continues to expound on the younger generation's way of talking, and her daughter Clara maintains that it is really quite up-to-date to talk in such a manner. Higgins mischievously encourages the young lady to try out some of the new slang on some of her mother's friends.

After the Eynsford-Hills leave, Higgins is exhilarated about Eliza's performance, but his mother points out that Eliza is not yet presentable — that is, Eliza is merely a "triumph of your art and of her dressmaker's," but that she reveals her social origins in every sentence that she speaks. Part of the trouble, she says, is that Eliza is adopting Henry's mode of speech, a mode which is acceptable on a canal barge, but one which is not proper for a garden party.

Mrs. Higgins then inquires into the nature of the household arrangement, or more specifically, where does Eliza live? Higgins bluntly and openly confesses, "With us, of course." Mrs. Higgins then points out to the two men a problem that neither of them has considered: what is to be done with Eliza after they have finished their little experiment? They are giving Eliza "the manners and habits that disqualify a fine lady from earning her own living without giving her a fine lady's income." Soon Eliza will be so well trained and be such a lady that no one will hire her, and she will have nothing to live on — and no job. Mrs. Higgins is assured by both men that there is nothing to worry about; they will do whatever is right by her. After all, Eliza is such a mimic that she keeps them constantly laughing by her imitations of other people's accents and affectations. As her son and his friend leave, Mrs. Higgins returns impatiently and angrily to her work at her writing table, but she cannot concentrate. "Oh, men! ! men! ! men! !" she exclaims.

### **Analysis**

Between Act II and Act III, an undisclosed amount of time has elapsed, enough time to allow Eliza to master some of the basics of pronunciation but not enough time for her to

master proper subject matter or the theme of discussion. When she appears at Mrs. Higgins', there is an obvious contrast. No longer is she the flighty Eliza of the first two acts; now, she is the reserved Eliza; she is "exquisitely dressed," and she "produces an impression of such remarkable distinction and beauty" that everyone is quite taken aback. The contrast on stage has to be tremendous or else the Eynsford-Hills would recognize her as the flower girl from the encounter in the first act. Accordingly, we, the audience, are delighted that they are so inept that they do not recognize her. The new Eliza seemingly fits in well in these new contrasting surroundings; that is, Mrs. Higgins' drawing room is described as being very formal with exquisitely refined furniture of the Chippendale style, furnished with excellent oil paintings and other art objects. Thus, the artificial formality of Eliza's speech blends well with the stiff formality of the highly decorative setting.

Following through with the Pygmalion legend, this act shows us Pygmalion's work of art — his Galatea of mythology — emerging in the figure of Eliza. Here is the beginning of the artistic creation making her first appearance, and everything about the creation suggests that it will be, in its finished form, a true masterpiece. Even at this point, Freddy Eynsford-Hill is totally smitten by Eliza's beauty and her superb uniqueness.

At the beginning of the act, the relationship between Mrs. Higgins and her son is humorous because the mother's attitude toward her son is so eccentric and because she expresses herself with as much forthright honesty as does her son. The depiction of Mrs. Higgins is that of an excellent personality filled with tolerance, intelligence, and imagination. Like Mrs. Pearce, she is immediately concerned over the fate of this "living doll" that Higgins has created. This depiction is important because Shaw maintains later in his epilogue that one of the reasons for Eliza's rejection of the possibility of marriage to Higgins is that she could never live up to Mrs. Higgins' standards, that she could never equal Mrs. Higgins' grasp of life.

Part of the dramatic humour of this act lies in the fact that we, the audience, know who the Eynsford-Hills are, but that Professor Higgins can't remember where he might have seen them, which makes us superior to the very superior Higgins. Throughout the scene, Higgins lives up to Mrs. Higgins' expectations — that is, he is too outspoken, "rather trying

on more commonplace occasions," he uses improper language, and, in general, he has an amazing lack of manners.

With Higgins' failure in the realm of manners, we are then presented to Eliza, who will now perform in this same setting. Higgins has, we hear, coached her on not only how to pronounce her words, but also on "what she pronounces." This anticipates Eliza's vulgar narration of the death of her aunt. This scene, with Eliza demonstrating her newly acquired knowledge, is the central scene of this act. It is in this scene, while Eliza is discussing the weather, that in both the film version and the musical comedy version, Eliza pronounces her now-famous line: "The rain in Spain stays mainly in the plain." The comedy of this scene relies upon the contrast between Eliza's mode of speech and her subject matter. She has been trained to pronounce words with impeccable perfection, but as Higgins feared, she has not learned what is proper to discuss and what is not. Higgins thought wrongly that he was safe in confining her subject to the weather and to one's health. It is, of course, humorously comic that Eliza does confine herself to these two supposedly safe subjects, but naively, she narrates some rather bizarre details of her aunt's death, using the terminology of the slums, yet pronouncing the unsavoury words with complete precision. Her enunciation of improper words makes the entire narration comically incongruous. As a result, behind the outward, new facade of Eliza lays an uncarved interior which remains on the vulgar side.

In spite of the squalid, if beautifully spoken, narration of her aunt's death, Eliza possesses an element of sincerity in contrast to the silly affectation of Miss Clara Eynsford-Hill's attempt to duplicate the "new manner of small talk." After Eliza leaves, Mrs. Eynsford-Hill asserts that she cannot become accustomed to young ladies using such words as "bloody," "beastly," and "filthy," and so forth. Actually, Shaw himself was put off by "proper" young ladies, such as Clara, attempting to use common expressions; he once maintained that "a flower girl's conversation is much more picturesque, [and has] much better rhetoric, [is] much more concise, interesting, and arresting than the conversation of the drawing-room, and that the moment she begins to speak beautifully she gains an advantage by the intensity of her experience and the strength of her feeling about it."

After Eliza departs, Mrs. Higgins also comments on the disparity between Eliza's speech and her subject matter. As noted, part of Eliza's problem is that she is learning the

English language anew from Professor Henry Higgins, who (despite the fact that he is a professor) uses speech which is not fit for the drawing room. Mrs. Higgins then returns to Shaw's original Pygmalion theme when she points out that Eliza is a triumph of Higgins' art and the art of the dressmaker; but that Eliza is not yet a presentable person. She is only partially carved. The thrill of the experiment for Higgins is also part of the Pygmalion theme; as he tells his mother: "You have no idea how frightfully interesting it is to take a human being and change her into a quite different human being by creating a new speech for her." Higgins, then, is clearly the artist, Pygmalion, and Eliza is Galatea: The only difference between life and the myth is that here the artist is not falling in love with his creation and, ultimately, he will not be able to control his own creation. Ultimately, Eliza will have a soul and a will of her own, completely independent of her creator. At present, however, her creator is content to be amused by his creation since Eliza loves to mimic all sorts of people, especially all of these people after she, Higgins, and Pickering return home.

### **3.4 Summary and Analysis of Act IV**

#### **Summary**

Act IV begins some time later and takes place in Higgins' laboratory-living room. The scene opens on the night after there has earlier been a great success where Eliza was presented as a duchess at an ambassador's garden party, as was stipulated in the original wager between Higgins and Pickering. Eliza has been a smashing success. Thus, when the scene opens, Higgins and Pickering are celebrating their triumph. (By this time, the actual financial terms of the wager are insignificant; Pickering has helped train Eliza and is sharing in the triumph, even though he has lost the wager.)

Eliza enters; she is brilliantly dressed in impeccable taste but her "expression is almost tragic." Immediately, Higgins begins to look for his slippers, and he is so busy congratulating himself on his great success that he is unaware that Eliza has left the room and has returned with his slippers; to fetch Higgins' slippers is apparently another accepted aspect of her training.

As Higgins and Pickering sit down and discuss the great triumph of the day, we hear that Eliza has been a tremendous success not only at the garden party, but also at the

dinner party and at the opera later. Higgins then admits that after the first few minutes, it became obviously apparent that he was going to easily win his bet with Pickering, and, as a result, he was bored for the rest of the time. In contrast, Pickering rather enjoyed himself, especially the very professional manner in which Eliza carried the entire charade off. Pickering then retires for the evening, followed by Higgins, yelling to Eliza to put out the lights.

Alone, Eliza gives vent to her pent-up fury as she flings herself furiously onto the floor, raging. At that moment, Higgins returns, looking for his slippers, which Eliza hurls at him with all her force. He is totally baffled by her display of anger. He is furthermore astounded by her calling him a "selfish brute" who is ready to throw her back into the gutter now that she has won his bet for him. Higgins is dumbfounded at her presumptuous claim; he refuses to acknowledge that she had anything to do with his winning the bet. The entire feat was accomplished by his coaching and his brilliance. When she physically attacks him, asking what is to become of her, Higgins restrains her and says, "What does it matter what becomes of you?" Higgins' brusqueness, however, subsides, and he relents enough to question her about her anxieties and to offer a glass of champagne to relieve the strain of the day. He assures her that she will feel better now that the garden party is over. Eliza's concerns, however, clearly and seriously involve the future. She asks: "What am I fit for? What have you left me fit for? Where am I to go? What am I to do? What's to become of me?" Even though both Mrs. Pearce and Mrs. Higgins have warned Higgins about this dilemma, he has obviously never given it a moment's thought. He can't imagine that she will have any difficulty in finding something to do — or even in marrying someone. After all, not all men are "confirmed old bachelors" like Higgins and Pickering. Maybe Mrs. Higgins could find a young chap for her. Eliza then informs him that all that she has ever done is sell flowers; now, as a lady, she can't even sell flowers; all she can hope to do is sell herself. She wishes Higgins had left her where he found her. (She has apparently forgotten that she came to see Higgins, not the other way around.)

Higgins returns to Eliza's original desire to work in a flower shop, and he suggests that Pickering could perhaps set up Eliza in her own shop. Higgins thinks this solution settles everything, and once again, looking for his slippers, he prepares to retire. But Eliza has one more question. She wants to know what clothes belong to her, personally — that is, what

clothes may she keep and what clothes belong to the "experiment." After all, Higgins and Pickering might need some of the clothes for the next girl they pick up to experiment on. She reminds Higgins of her past: "I'm only a common ignorant girl; and in my station I have to be careful." Higgins tells her that she can take all the clothes, but she cannot have the jewellery; it was rented. She antagonizes him further by asking him to take the jewellery to his room so there will be no "risk of their being missing." She also returns a ring which he bought her, but he throws the ring so angrily into the fireplace that Eliza crouches over the piano, her hands over her face, crying, "Don't you hit me." Higgins now feels wounded, and when Eliza tells him that he had better leave a note for Mrs. Pearce because she (Eliza) won't do his errands any more, he leaves, slamming the door savagely and calling Eliza "a heartless guttersnipe." Alone, Eliza senses her triumph over the master; thus, she quickly kneels and digs the ring out of the ashes. She finds it, considers it for a moment, and then flings it down and goes upstairs in a rage.

### **Analysis**

This act presents the completion of the artist's masterpiece; here is the fully realized Galatea that Pygmalion created in the form of the living Eliza. Here, we see a person completely transformed from the "guttersnipe" that we saw in Covent Garden in the first act. At the beginning of the act, both Pickering and Higgins are so absorbed in their own triumph that both fail to realize that the success of the experiment belongs as much to Eliza as it does to their teaching. In fact, when Eliza suggests that she won their bet for them, Higgins repudiates her claim vehemently: "You won my bet! You! Presumptuous insect! I won it." What neither Pickering nor Higgins takes into account is the stupendous effort that Eliza herself has contributed to the entire endeavour. As we shall see in the next act, Mrs. Higgins certainly recognizes Eliza's contribution, but both men are so absorbed in their own achievement that they fail to grasp the fact that Eliza has worked exceedingly hard to be able to speak like a lady; as a result, she developed an intense devotion and loyalty towards her two masters — not a love devotion, but a deep and sincere devotion and also a strong desire to please. Thus, at the beginning of this act, when the men ignore her, her pent-up fury turns to rage. The image which Shaw uses is that of a well-trained puppy dog fetching its master's slippers. At the beginning of the act, Eliza does, in fact, fetch Higgins' slippers. The men, however, fail to pet and admire the "puppy" for her achievements, and therefore

the trained puppy turns on its masters. In the next act, this image of the trained dog fetching slippers will be continued and will be developed as a central metaphor. Here, the slippers are dropped, literally, by having Eliza throw them at the master. However much Eliza has changed outwardly, this act of rage aligns her with the Eliza of Covent Garden of the first act.

In the original myth, Pygmalion had to pray to the gods to give his creation a soul. What Higgins as a creative artist did not realize was that his Galatea had a soul already. He has been able to polish the outside to a high degree of mechanical perfection, but he failed to note that at the same time, his creation was developing an inner soul and a mind of her own.

Whereas Mrs. Pearce's and Mrs. Higgins' first concern was what would happen to Eliza after the transformation, this has now become a question of major importance for Eliza. In a conventional type of romantic comedy, the ending would probably show the total success of the experiment with the audience leaving the theatre with the knowledge of Eliza's triumph at the ambassador's party and with Eliza and her master's falling in love, just as it happened in the myth. However, Shaw was interested in what happened after the triumph. And Eliza herself asks, what is she fit for, and where is she to go, and what will become of her? Higgins has been so completely involved with his experiment and the success of it that this question has never seriously entered his mind. Even now, when it is pointed out to him, he cannot take it seriously. Eliza knows that she absolutely cannot return to her old way of making a living, for she is now trained to be a lady and has no visible means to support herself in the position for which she is now trained. Thus Higgins has created a work of art without considering what he will do with this work of art after its exhibit is over. When Higgins suggests some sort of marriage, Shaw is making another dig at social standards. That is, when Eliza was a flower girl, she sold flowers and not her person; now that she is Lady Eliza, she can't sell flowers anymore (that would be beneath her) but she can sell herself.

At the end of the act, Eliza needles Higgins in a desperate attempt to break through his outer veneer. In her own repressed emotions, she wants to see him hurt just like she has been hurt; she wants to penetrate the god-like distance that Higgins surrounds himself with;

thus, she taunts him until she makes him lose his temper, and she is able to enjoy the spectacle of a so-called, self-proclaimed god losing his self-control — that is, Higgins is a "god" now made human, with human emotions and fury.

### **3.5 Summary and Analysis of Act V**

#### **Summary**

This act returns to Mrs. Higgins' drawing room as the parlor maid comes in to tell Mrs. Higgins that the Professor and the Colonel are downstairs telephoning the police and that Mr. Henry is "in a state." Mrs. Higgins sends word upstairs to Eliza to remain in her room until she sends for her. Higgins enters, loudly proclaiming Eliza's disappearance, which has distracted his entire routine since he has relied on her to keep up his appointment book for him. Mrs. Higgins is expressing her disapproval of their having informed the police when the maid announces the arrival of Mr. Doolittle, whom she describes as being a gentleman dressed brilliantly in a new frock coat and other elegant attire. He enters and begins immediately accusing Higgins of being responsible for his present affluent condition; that is, he has come into a very large amount of money which has forced him to become respectable. It has, he says, "ruined me. Destroyed my happiness. Tied me up and delivered me into the hands of middle-class morality." It seems that for a joke, Higgins mentioned Doolittle's name to a wealthy American as being "the most original moralist at present in England," and, as a result, the American, in his will, left an immense trust fund to Doolittle if he would lecture six times a year on moral reforms. As a result, Doolittle has lost his free and easy ways and is now forced to conform to middle-class morality, along with its confining respectability. The sum is so large that Doolittle is intimidated and can't properly give it up. Mrs. Higgins is pleased and sees now that Eliza can return home and live with her father in his new wealthy status, but Higgins protests strongly that he bought Eliza for five pounds and that Doolittle can't interfere unless he is a rogue, which Doolittle readily admits that he is — that is, he's part honest and part rogue, "a little of both . . . like the rest of us."

Mrs. Higgins then informs them that Eliza is upstairs, but before she is to be sent for, Higgins must promise to behave. Mrs. Higgins then reprimands both Higgins and Pickering for being so completely self-centered and inconsiderate of Eliza's feelings. She asks Doolittle to retire for a moment until Eliza becomes reconciled with Higgins and Pickering. Eliza

enters and addresses the two men in a refined, distant, and assured manner. Her dignified carriage and her ease of manner unnerve Higgins, who immediately attempts to treat her as his "property," as something he created "out of the squashed cabbage leaves of Covent Garden." Eliza, however, does not allow Higgins to rattle her by his insulting manners; instead, she thanks Colonel Pickering for his having always treated her as a lady and never as a guttersnipe. She says furthermore that everything that she has learned about manners has been due to the Colonel, and she now realizes that it is not what a person does, but how she is treated that makes her a lady: "The difference between a lady and a flower girl is not how she behaves, but how she's treated. I shall always be a flower girl to Professor Higgins, because he always treats me as a flower girl, and always will, but I know I can be a lady to you, because you always treat me as a lady, and always will." She learned grammar and pronunciation from Professor Higgins, but it was from Colonel Pickering that she learned self-respect. When she refuses to return to Wimpole Street, Higgins predicts that she will "relapse into the gutter in three weeks" without him. Eliza, however, says that she could not utter the old sounds if she tried and, at that moment, her father, Mr. Doolittle, appears at the window in all his splendid attire, and Eliza spontaneously emits one of her old guttural sounds — "A-a-a-a-ah-ow-oo!" — an exclamation that utterly delights and vindicates Higgins.

Doolittle has come to announce his marriage and to ask Eliza to attend the wedding. He explains that, like himself, his common-law wife has also been defeated by middle-class morality: "respectability has broken all the spirit out of her." When Eliza goes upstairs to get ready to accompany her father to his wedding, Doolittle confesses that he is nervous because he has never been married before — not even to Eliza's mother — but he has never told this to Eliza. Mrs. Higgins says that she will also attend the wedding with Eliza, and Pickering leaves with the bridegroom.

As Eliza is about to leave, Higgins blocks the doorway. He says that he wants Eliza to come back, but he will not change his manners, which he maintains are exactly the same as the Colonel's. Eliza disagrees: "That's not true," she says, "He treats a flower girl as if she was a duchess." To which Higgins replies, "And I treat a duchess as if she was a flower girl." Higgins continues, maintaining that good manners or bad manners are not important; instead, it is more important to have the same manners for all people. If he has treated her

badly, she has to admit that she has never seen him treat someone else differently or better. He is proud that she is now independent — in fact, it's one of the basic things that he has wanted her to hear — but he insists that he can get along quite well without her, even though he admits: "I have grown accustomed to your voice and appearance." Eliza then reminds him that he has both her voice and her "appearance" in numerous photographs and recordings; when he feels lonesome, he can turn on one of his recordings of her. Higgins counters, however, that he can't turn her "soul" on, and he says, furthermore, that he values quality more than service, and he points out that Eliza cannot buy a claim on him "by fetching my slippers and my spectacles." In fact, her "little dog's tricks of fetching and carrying slippers" can in no way compare to the greatness of his creation — that is, the Duchess Eliza.

At this point, Eliza is absolutely confused as to what course her life is to take. She sorely regrets the loss of independence which she once had. Higgins offers to adopt her or settle money on her, but he is horrified when he hears that Freddy Eynsford-Hill is romantically interested in her; Freddy, Higgins says, can't "make anything of" her. Eliza responds that maybe she can do something for Freddy; after all, she only wants to be natural, and she wants a little kindness, which Freddy can certainly give to her. She knows that she cannot return to her old way of life, and she cannot stand the idea of living "with a low common man after you two" (Higgins and Pickering), and she certainly doesn't intend to go to her father's house to live; thus, as soon as possible, she will marry Freddy.

Higgins is horrified at her conclusion, and he loudly asserts, "I'm not going to have my masterpiece thrown away on Freddy." But Eliza is determined to have her independence, and therefore she decides that she will teach. What in heaven's name will she teach, Higgins asks, and he is totally astonished when she announces that she will teach phonetics. She reminds him what a good ear she has, and, furthermore, she has more manners than he has and, therefore, she will be able to advertise and can thus become financially independent. Eliza is no longer frightened of Higgins, and she defies him to strike her. Suddenly Higgins reverses himself; he admires her for her independence: her defiance is far "better than fetching slippers and finding spectacles." But even after she has asserted her independence, Higgins assumes that she will decide to return to Wimpole Street and they — Higgins, Pickering, and Eliza — will be "three old bachelors" together instead of their

living together formerly as, in Higgins' words, "two men and a silly girl." At that moment, Mrs. Higgins returns to say that Eliza's carriage is waiting. Higgins, who knows that he cannot behave himself in church, has decided to stay behind, and so Eliza bids him goodbye, saying that they will not see each other again. Higgins ignores this comment and, instead, he gives Eliza some errands to do on the way home. Eliza disdainfully leaves, telling him to buy the gloves and the tie himself. Mrs. Higgins fears that Henry has spoiled the girl, and she volunteers to do his errands, but Higgins is confident that Eliza will buy them herself.

### **Analysis**

Act V presents the fully realized Galatea, the creation of the artist, alive in all of her splendour. The "romance" of the play's subtitle refers, of course, to the complete transformation of the "guttersnipe," the "squashed cabbage leaf" of the first act, into this delightful creature who is more magnificent than any real duchess — more real because, as it develops during the course of this act, Eliza has manners which are better and more polished than most duchesses. Furthermore, unlike the original Liza, the flower girl, this new Eliza has learned to control her emotional outbursts completely; now, her calculated calm and her poised reserve cause the normally self-contained and super-rational Higgins to lose his temper. We can now say confidently that the work of art has become superior to the creator.

The opening of the act implies that the creator, Higgins, could never conceive of the fact that his creation would, of her own volition, walk out on him. His colossal conceit (an assessment that is supported by Colonel Pickering) makes Higgins assume that Eliza has been kidnapped or that something horrible has happened that will require notifying the police. His colossal ego will not or cannot entertain the idea that she might have now gained enough independence to strike out on her own. In fact, it is not until the end of the act that Higgins finally recognizes that the work of art is now independent of its creator and is thus separate from him; she has no further need of him. Therefore, for any but the most sentimental readers, there is nothing in these acts that could possibly suggest a romantic entanglement between the two. Higgins will never accept Eliza as an equal; he will always try to bully her, even though he says that he likes her better now that she no longer fetches his slippers and spectacles. Eliza, having learned that manners involve not only her own

conduct but also how other people treat her, could never become involved with a man who constantly treats her as though she were a flower girl.

This act also shows the comical transformation of Alfred Doolittle. Earlier, he was completely content to be a member of the "undeserving poor," and he took special delight in ridiculing and flouting the morals of the middle class. Now he is thrust completely into this morality, which necessitates that he obeys some of their dreadful conventions, such as dressing properly and marrying the woman with whom he has been living. It has, as he feared earlier, placed him in a position of responsibility and it has, therefore, destroyed his cherished independence. Whereas earlier he was frightened to accept ten pounds rather than five pounds because ten might necessitate some degree of responsibility, now he is in control of an immense sum and, consequently, the dreadful poor will be badgering him constantly for handouts. Now he fears that not only will he have to marry, but that he might have to help support Eliza, whom he threw out over two years ago. He can even tell Higgins: "Have some consideration for my feelings as a middle-class man." Thus, with this inverted statement, Doolittle has sunk completely into the horrible complacency of middle-class morality.

At the end of the play, the two opposing forces are clearly before us: Higgins ends up so devoted to improving mankind in general that he lacks the ability to be decent to a single member of mankind, to a fine human being such as Eliza. He can teach her to be a magnificent duchess, a Galatea, a work of art, but he lacks sufficient tact in their personal relationship to avoid constantly hurting her feelings. In his devotion to reforming the entire human race, he trades innocently and unmercifully on a single individual human being. When Eliza remarks that she will not be walked on, Higgins answers her in his usual bullying fashion: "Then get out of my way; for I wont stop for you."

Even though Higgins has "grown accustomed to [her] face and voice," it is only because they are convenient pieces to be used, but he can get along without them. Thus the central conflict of the play is now stated: Higgins is the crusading scientist who is determined to save the world, even though he might have to hurt those closest to him. Eliza, on the other hand, wishes to be the recipient of a little loving kindness, and if it means

marrying Freddy Eynsford-Hill in order to find this human companionship and warmth, then she will do so.

Consequently, with the conflict clearly stated for Higgins, the essence of human life is through mutual improvement; for Eliza, it is through human loving and commitment — then only the most sloppy, sentimental reader could ever think that their relationship will ever change.

### **3.6 Summary and Analysis of Sequel**

When the play ends, the audience is left to ponder what will happen to the characters later; for the sentimentalist, it is a foregone conclusion that Higgins and Eliza will probably marry, even though there is ample indication in the play that they will not. Thus, in the prose "Sequel," Shaw reasserts his premise that such a wedding between Higgins and Eliza is absolutely impossible, and he explains again that he subtitled his play a "romance" because the technical meaning of "romance" refers to anything that was highly improbable; for example, the transformation of a flower girl into a duchess in six months is indeed highly improbable. A romance, however, also can suggest a "happy ending," and Shaw says he is not interested in such an ending to his story. He will not allow his creation, Eliza, to marry such a misfit as Higgins simply to satisfy the whims of the sentimentalists of the world, even though these sentimental people outnumber the realists. First of all, Eliza is beautiful, and she is now also intelligent, desirable, and witty enough to find a husband closer to her own age; after all, Higgins is over twenty years her senior. Eliza herself also knows that she is young enough to find someone much more desirable than Higgins. Second, Eliza recognizes that Mrs. Higgins is the model mother — that is, she is a woman of unusual charm and intelligence, and she possesses a tolerance for Higgins' idiosyncratic manners while sweetly disapproving of them. Eliza is now intelligent enough to know she would be a rival to this "irresistible wealthy" woman. Third, Eliza does not want to be a "second fiddle" to Higgins' study of phonetics and the English language; she knows that Higgins' experiments will always come first, and she would have to be content with being second place in his life. Last, Eliza, once having gained her independence, simply has no desire to be constantly combating Higgins' wit, his resentment, his bullying, and the condescendingly superior way which he takes with her. Higgins would always remind her of her origins and would attempt

to evade her anger after he had bullied her. Thus, she reasons, why not marry Freddy Eynsford-Hill? He worships her, and he would always treat her as a lady. But Freddy is not equipped to earn a living, and Mrs. Eynsford-Hill could not offer them financial assistance. Eliza's father has risen so socially high in the world that he spends all he has to keep up his appearance and, therefore, cannot be of financial assistance to them. Consequently, Colonel Pickering again comes to the rescue and sets them up in a flower shop, a move which violates Mrs. Eynsford-Hill's concept that people in trade are inferior people. Unfortunately, neither Eliza, who only sold flowers for a pittance earlier, nor Freddy has the slightest concept of how to run a shop, nor thus the Colonel has to constantly rescue them from economic disaster. Through it all, Higgins is delighted that Freddy is a failure; it justifies his opinion of the young man. But by attending night school, by hiring outside help, by luck, and by adding food items for sale, the shop began to prosper.

Eliza is still a part of Wimpole Street and she is still interested vaguely in Higgins, but she keeps him at a distance and holds his derisions of Freddy to a minimum. She is also very much beloved by Colonel Pickering, and she returns his love. In Shaw's words, Eliza "likes Freddy and she likes the Colonel; and she does not like Higgins and Mr. Doolittle. Galatea never does quite like Pygmalion: his relation to her is too godlike to be altogether agreeable."

## **4. Character Analysis**

### **4.1 Major Characters**

#### **a) Henry Higgins**

Henry Higgins, forty years old, is a bundle of paradoxes. In spite of his brilliant intellectual achievements, his manners are usually those of the worst sort of petulant, whining child. He is a combination of loveable eccentricities, brilliant achievements, and devoted dedication to improving the human race. Yet he is completely socially inept; his manners are so bad that his own mother does not want him in her house when she has company, and his manners are so offensive that she will not attend the same church at the same time. Since manners have always been the subject matter of comedies from the time of Aristophanes, Higgins' view of manners differs greatly from his own actions. His use of

phonetics to make a flower girl into a duchess does not mean that the play is about phonetics; the play concerns different definitions of manners, and thus Higgins' actions must be taken fully into account.

Henry Higgins is a confirmed bachelor, and this fact alone should rule out all popularisers who would create a romantic entanglement between Higgins and Eliza. In addition, he is so set in his ways that he announces to Eliza that if someone doesn't want to get run over, they had better get out of his way. To accomplish his aims, he will trample on anyone's feelings — whether that person is a flower girl in Covent Garden or a real duchess or a lady in his mother's elaborate drawing room. Thus, one of Higgins' claims to equality is not that he doesn't have manners (it is a foregone conclusion that he has none), but that he treats all people alike. However, he only thinks that he does; he is not as egalitarian and democratic as he likes to think that he is. When Higgins first meets Eliza in Covent Garden and is taking down her vocal sounds, he is extremely clever — so clever, in fact, that his horribly bad manners are accepted by the audience as being clever. In his tirade against Eliza, when he vents his wrath against her, we tend, on first hearing his tirade, to forgive him because he has such an admirable command of the English language as he simply rips to pieces a "guttersnipe" and "a squashed cabbage leaf." Note his superb language: "A woman who utters such depressing and disgusting sounds has no right to be anywhere — no right to live. Remember that you are a human being with a soul and the divine gift of articulate speech . . . don't sit there crooning like a bilious pigeon." Anyone who can deliver such splendid invective is admired for his or her brilliant, spontaneous use of the English language, and especially when it is directed against so lowly a person as this flower girl from the slums. But in a play dealing with manners, no proper gentleman would utter such condemnations. Later, we find out that Colonel Pickering treated Eliza properly from the very first. Thus, in spite of Higgins' claiming to treat all people with the same manners, he certainly does not treat Mrs. Eynsford-Hill and Clara with such a display of invective, and both of these characters represent everything that Higgins abhors; they represent the worst sort of upper-middle-class hypocrisy that both he and Doolittle despise. But in spite of his bad manners, Higgins is clever, and we do admire his cleverness, even at the expense of a flower girl.

Higgins is Shaw's creative rebel who floats through many of Shaw's dramas. Higgins rejects middle-class moralities. He admires do-nothing Doolittles for their honesty in asserting that they are the undeserving poor, he will devote his scientific skill to changing a flower girl into a duchess, he is ultimately interested in the soul of his creation (Eliza-Galatea) and not in her pronunciation, and he is devoted to improving the human race by his own scientific methods. And, last, we cannot deny his charm: Mrs. Pearce, his housekeeper, has often threatened to leave because of Henry's atrocious manners (improper language, improper dress, bad table behavior, etc.), but she is always charmed by him into remaining with him. Ultimately, Eliza is also so charmed by her association with Higgins (and Pickering) that she does not want to live with someone else. But if Higgins is charming, he is also a tyrannical bully; if he is devastatingly intelligent, he is also ignorantly insensitive to the feelings of others; if he is god-like in his achievements, he is childishly petulant in his wanting his own way; if he believes in his scientific methodology, he is also something of the intuitive poet; and if he is a man so confident of his aim in life, he is also a man so ignorant of his own personality that he really thinks himself timid, modest, and diffident. Thus, his appeal remains partly in the many contradictions that he is heir to.

#### **b) Eliza Doolittle**

Shaw's story of the flower girl from the slums who was taught to speak so properly that she was able to pass as a duchess at an ambassador's garden party is perhaps one of the best known works by Shaw, partly because of the popularity of the play which, in turn, inspired a more sentimentalized version in a popular movie and, later, became one of the world's most popular musical comedies, *My Fair Lady*, using Shaw's broad outlines, but turning the play from a study in manners to a sentimental love story between pupil and master.

The character of Eliza is best seen by the progression which she makes from "a thing of stone," "a nothingness," a "guttersnipe," and a "squashed cabbage leaf" to the final act where she is an exquisite lady — totally self-possessed, a person who has in many ways surpassed her creator. In the opening act, the audience cannot know that beneath the mud and behind the horrible speech sounds stands the potential of a great "work of art." This carries through the Pygmalion-Galatea theme in which a crude piece of marble is

transformed into a beautiful statue. It is not until the third act, when Eliza makes her appearance at Mrs. Higgins' house, that we know that Eliza possesses a great deal of native intelligence, that she has a perfect ear for all sorts of sounds, an excellent ability at reproducing sounds, a superb memory, and a passionate desire to improve herself.

In the first act, Shaw takes great pains to hide all of Eliza's basic qualities. He shows her not only as a person who completely violates the English language, but, more important, he shows her as a low, vulgar creature — totally without manners. We see her initially as a low-class flower girl who vulgarly tries to solicit money from a well-dressed gentleman, Colonel Pickering, and then as a young girl who is vulgarly familiar to another gentleman (Freddy Eynsford-Hill, who ironically wants her to be familiar with him when she becomes a lady); last, we see her as a person who is obnoxious in her protestations when she thinks that she is about to be accused of prostitution. Thus, what Shaw has done is to let us listen to a flower girl who totally violates the English language and who is a total vulgarian in terms of language. The change in Eliza's pronunciation will come about because of Higgins' lessons in phonetics, but the important change, and the real subject of the play, is the change that will come about in Eliza's manners — something which even Higgins cannot teach her because he has no manners himself.

Eliza arrives at Higgins' laboratory-living room for rather ironic reasons. She wants to adopt middle-class manners that both Higgins and her father despise. Eliza's ideal is to become a member of the respectable middle class, and in order to do so, she must learn proper pronunciation and manners. But then we notice that in spite of the original motive, Eliza's monumental efforts to master her lessons have their bases in the fact that she has developed a "doglike" devotion to her two masters — a devotion which Higgins will ultimately reject and which Eliza will ultimately declare herself independent of in the next stage of her development.

In both Acts IV and V, Eliza is seen as a completely transformed person, outwardly. She is poised, dignified, in control of her once spitfire temper, and she has rejected all of the old common vulgarity of her past life. She is no longer willing to be Higgins' creation; she now asserts her own independence. But it is an independence which demands values from life which Higgins cannot give her. Unlike Higgins, who wants to change the world, Eliza

wants only to change herself. Unlike Higgins, who can and does stand apart from the common aspects of life, Eliza can be content with Freddy, who simply needs and wants her as a compassionate human being. And whereas Higgins can get along without anyone, Eliza and Freddy need each other. In contrast, Higgins will continue to try to improve the world, while Eliza will make a comfortable home for herself and Freddy.

### **c) Alfred Doolittle**

Doolittle is not so much a character as he is a vehicle which Shaw manipulates for his own dramatic purposes. Through Doolittle, Shaw is able to make many satirical thrusts at middle-class morality and to make additional comments on class distinctions and on class manners. (It is especially witty when Eliza points out to Higgins that the Professor's so-called equality in the way he treats people shows that he has the same manners as her father because Doolittle makes no class distinctions either: the analogy wounds Higgins because he has to acknowledge that it is essentially true.)

As his name readily suggests, Doolittle does as little as possible to get through life. He is a dustman because that is easier for him than "real work." (A dustman was a person who simply collected the ashes that people put out; by Shaw's time, refuse was added to the ashes, making Doolittle essentially a garbage collector.)

The comedy connected with Doolittle is his transformation during the course of the play. Whereas his daughter wants to become a member of the respectable middle class, Doolittle is delighted that his job as dustman is so low on the social class scale that it has absolutely no morals connected to it; therefore, he is not subjected to "dreadful" middle-class morality — at least not until the last act.

When we first meet Doolittle, he comes to Professor Higgins' house in the hypocritical role of the "virtuous father" in order to rescue his "compromised daughter." It is soon discovered, however, that he threw his daughter out into the streets to earn her own living over two years ago, and, furthermore, he was never married to Eliza's mother. In fact, the people in the neighbourhood won't even let Doolittle have any of Eliza's belongings. When the ruse of the virtuous father fails, Doolittle quickly changes his pitch and becomes

the ingratiating pimp as he tries to sell his own daughter to the men for almost any price they are willing to pay. Higgins and Pickering are not taken in by his nauseating suggestions, however, but they are delighted by Doolittle's poetic use of the English language, by his use of rhetoric that could only be used by a Welshman, and by his ingenuity as he tries one method after another until he assumes a philosophical pose; in his resourceful rhetoric, he stoutly proclaims that too much charity has been directed at the "deserving poor." Now is it time for him to claim his equal share as a member of the "undeserving poor." An undeserving poor man, according to Doolittle, has as much right to go on a drunken binge as does a deserving poor man; furthermore, if they will give him some money, he will promise to spend it all on a drunken binge immediately and will thus be broke and ready for work on Monday morning.

The originality of this idea, and the audacity and impudence with which it is put forward, cause Higgins and Pickering to yield to Doolittle's request, and they even offer him ten pounds, but Doolittle refuses because it would involve him in responsibilities; he can't drink up ten pounds in the weekend, but he can drink up five pounds.

In the last act, Doolittle's character does not essentially change. It is only that through a large sum of money, he has been forced to accept responsibilities that he would rather not have been faced with. The immoral blackmailer and pimp of the second act has now been forced into the role of a lecturer on moral reforms, and he must now adopt middle-class morality. Since Shaw philosophically wanted to do completely away with the lower class, he is pleased to force Doolittle into accepting a position where he will not be comfortable being one of the "undeserving poor"; Shaw undoubtedly was secretly delighted at the discomfiture that Doolittle was undergoing.

#### **d) Mrs. Higgins**

Professor Higgins' mother, Mrs. Higgins is a stately lady in her sixties who sees the Eliza Doolittle experiment as idiocy, and Higgins and Pickering as senseless children. She is the first and only character to have any qualms about the whole affair. When her worries prove true, it is to her that all the characters turn. Because no woman can match up to his mother, Higgins claims, he has no interest in dallying with them. To observe the mother of

Pygmalion (Higgins), who completely understands all of his failings and inadequacies, is a good contrast to the mythic proportions to which Higgins builds himself in his self-estimations as a scientist of phonetics and a creator of duchesses.

### **c) Colonel Pickering**

Colonel Pickering, the author of *Spoken Sanskrit*, is a match for Higgins (although somewhat less obsessive) in his passion for phonetics. But where Higgins is a boorish, careless bully, Pickering is always considerate and a genuinely gentleman. He says little of note in the play, and appears most of all to be a civilized foil to Higgins' barefoot, absentminded crazy professor. He helps in the Eliza Doolittle experiment by making a wager of it, saying he will cover the costs of the experiment if Higgins does indeed make a convincing duchess of her. However, while Higgins only manages to teach Eliza pronunciations, it is Pickering's thoughtful treatment towards Eliza that teaches her to respect herself.

## **4.2 Minor Characters**

### **a) Clara**

Mrs. Eynsford Hill's obnoxious daughter, who though failing to inherit the wealth of the privileged has inherited all its snobbery. She discovers that she can gain the respect and friendship of others by being honest with them rather than putting on airs after reading some H.G. Wells. Her discovery is a sort of accident, as her mother and the rest of her acquaintances never bother to point out her shallow insincerity.

### **b) Freddy**

Mrs. Eynsford Hill's son and Eliza's lover. Freddy is accustomed to a middle class lifestyle but, like his sister, lacks a middle class education. He falls madly in love with Eliza and eventually marries her. They try to open a flower shop together, but do poorly until they take some classes in simple mathematics.

**c) Mrs. Eynsford Hill**

Clara and Freddy's mother. A former member of the upper class, who now attempts to keep up appearances although she is in reduced circumstances. She is continuously bemoaning her situation and coddling her poorly educated children.

**d) Mrs. Pearce**

Higgins' maid, who disapproves of his poor manners and willful behavior but has become inured to them over time. She attempts to convince Higgins that his arrangement with Eliza cannot be taken lightly, but fails.

**e) Nepomuuck**

He is Higgins' former student, a translator, and self-proclaimed master linguist. At the Embassy party, where Higgins hopes Eliza will pass as a duchess, Nepommuck proclaims that she is a Hungarian of royal blood.

**f) Ezra D. Wannafeller**

Rich American philanthropist, who transforms Alfred Doolittle from a common dustman to a member of the middle class by willing him three thousand pounds a year to lecture for the Wannafeller Moral Reform League.

**5. Important Quotes Explained**

This list of important quotations from "Pygmalion" by George Bernard Shaw will help the students work with the essay topics and thesis statements on their paper topics on Pygmalion page by allowing them to support their claims.

**5.1 "Oh, men! Men!! men!!!"**

—Mrs. Higgins venting her frustrations (Act III)

**5.2 “Yes, you squashed cabbage-leaf, you disgrace to the noble architecture of these columns, you incarnate insult to the English language! I could pass you off as the Queen of Sheba!”**

—Professor Henry Higgins to Eliza Doolittle (Act I)

**5.3 “We were above that at the corner of Tottenham Court Road.”**

—Eliza Doolittle, viewing the idea of getting married as selling herself (Act IV)

**5.4 “You certainly are a pretty pair of babies, playing with your live doll.”**

—Mrs. Higgins to Professor Higgins and Colonel Pickering (Act III)

**5.5 “It’s almost irresistible. She’s so deliciously low—so horribly dirty...”**

—Professor Higgins, in reference to Eliza when she first comes for lessons (Act II)

**5.6 “I ain’t pretending to be deserving. I’m undeserving, and I mean to go on being undeserving.”**

—Alfred Doolittle to Professor Higgins and Colonel Pickering (Act II)

**5.7 “Oh, I can’t be bothered with young women. My idea of a loveable woman is something as like you as possible. I shall never get into the way of seriously liking young women: some habits lie too deep to be changed. Besides, they’re all idiots.”**

—Professor Higgins to Mrs. Higgins (Act III)

**5.8 “What does he know of art or science or anything else?”**

—Professor Higgins in reference to Freddy Eynsford-Hill (Act III)

**5.9 “What am I fit for? What have you left me fit for? Where am I to go? What am I to do? What’s to become of me?”**

—Eliza Doolittle to Professor Higgins (Act IV)

**5.10 “I sold flowers. I didn’t sell myself. Now you’ve made a lady of me. I’m not fit to sell anything else. I wish you’d left me where you found me.”**

—Eliza Doolittle to Professor Higgins (Act IV)

**5.11 “It ain’t the lecturing I mind. I’ll lecture them blue in the face, I will, and not turn a hair. It’s making a gentleman of me that I object to. Who asked him to make a gentleman of me? I was happy. I was free. I touched pretty nigh everybody for money when I wanted it, same as I touched you, Henry Higgins. Now I am worried; tied neck and heels; and everybody touches me for money.”**

—Alfred Doolittle to Professor Higgins on being left a yearly stipend (Act IV)

**5.12 “I want a little kindness. I know I’m a common ignorant girl, and you a book-learned gentleman; but I’m not dirt under your feet. What I done [correcting herself] what I did was not for the dresses and the taxis: I did it because we were pleasant together and I come—came—to care for you; not to want you to make love to me, and not forgetting the difference between us, but more friendly like.”**

—Eliza Doolittle to Professor Higgins (Act IV)

## **6. Study Questions**

**6.1** What is the dramatic importance of phonetics in all of the acts?

**6.2** How is phonetics related to manners in all of the acts?

**6.3** What is the dramatic function of the Eynsford-Hill family in the first act?

**6.4** How might Alfred Doolittle be considered extraneous to the play? How would the play be different if his part were left out of a production?

**6.5** How does Doolittle’s change in social position reflect on Eliza’s transformation?

**6.6** How are Mrs. Pearce and Mrs. Higgins more alike than is Eliza to each of these ladies? How is she similar to each of them?

**6.7** Discuss the relationship between Higgins and his mother.

**6.8** Explain the numerous intentional violations of manners on Higgins’ part. At the end of the play, how can we tolerate the fact that Higgins calls Eliza a “damned impudent slut”?

**6.9** Who should be given the most credit for Eliza’s transformation from a flower girl into a duchess? Could either Eliza or Higgins have accomplished this feat without the other?

**6.10** Why do you think that Higgins and Eliza should never marry? Or do you think that they should marry? Explain.

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## **Paper XII: Unit III**

### **Modern Drama and the Absurd**

#### **Structure**

#### **1. Introduction to the “Theatre of Absurd”**

1.1 The West

1.2 The East

#### **2. Absurd Drama: an Overview**

#### **3. Unique Characteristics of Modern Drama**

3.1 Stylistic Features and Dramatic Elements of Absurdist Plays

3.2 Essential Traits in Practice

#### **4. Suggested Essay Topics**

#### **5. Suggestions for Further Reading**

#### **6. Bibliography**

## 1. Introduction to the “Theatre of Absurd”

### 1.1 The West

'The Theatre of the Absurd' is a term coined by the critic Martin Esslin for the work of a number of playwrights, mostly written in the 1950s and 1960s. The term is derived from an essay by the French philosopher Albert Camus. In his 'Myth of Sisyphus', written in 1942, he first defined the human situation as basically meaningless and absurd. The 'absurd' plays by Samuel Beckett, Arthur Adamov, Eugene Ionesco, Jean Genet, Harold Pinter and others all share the view that man inhabits a universe with which he is out of key. Its meaning is indecipherable and his place within it is without purpose. He is bewildered, troubled and obscurely threatened.

The origins of the Theatre of the Absurd are rooted in the avant-garde experiments in art of the 1920s and 1930s. At the same time, it was undoubtedly strongly influenced by the traumatic experience of the horrors of the Second World War, which showed the total impermanence of any values, shook the validity of any conventions and highlighted the precariousness of human life and its fundamental meaninglessness and arbitrariness. The trauma of living from 1945 under threat of nuclear annihilation also seems to have been an important factor in the rise of the new theatre.

At the same time, the Theatre of the Absurd also seems to have been a reaction to the disappearance of the religious dimension from contemporary life. The Absurd Theatre can be seen as an attempt to restore the importance of myth and ritual to our age, by making man aware of the ultimate realities of his condition, by instilling in him again the lost sense of cosmic wonder and primeval anguish. The Absurd Theatre hopes to achieve this by

shocking man out of an existence that has become trite, mechanical and complacent. It is felt that there is mystical experience in confronting the limits of human condition.

As a result, absurd plays assumed a highly unusual, innovative form, directly aiming to startle the viewer, shaking him out of this comfortable, conventional life of everyday concerns. In the meaningless and Godless post-Second-World-War world, it was no longer possible to keep using such traditional art forms and standards that had ceased being convincing and lost their validity. The Theatre of the Absurd openly rebelled against conventional theatre. Indeed, it was anti-theatre. It was surreal, illogical, conflict less and plot less. The dialogue seemed total gobbledygook. Not unexpectedly, the Theatre of the Absurd first met with incomprehension and rejection.

One of the most important aspects of absurd drama was its distrust of language as a means of communication. Language had become a vehicle of conventionalised, stereotyped, meaningless exchanges. Words failed to express the essence of human experience, not being able to penetrate beyond its surface. The Theatre of the Absurd constituted first and foremost an onslaught on language, showing it as a very unreliable and insufficient tool of communication. Absurd drama uses conventionalised speech, clichés, slogans and technical jargon, which is distorted, parodied and broken down. By ridiculing conventionalised and stereotyped speech patterns, the Theatre of the Absurd tries to make people aware of the possibility of going beyond everyday speech conventions and communicating more authentically. Conventionalised speech acts as a barrier between ourselves and what the world is really about: in order to come into direct contact with natural reality, it is necessary to discredit and discard the false crutches of conventionalised language. Objects are much more important than language in absurd theatre: what happens transcends what is being

said about it. It is the hidden, implied meaning of words that assume primary importance in absurd theatre, over and above what is being actually said. The Theatre of the Absurd strove to communicate an undissolved totality of perception - hence it had to go beyond language.

Absurd drama subverts logic. It relishes the unexpected and the logically impossible. According to Sigmund Freud, there is a feeling of freedom we can enjoy when we are able to abandon the straitjacket of logic. In trying to burst the bounds of logic and language the absurd theatre is trying to shatter the enclosing walls of the human condition itself. Our individual identity is defined by language, having a name is the source of our separateness - the loss of logical language brings us towards a unity with living things. In being illogical, the absurd theatre is anti-rationalist: it negates rationalism because it feels that rationalist thought, like language, only deals with the superficial aspects of things. Nonsense, on the other hand, opens up a glimpse of the infinite. It offers intoxicating freedom, brings one into contact with the essence of life and is a source of marvellous comedy.

There is no dramatic conflict in the absurd plays. Dramatic conflicts, clashes of personalities and powers belong to a world where a rigid, accepted hierarchy of values forms a permanent establishment. Such conflicts, however, lose their meaning in a situation where the establishment and outward reality have become meaningless. However frantically characters perform, this only underlines the fact that nothing happens to change their existence. Absurd dramas are lyrical statements, very much like music: they communicate an atmosphere, an experience of archetypal human situations. The Absurd Theatre is a theatre of situation, as against the more conventional theatre of sequential events. It presents a pattern of poetic images. In doing this, it uses visual elements,

movement, light. Unlike conventional theatre, where language rules supreme, in the Absurd Theatre language is only one of many components of its multidimensional poetic imagery.

The Theatre of the Absurd is totally lyrical theatre which uses abstract scenic effects, many of which have been taken over and modified from the popular theatre arts: mime, ballet, acrobatics, conjuring, music-hall clowning. Much of its inspiration comes from silent film and comedy, as well as the tradition of verbal nonsense in early sound film (Laurel and Hardy, W C Fields, the Marx Brothers). It emphasises the importance of objects and visual experience: the role of language is relatively secondary. It owes a debt to European pre-war surrealism: its literary influences include the work of Franz Kafka. The Theatre of the Absurd is aiming to create a ritual-like, mythological, archetypal, allegorical vision, closely related to the world of dreams.

### **Some of the predecessors of absurd drama**

In the realm of verbal nonsense: François Rabelais, Lewis Carroll and Edward Lear. Many serious poets occasionally wrote nonsense poetry (Johnson, Charles Lamb, Keats, Hugo, Byron, Thomas Hood). One of the greatest masters of nonsense poetry was the German poet Christian Morgenstern (1871-1914). Ionesco found the work of S J Perelman (i.e. the dialogues of the Marx Brothers' films) a great inspiration for his work.

The world of allegory, myth and dream: The tradition of the world as a stage and life as a dream goes back to Elizabethan times. Baroque allegorical drama shows the world in terms of mythological archetypes: John Webster, Cyril Tourneur, Calderon, Jakob Biederman. With the decline of allegory, the element of fantasy prevails (Swift, Hugh Walpole).

In some 18th and 19th Century works of literature we find sudden transformation of characters and nightmarish shifts of time and place (E T A Hoffman, Nerval, Aurevilly). Dreams are featured in many theatrical pieces, but it had to wait for Strindberg to produce the masterly transcriptions of dreams and obsessions that have become a direct source of the Absurd Theatre. Strindberg, Dostoyevsky, Joyce and Kafka created archetypes: by delving into their own subconscious, they discovered the universal, collective significance of their own private obsessions. In the view of Mircea Eliade, myth has never completely disappeared on the level of individual experience. The Absurd Theatre sought to express the individual's longing for a single myth of general validity. The above-mentioned authors anticipated this.

Alfred Jarry is an important predecessor of the Absurd Theatre. His *UBU ROI* (1896) is a mythical figure, set amidst a world of grotesque archetypal images. Ubu Roi is a caricature, a terrifying image of the animal nature of man and his cruelty. (Ubu Roi makes himself King of Poland and kills and tortures all and sundry. The work is a puppet play and its décor of childish naivety underlines the horror.) Jarry expressed man's psychological states by objectifying them on the stage. Similarly, Franz Kafka's short stories and novels are meticulously exact descriptions of archetypal nightmares and obsessions in a world of convention and routine.

20th Century European avant-garde: For the French avant-garde, myth and dream was of utmost importance: the surrealists based much of their artistic theory on the teachings of Freud and his emphasis on the role of the subconscious. The aim of the avant-garde was to do away with art as a mere imitation of appearances. Apollinaire demanded that art should be more real than reality and deal with essences rather than appearances.

One of the more extreme manifestations of the avant-garde was the Dadaist movement, which took the desire to do away with obsolete artistic conventions to the extreme. Some Dadaist plays were written, but these were mostly nonsense poems in dialogue form, the aim of which was primarily to 'shock the bourgeois audience'. After the First World War, German Expressionism attempted to project inner realities and to objectify thought and feeling. Some of Brecht's plays are close to Absurd Drama, both in their clowning and their music-hall humour and the preoccupation with the problem of identity of the self and its fluidity. French surrealism acknowledged the subconscious mind as a great, positive healing force. However, its contribution to the sphere of drama was meagre: indeed it can be said that the Absurd Theatre of the 1950s and 1960s was a belated practical realisation of the principles formulated by the Surrealists as early as the 1930s. In this connection, of particular importance were the theoretical writings of Antonin Artaud. Artaud fully rejected realism in the theatre, cherishing a vision of a stage of magical beauty and mythical power. He called for a return to myth and magic and to the exposure of the deepest conflicts within the human mind. He demanded a theatre that would produce collective archetypes, thus creating a new mythology. In his view, theatre should pursue the aspects of the internal world. Man should be considered metaphorically in a wordless language of shapes, light, movement and gesture. Theatre should aim at expressing what language is incapable of putting into words. Artaud forms a bridge between the inter-war avant-garde and the post-Second-World-War Theatre of the Absurd.

## **1.2 The East**

At the time when the first absurd plays were being written and staged in Western Europe in the late 1940s and early 1950s, people in the East European countries suddenly

found themselves thrown into a world where absurdity was an integral part of everyday living. Suddenly, you did not need to be an abstract thinker in order to be able to reflect upon absurdity: the experience of absurdity became part and parcel of everybody's existence.

Hitler's attempt to conquer Russia during the Second World War gave Russia a unique opportunity to extend its sphere of influence and at the same time to 'further the cause of [the Soviet brand of] socialism'. In the final years of the war, Stalin turned the war of the defeat of Nazism into the war of conquest of Central Europe and the war of the division of Europe. In pursuing Hitler's retreating troops, the Russian Army managed to enter the territory of the Central European countries and to remain there, with very few exceptions, until now. The might of the Russian Army made it possible for Stalin to establish rigidly ideological pro-Soviet regimes, hermetically sealed from the rest of Europe. The Central European countries, whose pre-war political systems ranged from feudal monarchies (Rumania), semi-authoritarian states (Poland) through to a parliamentary Western-type democracy (Czechoslovakia) were now subjected to a militant Sovietisation. The countries were forced to undergo a major traumatic political and economic transformation.

The Western Theatre of the Absurd highlighted man's fundamental bewilderment and confusion, stemming from the fact that man has no answers to the basic existential questions: why we are alive, why we have to die, why there is injustice and suffering. East European Soviet-type socialism proudly proclaimed that it had answers to all these questions and, moreover, that it was capable of eliminating suffering and setting all injustices right. To doubt this was subversive. Officially, it was sufficient to implement a

grossly simplified formula of Marxism to all spheres of life and Paradise on Earth would ensue. It became clear very soon that this simplified formula offered even fewer real answers than various esoteric and complex Western philosophical systems and that its implementation by force brought enormous suffering.

From the beginning it was clear that the simplified idea was absurd: yet it was made to dominate all spheres of life. People were expected to shape their lives according to its dictates and to enjoy it. It was, and still is, an offence to be sceptical about Soviet-type socialism if you are a citizen of an East-European country. The sheer fact that the arbitrary formula of simplified Marxism was made to dominate the lives of millions of people, forcing them to behave against their own nature, brought the absurdity of the formula into sharp focus for these millions. Thus the Soviet-type system managed to bring the experience of what was initially a matter of concern for only a small number of sensitive individuals in the West to whole nations in the East.

This is not to say that the absurdity of life as experienced in the East differs in any way from the absurdity of life as it is experienced in the West. In both parts of the world it stems from the ambiguity of man's position in the universe, from his fear of death and from his instinctive yearning for the Absolute. It is just that official East-European practices, based on contempt for the fundamental existential questions and on a primitive and arrogant faith in the power of a simplified idea, have created a reality which makes absurdity a primary and deeply-felt, intrinsic experience for anybody who comes in contact with that reality.

To put it another way: the western Theatre of the Absurd may be seen as the expression of frustration and anger of a handful of intellectuals over the fact that people seem to lead uninspired, second-rate and stereotyped existences, either by deliberate

choice or because they do not know any better and have no idea how or ability by which to help themselves. Although such anger may sound smug and condescending, it is really mixed with despair. And when we look at Eastern Europe, we realise that these intellectuals are justified in condemning lives of mediocrity, even though many people in the West seem to lead such lives quite happily and without any awareness of the absurdity. In Eastern Europe, second-rateness has been elevated to a single, sacred, governing principle. There, mediocrity rules with a rod of iron. Thus it can be seen clearly what it can achieve. As a result, unlike in the West, many people in the East seem to have discovered that it is very uncomfortable to live under the command of second-rateness.

The fact that mediocrity is harmful to life comes across so clearly in Eastern Europe either because East-European second-rateness is much harsher than the mild, West-European, consumerist mediocrity, or simply because it is a single, totalitarian second-rateness, obligatory for all. A single version of a simple creed cannot suit all, its insufficiencies immediately show. This is not the case if everybody is allowed to choose their own simplified models and prejudices which suit their individual needs, the way it is in the West - thus their insufficiencies are not immediately noticeable.

The rise of the Theatre of the Absurd in the East is connected with the period of relative relaxation of the East European regimes after Stalin's death. In the first decade after the communist take-over of power, it would have been impossible for anyone to write anything even distantly based on his experiences of life after the take-over without endangering his personal safety. The arts, as indeed all other spheres of life, were subject to rigid political control and reduced to serving blatant ideological and propagandistic aims. This was the period when feature films were made about happy workers in a steelworks, or

about a village tractor driver who after falling in love with his tractor becomes a member of the communist party, etc. All the arts assumed rigidly conservative, 19th-Century realist forms, to which a strong political bias was added. 20th -Century developments, in particular the inter-war experiments with structure and form in painting and poetry were outlawed as bourgeois decadence.

In the years after Stalin's death in 1953, the situation slowly improved. The year 1956 saw two major attempts at liberalisation within the Soviet Bloc: the Hungarian revolution was defeated, while the Polish autumn managed to introduce a measure of normalcy into the country which lasted for several years. Czechoslovakia did not see the first thaw until towards the end of the 1950s: genuine liberalisation did not start gaining momentum until 1962-63. Hence it was only in the 1960s that the first absurdist plays could be written and staged in Eastern Europe. Even so, the Theatre of the Absurd remained limited to only two East European countries, those that were the most liberal at the time: Poland and Czechoslovakia.

The East European Absurd Theatre was undoubtedly inspired by Western absurd drama, yet it differed from it considerably in form, meaning and impact. Although East European authors and theatre producers were quite well acquainted with many West-European absurd plays from the mid to late 1950s onwards, nevertheless (with very few exceptions) these plays were not performed or even translated in Eastern Europe until the mid-1960s. The reasons for this were several. First, West-European absurd drama was regarded by East-European officialdom as the epitome of West-European bourgeois capitalist decadence and, as a result, East European theatrical producers would be wary of trying to stage a condemned play - such an act would blight their career once and for all,

ensuring that they would never work in theatre again. The western absurdist plays were regarded as nihilistic and anti-realistic, especially after Kenneth Tynan had attacked Ionesco as the apostle of anti-realism: this attack was frequently used by the East European officialdom for condemning Western absurd plays.

Secondly, after a decade or more of staple conservative realistic bias, there were fears among theatrical producers that the West European absurd plays might be regarded as far too avant-garde and esoteric by the general public. Thirdly, there was an atmosphere of relative optimism in Eastern Europe in the late 1950s and the 1960s. It was felt that although life under Stalin's domination had been terrible, the bad times were now past after the dictator's death and full liberalisation was only a matter of time. The injustices and deficiencies of the East European systems were seen as due to human frailty rather than being a perennial metaphysical condition: it was felt that sincere and concerted human effort was in the long run going to be able to put all wrongs right. In a way, this was a continuation of the simplistic Stalinist faith in man's total power over his predicament. From this point of view, it was felt that most Western absurdist plays were too pessimistic, negative and destructive. It was argued (perhaps partially for official consumption) that the East European absurdist plays, unlike their Western counterparts, constituted constructive criticism.

The line of argument of reformist, pro-liberalisation Marxists in Czechoslovakia in the early 1960s ran as follows: The Western Theatre of the Absurd recorded the absurdity of human existence as an immutable condition. It was a by-product of the continuing disintegration of capitalism. Western absurd plays were irrelevant in Eastern Europe, since socialist society had already found all answers concerning man's conduct and the meaning

of life in general. Unlike its Western counterpart, East European absurd drama was communicating constructive criticism of the deformation of Marxism by the Stalinists. All that the East-European absurdist plays were trying to do was to remove minor blemishes on the face of the Marxist model - and that was easily done.

It was only later that some critics were able to point out that West European absurd dram was not in fact nihilistic and destructive and that it played the same constructive roles as East European drama attempted to play. At this stage, it was realised that the liberal Marxist analysis of East European absurd drama was incorrect: just as with its Western counterpart, the East European absurdist theatre could be seen as a comment on the human condition in general - hence its relevance also for the West.

On the few occasions that Western absurdist plays were actually staged in Eastern Europe, the East European audiences found the plays highly relevant. A production of *Waiting for Godot* in Poland in 1956 and in Slovakia in 1969, for instance, both became something nearing a political demonstration. Both the Polish and Slovak audiences stressed that for them, this was a play about hope - hope against hope.

The tremendous impact of these productions in Eastern Europe can be perhaps compared with the impact of *Waiting for Godot* on the inmates of a Californian penitentiary, when it was staged there in 1957. Like the inmates of a gaol, people in Eastern Europe are possibly also freer of the numbing concerns of everyday living than the average Western man in the street. Since they live under pressure, this somehow brings them closer to the bare essentials of life and they are therefore more receptive to the works that deal with archetypal existential situations than is the case with an ordinary Wes-European citizen.

On the whole, East European absurd drama has been far less abstract and esoteric than its West European counterpart. Moreover, while the West European drama is usually considered as having spent itself by the end of the 1960s, several East European authors have been writing highly original plays in the absurdity mould, well into the 1970s.

The main difference between the West European and the East European plays is that while the West European plays deal with a predicament of an individual or a group of individuals in a situation stripped to the bare, and often fairly abstract and metaphysical essentials, the East European plays mostly show an individual trapped within the cogwheels of a social system. The social context of the West European absurd plays is usually subdued and theoretical: in the East European plays it is concrete, menacing and fairly realistic: it is usually covered by very transparent metaphors. The social context is shown as a kind of Catch-22 system - it is a set of circumstances whose joint impact crushes the individual. The absurdity of the social system is highlighted and frequently shown as the result of the actions of stupid, misguided or evil people - this condemnation is of course merely implicit. Although the fundamental absurdity of the life feature in these plays is not intended to be metaphysically conditioned - these are primarily pieces of social satire - on reflection, the viewer will realise that there is fundamentally no difference between the 'messages' of the West European and the East European plays - except that the East European plays may be able to communicate these ideas more pressingly and more vividly to their audiences, because of their first-hand everyday experience of the absurdity that surrounds them.

At the end of the 1960s, the situation in Eastern Europe changed for the worse. After the invasion of Czechoslovakia in 1968, it became apparent that Russia would not tolerate a

fuller liberalisation of the East European countries. Czechoslovakia was thrown into a harsh, neo-Stalinist mould, entering the time capsule of stagnating immobility, in which it has remained ever since. Since it had been primarily artists and intellectuals that were spearheading the liberalising reforms of the 1960s, the arts were now subjected to a vicious purge. Many well-known artists and intellectuals were turned into non-persons practically overnight: some left or were later forced to lead the country.

All the Czechoslovak absurdist playwrights fell into the non-person category. It is perhaps quite convincing evidence of the social relevance of their plays that the establishment feared them so much it felt the need to outlaw them. Several of the banned authors have continued writing, regardless of the fact that their plays cannot be staged in Czechoslovakia at present. They have been published and produced in the West.

As in the 1960s, these authors are still deeply socially conscious: for instance, Václav Havel, in the words of Martin Esslin, 'one of the most promising European playwrights of today', is a courageous defender of basic human values and one of the most important (and most thoughtful) spokespersons of the non-establishment groupings in Czechoslovakia.

By contrast, the Polish absurdist playwrights have been able to continue working in Poland undisturbed since the early 1960s, their plays having been normally published and produced within the country even throughout 1970s.

It is perhaps quite interesting that even the Western absurd dramatists have gradually developed a need to defend basic human values. They have been showing solidarity with their East European colleagues. Ionesco was always deeply distrustful of politics and the clichéd language of the political establishment. Harold Pinter, who took part

in a radio production of one of Václav Havel's plays from the 1970s several years ago, has frequently spoken in support of the East European writers and playwrights. Samuel Beckett has written a short play dedicated to Havel, which was staged in France in 1984 during a ceremony at the University of Toulouse, which awarded Havel an honorary doctorate.

## **2. Absurd Drama: an Overview**

'The Theatre of the Absurd' has become a catch-phrase, much used and much abused. What does it stand for? And how can such labels be justified? Perhaps it will be best to attempt to answer the second question first. There is no organised movement, no school of artists, who claim the label for themselves. A good many playwrights who have been classed under this label, when asked if they belong to the Theatre of the Absurd, will indignantly reply that they belong to no such movement - and quite rightly so. For each of the playwrights concerned seeks to express no more and no less his personal vision of the world.

Yet critical concepts of this kind are useful when new modes of expression, new conventions of art arise. When the plays of Ionesco, Beckett, Genet, and Adamov first appeared on the stage they puzzled and outraged most critics as well audiences. And no wonder. These plays flout all the standards by which drama has been judged for many centuries; they must therefore appear as a provocation to people who have come into the theatre expecting to find what they would recognize as a well-made play. A well-made play is expected to present characters that are well-observed and convincingly motivated: these plays often contain hardly any recognizable human beings and present completely unmotivated actions. A well-made play is expected to entertain by the ding-dong of witty and logically built-up dialogue: in some of these plays dialogue seems to have degenerated

into meaningless babble. A well-made play is expected to have a beginning, middle, and a neatly tied-up ending: these plays often start at an arbitrary point and seem to end just as arbitrarily. By all the traditional standards of critical appreciation of the drama, these plays are not only abominably bad; they do not even deserve the name drama.

And yet, strangely enough, these plays have worked, they have had an effect; they have exercised a fascination of their own in the theatre. At first it was said that this fascination was merely a succès de scandale that people flocked to see Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* or Ionesco's *Bald Primadonna* merely because it had become fashionable to express outrage and astonishment about them at parties. But this explanation clearly could not apply to more than one or two plays of this kind. And the success of a whole row of similarly unconventional works became more and more manifest. If the critical touchstones of conventional drama did not apply to these plays, this must surely have been due to a difference in objective, the use of different artistic means, to the fact, in short, that these plays were both creating and applying a different convention of drama. It is just as senseless to condemn an abstract painting because it lacks perspective or a recognizable subject-matter as it is to reject *Waiting for Godot* because it has no plot to speak of. In painting a composition of squares and lines an artist like Mondrian does not want to depict any object in nature, he does not want to create perspective. Similarly, in writing *Waiting for Godot* Beckett did not intend to tell a story, he did not want the audience to go home satisfied that they knew the solution to the problem posed in the play. Hence there is no point in reproaching him with not doing what he never sought to do; the only reasonable course is to try and find out what it was that he did intend.

Yet, if tackled directly most of the playwrights in question would refuse to discuss any theories or objectives behind their work. They would, with perfect justification, point out that they are concerned with one thing only: to express their vision of the world as best they can, simply because, as artists, they feel an irrepressible urge to do so. This is where the critic can step in. By describing the works that do not fit into the established convention, by bringing out the similarities of approach in a number of more or less obviously related new works, by analysing the nature of their method and their artistic effect, he can try to define the framework of the new convention, and by doing so, can provide the standards by which it will become possible to have works in that convention meaningfully compared and evaluated. The onus of proof that there is such a convention involved clearly lies on the critic, but if he can establish that there are basic similarities in approach, he can argue that these similarities must arise from common factors in the experience of the writers concerned. And these common factors must in turn spring from the spiritual climate of our age (which no sensitive artist can escape) and also perhaps from a common background of artistic influences, a similarity of roots, a shared tradition.

A term like the Theatre of the Absurd must therefore be understood as a kind of intellectual shorthand for a complex pattern of similarities in approach, method, and convention, of shared philosophical and artistic premises, whether conscious or subconscious, and of influences from a common store of tradition. A label of this kind therefore is an aid to understanding, valid only in so far as it helps to gain insight into a work of art. It is not a binding classification; it is certainly not all-embracing or exclusive. A play may contain some elements that can best be understood in the light of such a label, while other elements in the same play derive from and can best be understood in the light of a

different convention. Arthur Adamov, for example, has written a number of plays that are prime examples of the Theatre of the Absurd. He now quite openly and consciously rejects this style and writes in a different, realistic convention. Nevertheless even his latest plays, which are both realistic and socially committed, contain some aspects which can still be elucidated in terms of the Theatre of the Absurd (such as the use of symbolic interludes, guignols, in his play *Spring '71*). Moreover, once a term like Theatre of the Absurd is defined and understood, it acquires a certain value in throwing light on works of previous epochs. The Polish critic Jan Kott, for example, has written a brilliant study of *King Lear* in the light of Beckett's *Endgame*. And that this was no vain academic exercise but a genuine aid to understanding is shown by the fact that Peter Brook's great production of *King Lear* took many of its ideas from Kott's essay.

Here one can ask that what then is the convention of drama that has now acquired the label of the Theatre of the Absurd.

To answer this, let us take one of the plays in this volume as a starting point: Ionesco's *Amédée*. A middle-aged husband and wife are shown in a situation which is clearly not taken from real life. They have not left their flat for years. The wife earns her living by operating some sort of telephone switchboard; the husband is writing a play, but has never got beyond the first few lines. In the bedroom is a corpse. It has been there for many years. It may be the corpse of the wife's lover whom the husband killed when he found them together, but this is by no means certain; it may also have been a burglar, or a stray visitor. But the oddest thing about it is that it keeps growing larger and larger; it is suffering from 'geometric progression, the incurable disease of the dead'. And in the course of the play it grows so large that eventually an enormous foot bursts from the bedroom into the living-

room, threatening to drive Amédée and his wife out of their home. All this is wildly fantastic, yet it is not altogether unfamiliar, for it is not unlike situations most of us have experienced at one time or another in dreams and nightmares.

Ionesco has in fact put a dream situation onto the stage, and in a dream quite clearly the rules of realistic theatre no longer apply. Dreams do not develop logically; they develop by association. Dreams do not communicate ideas; they communicate images. And indeed the growing corpse in Amédée can best be understood as a poetic image. It is in the nature both of dreams and poetic imagery that they are ambiguous and carry a multitude of meanings at one and the same time, so that it is futile to ask what the image of the growing corpse stands for. On the other hand one can say that the corpse might evoke the growing power of past mistakes or past guilt, perhaps the waning of love or the death of affection - some evil in any case that festers and grows worse with time. The image can stand for any and all of these ideas, and its ability to embrace them all gives it the poetic power it undoubtedly possesses.

Not all the plays of the Theatre of the Absurd can be described simply as dreams (although Adamov's Professor Taranne in this volume actually came to Adamov as a dream, Albee's Zoo Story is clearly far more firmly anchored in reality) but in all of them the poetic image is the focus of interest. In other words: while most plays in the traditional convention are primarily concerned to tell a story or elucidate an intellectual problem, and can thus be seen as a narrative or discursive form of communication, the plays of the Theatre of the Absurd are primarily intended to convey a poetic image or a complex pattern of poetic images; they are above all a poetical form. Narrative or discursive thought proceeds in a dialectical manner and must lead to a result or final message; it is therefore dynamic and

moves along a definite line of development. Poetry is above all concerned to convey its central idea, or atmosphere, or mode of being; it is essentially static.

This does not mean, however, that these plays lack movement: the movement in *Amédée*, for instance, is relentless, lying as it does in the pressure of the ever-growing corpse. But the situation of the play remains static; the movement we see is the unfolding of the poetic image. The more ambiguous and complex that image, the more intricate and intriguing will be the process of revealing it. That is why a play like *Waiting for Godot* can generate considerable suspense and dramatic tension in spite of being a play in which literally nothing happens, a play designed to show that nothing can ever happen in human life. It is only when the last lines have been spoken and the curtain has fallen that we are in a position to grasp the total pattern of the complex poetic image we have been confronted with. If, in the traditional play, the action goes from point A to point B, and we constantly ask, 'what's going to happen next?', here we have an action that consists in the gradual unfolding of a complex pattern, and instead we ask, 'what is it that we are seeking? What will the completed image be when we have grasped the nature of the pattern?' Thus in Arrabal's *The Two Executioners* in this volume we realise at the end of the play that the theme is the exploration of a complex image of the mother-son relationship; in Albee's *Zoo Story* it is only in the last lines of the play that the idea of the entire dialogue between Jerry and Peter falls into place, as an image of the difficulty of communication between human beings in our world.

Why should the emphasis in drama have shifted away from traditional forms towards images which, complex and suggestive as they may be, must necessarily lack the final clarity of definition, the neat resolutions we have been used to expect? Clearly because

the playwrights concerned no longer believe in the possibility of such neatness of resolution. They are indeed chiefly concerned with expressing a sense of wonder, of incomprehension, and at times of despair, at the lack of cohesion and meaning that they find in the world. If they could believe in clearly defined motivations, acceptable solutions, settlements of conflict in tidily tied up endings, these dramatists would certainly not eschew them. But, quite obviously, they have no faith in the existence of so rational and well ordered a universe. The 'well-made play' can thus be seen as conditioned by clear and comforting beliefs, a stable scale of values, an ethical system in full working condition. The system of values, the world-view behind the well-made play may be a religious one or a political one; it may be an implicit belief in the goodness and perfectibility of men (as in Shaw or Ibsen) or it may be a mere unthinking acceptance of the moral and political status quo (as in most drawing-room comedy). But whatever it is, the basis of the well-made play is the implicit assumption that the world does make sense, that reality is solid and secure, all outlines clear, all ends apparent. The plays that we have classed under the label of the Theatre of the Absurd, on the other hand, express a sense of shock at the absence, the loss of any such clear and well-defined systems of beliefs or values.

There can little doubt that such a sense of disillusionment, such a collapse of all previously held firm beliefs is a characteristic feature of our own times. The social and spiritual reasons for such a sense of loss of meaning are manifold and complex: the waning of religious faith that had started with the Enlightenment and led Nietzsche to speak of the 'death of God' by the eighteen-eighties; the breakdown of the liberal faith in inevitable social progress in the wake of the First World War; the disillusionment with the hopes of radical social revolution as predicted by Marx after Stalin had turned the Soviet Union into a

totalitarian tyranny; the relapse into barbarism, mass murder, and genocide in the course of Hitler's brief rule over Europe during the Second World War; and, in the aftermath of that war, the spread of spiritual emptiness in the outwardly prosperous and affluent societies of Western Europe and the United States. There can be no doubt: for many intelligent and sensitive human beings the world of the mid twentieth century has lost its meaning and has simply ceased to make sense. Previously held certainties have dissolved, the firmest foundations for hope and optimism have collapsed. Suddenly man sees himself faced with a universe that is both frightening and illogical - in a word, absurd. All assurances of hope, all explanations of ultimate meaning have suddenly been unmasked as nonsensical illusions, empty chatter, whistling in the dark. If we try to imagine such a situation in ordinary life, this might amount to our suddenly ceasing to understand the conversation in a room full of people; what made sense at one moment has, at the next, become an obscure babble of voices in a foreign language. At once the comforting, familiar scene would turn into one of nightmare and horror. With the loss of the means of communication we should be compelled to view that world with the eyes of total outsiders as a succession of frightening images.

Such a sense of loss of meaning must inevitably lead to a questioning of the recognised instrument for the communication of meaning: language. Consequently the Theatre of the Absurd is to a very considerable extent concerned with a critique of language, an attack above all on fossilized forms of language which have become devoid of meaning. The conversation at the party which at one moment seemed to be an exchange of information about the weather, or new books, or the respective health of the participants, is suddenly revealed as an exchange of mere meaningless banalities. The people talking about

the weather had no intention whatever of really exchanging meaningful information on the subject; they were merely using language to fill the emptiness between them, to conceal the fact that they had no desire to tell each other anything at all. In other words, from being a noble instrument of genuine communication language has become a kind of ballast filling empty spaces. And equally, in a universe that seems to be drained of meaning, the pompous and laborious attempts at explanation that we call philosophy or politics must appear as empty chatter. In *Waiting for Godot*, for example Beckett parodies and mocks the language of philosophy and science in Lucky's famous speech. Harold Pinter, whose uncanny accuracy in the reproduction of real conversation among English people has earned him the reputation of having a tape-recorder built into his memory, reveals that the bulk of everyday conversation is largely devoid of logic and sense, is in fact nonsensical. It is at this point that the Theatre of the Absurd can actually coincide with the highest degree of realism. For if the real conversation of human beings is in fact absurd and nonsensical, then it is the well-made play with its polished logical dialogue that is unrealistic, while the absurdist play may well be a tape-recorded reproduction of reality. Or, in a world that has become absurd, the Theatre of the Absurd is the most realistic comment on, the most accurate reproduction of, reality.

In its critique of language the Theatre of the Absurd closely reflects the preoccupation of contemporary philosophy with language, its effort to disentangle language, as a genuine instrument for logic and the discovery of reality, from the welter of emotive, illogical usages, the grammatical conventions that have, in the past, often been confused with genuine logical relationships. And equally, in its emphasis on the basic absurdity of the human condition, on the bankruptcy of all closed systems of thought with

claims to provide a total explanation of reality, the Theatre of the Absurd has much in common with the existential philosophy of Heidegger, Sartre, and Camus. (It was in fact Camus who coined the concept of the Absurd in the sense in which it is used here.) This is not to say that the dramatists of the Absurd are trying to translate contemporary philosophy into drama. It is merely that philosophers and dramatists respond to the same cultural and spiritual situation and reflect the same preoccupations.

Yet, however contemporary the Theatre of the Absurd may appear it is by no means the revolutionary novelty as which some of its champions, as well as some of its bitterest critics, tend to represent it. In fact the Theatre of the Absurd can best be understood as a new combination of a number of ancient, even archaic, traditions of literature and drama. It is surprising and shocking merely because of the unusual nature of the combination and the increased emphasis on aspects of drama that, while present in all plays, rarely emerge into the foreground.

The ancient traditions combined in a new form in the Theatre of the Absurd are: the tradition of miming and clowning that goes back to the mimes of Greece and Rome, the *commedia dell' arte* of Renaissance Italy, and such popular forms of theatre as the pantomime or the music-hall in Britain; the equally ancient tradition of nonsense poetry; the tradition of dream and nightmare literature that also goes back to Greek and Roman times; allegorical and symbolic drama, such as we find it in medieval morality plays, or in the Spanish *auto sacramental*; the ancient tradition of fools and mad scenes in drama, of which Shakespeare provides a multitude of examples; and the even more ancient tradition of ritual drama that goes back to the very origins of the theatre where religion and drama were still one. It is no coincidence that one of the masters of the Theatre of the Absurd, Jean Genet,

regards his plays as attempts at recapturing the ritual element in the Mass itself, which, after all, can be seen as a poetic image of an archetypal event brought to life through a sequence of symbolical actions.

It is against this background that we must see the history of the movement which culminates in Beckett, Ionesco, or Genet. Its immediate forebears are dramatists like Strindberg, who progressed from photographic naturalism to more and more openly expressionist representations of dreams, nightmares, or obsessions in plays like the *Ghost Sonata*, *Dream Play*, or *To Damascus*, and novelists like James Joyce and Kafka. A form of drama concerned with dream-like imagery and the failure of language were bound to find inspiration also in the silent cinema, with its dream-like quality and cruel, sometimes nightmare humour. Charlie Chaplin's little man and Buster Keaton's stone-faced stoic are among the openly acknowledged influences of writers like Beckett and Ionesco. These comedians, after all, derive from the most ancient traditions of clowning, as do, in the talking cinema, the Marx Brothers, W. C. Fields, or Laurel and Hardy, all clearly part of the tradition which leads to the Theatre of the Absurd.

Another direct and acknowledged influence is that of the Dadaists, the surrealists, and the Parisian avant-garde that derives from writers like Alfred Jarry (1873-1907) and Guillaume Apollinaire (1880-1918). Jarry's *Ubu Roi*, first performed in 1896, might in fact be called the first modern example of the Theatre of the Absurd. It is a savage farce in which monstrous puppets castigate the greed and emptiness of bourgeois society through a series of grotesque stage images. Apollinaire's play *Les Mamelles de Tiresias* ('The Breasts of Tiresias') was the first play to be labelled by its author as 'a surrealist drama'. Here too the action proceeds through a series of savagely grotesque images; the hero, or rather the

heroine, Thérèse-Tiresias changes sex by letting her breasts float towards the heavens in the shape of two toy balloons. Jarry and Apollinaire were the direct precursors of the Dadaists in Switzerland, France and Germany. Brecht's earliest plays bear the marks of the Dadaist influence and can be regarded as early examples of the Theatre of the Absurd: *In the Jungle of the Cities* for instance presents the audience with a totally unmotivated struggle, a series of poetic images of man fighting a senseless battle with himself. In France the two leading exponents of surrealism in drama were Antonin Artaud (1896-1948) and Roger Vitrac (1899-1952). Vitrac's play *Victor ou Les Enfants au Pouvoir* (1924) anticipates Ionesco and Arrabal by showing the world from the point of view of a nine-year-old child of giant size and monstrous intelligence. Artaud, who wrote very little in dramatic form himself, is of immense importance as a theoretician of the new anti-literary theatre: he coined the slogan of the 'Theatre of Cruelty' for his conception of a theatre designed to shock its audience into a full awareness of the horror of the human condition. Jean-Louis Barrault and Roger Blin, two of the leading directors of the contemporary avant-garde theatre, were pupils of Artaud; Arthur Adamov was among his closest friends.

In its present form the Theatre of the Absurd is a post-war phenomenon. Genet's *The Maids* had its first performance at the Athénée in Paris in 1947; Ionesco's *Bald Primadonna* and Adamov's earliest plays were first produced in 1950; Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* in 1952. It will be noticed that all these first performances took place in Paris. And Paris certainly is the fountainhead of the Theatre of the Absurd. Yet it is equally strange and significant that the playwrights themselves are largely exiles from other countries domiciled in Paris: Beckett (born 1906) an Anglo-Irishman who writes in French; Ionesco (born 1912) half-French and half-Rumanian; Adamov (born 1908) a Russo-Armenian. Only Genet is a

Frenchman born and bred, but then he is an exile in a different sense: an exile from society itself, a child abandoned by his mother, brought up by foster-parents and drifting from detention centres for juvenile delinquents into an underworld of thieves and male prostitutes, prison and penitentiary. It is in the experience of the outcast or exile that our image of the world seen from the outside assumes a new and added significance: for the exile, from his country or from society, moves in a world drained of meaning, sees people in pursuit of objectives he cannot comprehend, hears them speak a language that he cannot follow. The exile's basic experience is the archetype and the anticipation of twentieth-century man's shock at his realization that the world is ceasing to make sense.

Of the dramatists of the Absurd Samuel Beckett is undoubtedly the profoundest, the greatest poet. *Waiting for Godot* and *Endgame* are certainly masterpieces; *Happy Days* and *Play*, *Krapp's Last Tape*, and the two *Acts without Words* (where language has drained away altogether) are brilliant and profound poetic images; and the radio plays *All that Fall*, *Embers*, *Words and Music*, and *Cascando* have an equal enigmatic power.

Jean Genet (born 1910) lacks Beckett's discipline, intellect and erudition, but he too is a poet, endowed with the wellnigh magic power of creating beauty from evil, corruption and excrement. If the evanescence of man in time and the mystery of human personality and identity are Beckett's main themes, Genet's chief concern is with the falseness of human pretensions in society, the contrast between appearance and reality, which itself must remain forever elusive. In *The Maids* we see the servants bound in a mixture of hatred and erotic dependence to their mistress, re-enacting this love-hate in an endless series of ritual games; in *The Balcony* society itself is symbolized in the image of a brothel providing its customers with the illusions of power; and in *The Blacks* we are back with the underdog

acting out his hatred for his oppressor (which is also a form of love) in an endless ritual of mock-murder.

Jean Tardieu (born 1903) and Boris Vian (1920-59) are among the best of the French dramatists of the Absurd. Tardieu is an experimenter who has systematically explored the possibilities of a theatre that can divorce itself from discursive speech to the point where language becomes mere musical sound. Vian, a devoted follower of Jarry, wrote a play, *The Empire Builders*, which shows man fleeing from death and loneliness in the image of a family moving into ever smaller flats on higher and higher floors of a mysterious building.

In Italy Dino Buzzati and Ezio d'Errico, in Germany Günter Grass (known as a novelist for his monumental *Tin Drum*) and Wolfgang Hildesheimer are the main exponents of the Theatre of the Absurd. In Britain, N. F. Simpson, James Saunders, David Campton, and Harold Pinter might be classed under this heading. N. F. Simpson has clear links with English nonsense literature, Lewis Carroll and Edward Lear. James Saunders, particularly in *Next Time I'll Sing to You*, expresses in dramatic form the thought of the existential philosophers. Pinter, who acknowledges Kafka and Beckett among his literary heroes, combines realism with an intuition of the absurdity of human existence. In his later work he has shed some of the allegorical symbolism of his beginnings, but even in seemingly realistic plays like *The Collection* there is an absence of motivation and solution, a multiple ambiguity and a sense of non-communication which transforms the seemingly realistic account of humdrum adultery into a poetic image of the human condition.

Behind the Iron Curtain, where socialist realism is the official creed in the theatre, there would appear to be no room for an avant-garde trend of this type. Yet there is one country where the influence of the Theatre of the Absurd has produced some astonishingly

successful plays: Poland, an area of relative artistic freedom since the defeat of the Stalinists by Gomulka in the autumn of 1956. A strong surrealist influence was present in Poland even before the war (Gombrowicz and Witkiewicz are two dramatists who might be regarded as among the most important immediate precursors of the Theatre of the Absurd) so that the soil was fertile for a development which was further fostered by the ability of drama of this kind to express political comment in a suitably oblique form. A number of young dramatists, notably Slawomir Mrozek and Tadeusz Rozewicz, have produced outstandingly original work in the convention of the Absurd.

Three of the playwrights represented in this volume are Parisian exiles. Eugène Ionesco is undoubtedly the most fertile and original of the dramatists of the Absurd, and also, in spite of a streak of clowning and fun for its own sake in his work, one of the most profound. He is moreover the most vocal of the dramatists of the Absurd, the only one who is prepared to discuss the theoretical foundations of his work and to reply to the attacks on it from committed left-wing realists. The critique of language and the haunting presence of death are Ionesco's chief themes in plays like *The Bald Primadonna*, *The Lesson*, *The Chairs*, *The Killer*, *Rhinoceros*, and *Exit The King*. *Amédée* or *How to Get Rid of It* (1953) is Ionesco's first full-length play and contains one of his most telling images. It is also characteristic in its alternation between states of depression and euphoria, leaden oppression and floating on air, an image which reappears through his work and which culminates, in this particular play, in Amédée's floating away at the end.

Arthur Adamov today belongs to the camp against which Ionesco directs his harshest polemics, the socialist realists whose organ is the periodical *Théâtre populaire*, but he started out as a follower of Artaud, a self-confessed neurotic, an alien in a senseless world.

Adamov's development from one extreme to the other is a fascinating artistic and psychological case history, in which Professor Taranne occupies a key position. Adamov's progress can be seen as a process of psychological therapy through writing. Unable to face the reality of the outside world, he started out by projecting his oppressions and anxieties on to the stage. Nothing would have induced him, he has since confessed, to mention any element of the real world, such as a place-name in one of his plays; he would have regarded that as a piece of unspeakable vulgarity. And yet, when he committed to paper the dream which is now the play Professor Taranne, he realized that a real place-name, that of Belgium, had occurred in the dream. Truthfulness in transcribing the dream thus forced him to compromise on one of his fundamental artistic principles. And from then onwards reality kept breaking through into his writing in ever more insistent form, until today he is a thorough-going realist of the Brechtian school. That is to say, by writing his obsessions out of his system, Adamov acquired the ability to face and to control the objective world from which he had withdrawn into neurosis. It might be argued that the projection of neurotic obsessions is both more interesting and more illuminating in providing insights into the dark side of the human mind than the accurate transcription of historical events, and that therefore Adamov's absurdist plays are more fascinating, more successful than his later efforts. But this is a matter of taste as well as of ideological bias. The fact remains that Professor Taranne and the somewhat more realistic Ping Pong are undoubtedly among Adamov's best plays.

Fernando Arrabal (born 1932) is a Spaniard who has been living in France since 1954 and now writes in French. He is an admirer of Beckett, but sees his roots in the surrealist tradition of Spain, a country that has always been rich in fantasy and the grotesque (El

Greco, Goya) and that in more recent times has produced such outstanding representatives of the modern movement as the painter Picasso (who has himself written two plays in an absurdist vein) and the writers Lorca and Valle Inclàn. Arrabal's own contribution to the absurdist spectrum is a highly original one: his main preoccupation is with the absurdity of ethical and moral rules. He looks at the world with the incomprehension of a child that simply cannot understand the logic of conventional morality. Thus, in *The Automobile Graveyard* there is a prostitute who follows her profession simply because religion demands that one be kind to one's neighbours; how then could she refuse them the ultimate kindness of giving herself to them? And similarly in *The Two Executioners* the rebel son who objects to the tortures that his mother inflicts on his father is faced with the dilemma of several contradictory moral laws: obedience to one's father, the human goodness that prompts one to save the suffering victim from his torturers, and the need to honour and obey one's mother. These moral laws are here in obvious conflict, as it is the mother who has the father tortured. Clearly the situation in which several moral laws are in contradiction exposes the absurdity of the system of values that accommodates them all. Arrabal refuses to judge; he merely notes the position and shows that he finds it beyond his comprehension.

Edward Albee (born 1928) is one of the few American exponents of the Theatre of the Absurd. An adopted child, he shares with Genet the orphan's sense of loneliness in an alien world; and the image of the dream child which exists only in the adoptive parents' imagination recurs in a number of his plays, notably *The American Dream* and *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf*. The latter, which has earned him an enormous success on Broadway, is undoubtedly one of the finest American plays since the heyday of Eugene O'Neill. It is a savage dance of death reminiscent of Strindberg, outwardly realistic in form, but in fact, as

in the case of Pinter's best work, existing on at least two levels apart from the realistic one: as an allegory of American society, a poetic image of its emptiness and sterility, and as a complex ritual on the pattern of Genet. *The Zoo Story* (1958), one of Albee's earliest dramatic ventures, has a similar complexity: it is a clinically accurate study of Schizophrenia, an image of man's loneliness and inability to make contact, and also, on the ritual and symbolic level, an act of ritual self-immolation that has curious parallels with Christ's atonement. (Note the names Jerry – Jesus and Peter).

The plays in this volume, like the plays of the Theatre of the Absurd in general, present a disillusioned, harsh, and stark picture of the world. Though often couched in the form of extravagant fantasies, they are nevertheless essentially realistic, in the sense that they never shirk the realities of the human mind with its despair, fear and loneliness in an alien and hostile universe. There is more human reality in the grotesquely extravagant images of Amédée than in many far longer plays in a convention that is a mere photographic copy of the surface of life. The realism of these plays is a psychological, and inner realism; they explore the human sub-conscious in depth rather than trying to describe the outward appearance of human existence. Nor is it quite correct that these plays, deeply pessimistic as they are, are nothing but an expression of utter despair. It is true that basically the Theatre of the Absurd attacks the comfortable certainties of religious or political orthodoxy. It aims to shock its audience out of complacency, to bring it face to face with the harsh facts of the human situation as these writers see it. But the challenge behind this message is anything but one of despair. It is a challenge to accept the human condition as it is, in all its mystery and absurdity, and to bear it with dignity, nobly, responsibly; precisely because there are no easy solutions to the mysteries of existence, because

ultimately man is alone in a meaningless world. The shedding of easy solutions, of comforting illusions, may be painful, but it leaves behind it a sense of freedom and relief. And that is why, in the last resort, the Theatre of the Absurd does not provoke tears of despair but the laughter of liberation.

### 3. Unique Characteristics of Modern Drama

#### 3.1 Stylistic Features and Dramatic Elements of Absurdist Plays

The Theatre of the Absurd, or Theater of the Absurd (French: "Le Théâtre de l'Absurde") is a designation for particular plays written by a number of primarily European playwrights in the late 1940s, 1950s, and 1960s, as well as to the style of theatre which has evolved from their work. The term was coined by the critic Martin Esslin, who made it the title of a 1962 book on the subject. Esslin saw the work of these playwrights as giving artistic articulation to Albert Camus' philosophy that life is inherently without meaning, and so one must find one's own meaning as illustrated in his work *The Myth of Sisyphus*. Origins

The 'Theatre of the Absurd' is thought to have its origins in Dadaism, nonsense poetry and avant-garde art of the 1910s – 1920s. Despite its critics, this genre of theatre achieved popularity when World War II highlighted the essential precariousness of human life. It is also often known as theatre intended to shock the audience. Most exemplary is Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*, a play about two bums that would have shocked the French audience, to say the least, attending the premiere performance at the Theatre de Babylone. The expression "Theater of the Absurd" has been criticized by some writers, and one also finds the expressions "Anti-Theater" and "New Theater". According to Martin Esslin, the four defining playwrights of the movement are Eugène Ionesco, Samuel Beckett, Jean Genet, and Arthur Adamov, although each of these writers has entirely unique preoccupations and

techniques that go beyond the term "absurd". Other writers often associated with this group include Tom Stoppard, Friedrich Dürrenmatt, Fernando Arrabal, Harold Pinter, Edward Albee and Jean Tardieu. Playwrights who served as an inspiration to the movement include Alfred Jarry, Luigi Pirandello, Stanislaw Ignacy Witkiewicz, Guillaume Apollinaire, the surrealists and many more. The "Absurd" or "New Theater" movement was, in its origin, a distinctly Paris-based (and Rive Gauche) avant-garde phenomenon tied to extremely small theatres in the Quartier Latin; the movement only gained international prominence over time.

### **3.2 Essential Traits in Practice**

- a) The Theatre of the Absurd departs from realistic characters, situations and all of the associated theatrical conventions.
- b) Time, place and identity are ambiguous and fluid, and even basic causality frequently breaks down.
- c) Meaningless plots, repetitive or nonsensical dialogue and dramatic non-sequiturs are often used to create dream-like or even nightmare-like moods.
- d) There is a fine line, however, between the careful and artful use of chaos and non-realistic elements and true, meaningless chaos. While many of the plays described by this title seem to be quite random and meaningless on the surface, an underlying structure and meaning is usually found in the midst of the chaos.
- e) Human condition is meaningless, absurd, and illogical. Humans are lost and floating in an incomprehensible universe and they abandon rational devices and discursive thought because these approaches are inadequate.

f) Language: Words often appear to have lost their denotative function, thus creating misunderstanding among the characters. Instead, language frequently gains a certain phonetic, rhythmical, almost musical quality, opening up a wide range of toying with it, sometimes for the mere purpose of whiling away the time of waiting for something that is not to come (as in Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*).

g) Characteristics: no plot, minimal staging, babbling; abstract setting, arbitrary illogical action. They are devoid of purpose. It is sometimes said to express the 'human condition' in a basic or 'existential' way'.

h) Pirandello was one of the first experimentalists. He wanted to bring down the fourth wall that was created by Realism and playwrights like Ibsen and Strindberg.

i) Absurdism is "the inevitable devaluation of ideals, purity, and purpose".

j) The language and poetry of Absurdist Theatre emerges from concrete and objectified images of the stage.

k) Absurdist Dramas asks its audience to "draw his own conclusions, make his own errors".

l) Though Theatre of the Absurd may be seen as nonsense. Adorned with bewilderment, absurdist drama initially created was because critics and reviewers were used to more conventional drama.

#### **4. Suggested Essay Topics**

4.1 Discuss the development of the "Theatre of Absurd."

4.2 What are the significant features of absurd drama?

4.3 How does the “Theatre of Absurd” influence modern drama?

4.4 Discuss some of the significant works that are the products of the “Theatre of Absurd.”

## 5. Suggestions for Further Reading

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Watt, Stephen and Gary A. Richardson, eds. *American Drama: Colonial to Contemporary*.  
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## **Paper XII: Unit IV**

### **Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot***

#### **1. Background**

##### **1.1 Introduction to the Playwright**

##### **1.2 Introduction to the Play**

#### **2. Type of Work**

##### **2.1 Existentialist Thought**

##### **2.2 Theatre of the Absurd**

#### **3. Major Themes**

#### **4. Summary and Analysis of Acts**

#### **5. Important Quotes Explained**

#### **6. Character Analysis**

#### **7. Stylistic Devices**

#### **8. Study Questions**

#### **9. Suggestions for Further Reading**

#### **10. Bibliography**

### **STRUCTURE**

#### **1. Background**

## 1.1 Introduction to the Playwright

Samuel Beckett was born in Dublin, Ireland, in 1906, the second son of comfortable middle-class parents who were a part of the Protestant minority in a predominantly Catholic society. He was provided with an excellent education, graduating from Trinity College, Dublin, with a major emphasis in French and Italian. His first job was as a teacher of English in the Ecole Normale Supérieure in Paris. In 1931, he returned to Ireland as a lecturer in French literature, and he received his Masters degree in French from Dublin and subsequently returned to Paris as a teacher in 1932. He has made Paris his home since that time, except for visits abroad and a retreat to the Unoccupied Zone in Vichy, France, during 1942–44.

Beckett found teaching uncongenial to his creative activities and soon turned all of his attention to writing. During the 1930s and 1940s, his writing consisted of critical studies (Proust and others), poems, and two novels (Murphy and Watt), all written in English. In the late 1940s, he changed from writing in English to writing in French. Part of the reason for this was his basic rejection of Ireland as his homeland. When asked why he found Ireland uncongenial, he offered the same explanation that has been given by other famous Irish expatriates, such as Sean O'Casey and James Joyce. He could not tolerate the strict censorship of so many aspects of life, especially the arbitrary censoring of many works of literature by the Catholic clergy. In addition, the political situation created an oppressive anti-intellectualism. Even after he became famous, he refused to allow some of his plays to be presented in Ireland. In 1958, during the International Theater Festival in Dublin, a play of his compatriot O'Casey was banned, and Beckett, in protest, withdrew his plays, which have not been seen in Ireland since then.

Since the major portion of his dramas were composed in French and first presented in Paris, many critics find difficulty in classifying Beckett's works: should he be considered a French or an Irish writer? The nature of his characters, even when named Vladimir and Estragon, seems to be more characteristically Irish than any other nationality. Essentially, it should be a moot question because Beckett, when composing in French, was his own translator into English and vice versa. Thus his works do not suffer from another translator's tampering with them, and his great plays now belong to the realm of world literature.

### **Works by Samuel Beckett**

#### **Plays**

*Waiting for Godot, Endgame, Krapp's Last Tape, Happy Days, Eleutheria (Beckett's first play; never produced; published posthumously)*

#### **Short Plays**

*Act without Words I & II, As the Story Was Told, Eh Joe, Play, Come and Go, Breath, Not I, A Piece of Monologue, Footfalls, Rockaby, Ohio Impromptu, Catastrophe, Rough for Theatre I & II, That Time, What Where*

#### **Radio Plays**

*Words and Music, Embers, Cascando, Rough for Radio I & II*

#### **Fiction and Prose**

*More Pricks than Kicks (short stories, Murphy, Mercier and Camier, Watt, Molloy, Malone Dies, The Unnamable, How It Is, Ill Seen Ill Said, Worstward Ho!, Company*

## 1.2 Introduction to the Play

*Waiting for Godot* qualifies as one of Samuel Beckett's most famous works. Originally written in French in 1948, Beckett personally translated the play into English. The world premiere was held on January 5, 1953, in the Left Bank Theatre of Babylon in Paris. The play's reputation spread slowly through word of mouth and it soon became quite famous. Other productions around the world rapidly followed. The play initially failed in the United States, likely as a result of being misbilled as "the laugh of four continents." A subsequent production in New York City was more carefully advertised and garnered some success.

*Waiting for Godot* incorporates many of the themes and ideas that Beckett had previously discussed in his other writings. The use of the play format allowed Beckett to dramatize his ideas more forcefully than before, and is one of the reasons that the play is so intense.

Beckett often focused on the idea of "the suffering of being." Most of the play deals with the fact that Estragon and Vladimir are waiting for something to alleviate their boredom. Godot can be understood as one of the many things in life that people wait for.

The play has often been viewed as fundamentally existentialist in its take on life. The fact that none of the characters retain a clear mental history means that they are constantly struggling to prove their existence. Thus the boy who consistently fails to remember either of the two protagonists casts doubt on their very existence. This is why Vladimir demands to know that the boy will in fact remember them the next day.

*Waiting for Godot* is part of the Theatre of the Absurd. This implies that it is meant to be irrational. Absurd theatre does away with the concepts of drama, chronological plot,

logical language, themes, and recognizable settings. There is also a split between the intellect and the body within the work. Thus Vladimir represents the intellect and Estragon the body, both of whom cannot exist without the other.

## **2. Type of Work**

### **2.1 Existentialist Thought**

“We always find something, eh Didi, to give us the impression we exist?”

- Estragon in *Waiting for Godot*

Existentialism is a movement in twentieth-century philosophy and literature that centres on the individual and his or her relationship to the universe or God. One of the leading exponents of existentialist thought was French novelist and philosopher Jean-Paul Sartre. His philosophy is articulated in his novels, such as *No Exit* and *Nausea*, as well as in his more purely philosophical works (*Being and Nothingness*, *Critique of Dialectical Reason*).

Among the most famous and influential existentialist propositions is Sartre’s dictum, “existence precedes and rules essence,” which is generally taken to mean that there is no predefined essence to humanity except that which we make for ourselves. Since Sartrean existentialism does not acknowledge the existence of a god or of any other determining principle, human beings are free to do as they choose. Along with this freedom to choose, there is the responsibility for the consequences of one’s choices. With this responsibility comes a profound anguish or dread.

Existentialism attempts to describe our desire to make rational decisions despite existing in an irrational universe. Unfortunately, life might be without inherent meaning

(existential atheists) or it might be without a meaning we can understand (existential theists). Either way, the human desires for logic and immortality are futile. We are forced to define our own meanings, knowing they might be temporary.

The existentialist label has been applied to writers, philosophers, visual artists and filmmakers; the movement flourished in the mid-20th century Europe. Nineteenth-century precursors to this school of thought include Some notable 19th century precursors include Kierkegaard and Nietzsche. Other 20th-century notables include Albert Camus, Jean Genet, Andre Gide, Simone de Beauvoir, Franz Kafka, and Beckett.

## **2.2 Theatre of the Absurd**

Beckett is considered one of the defining playwrights of Theatre of the Absurd, a style of theatre developed by a number of primarily European playwrights in the 1950s and 1960s. The term was coined by the critic Martin Esslin, who made it the title of a 1962 book on the subject. Esslin saw the work of these playwrights as giving artistic articulation to Albert Camus' philosophy that life is inherently without meaning, as illustrated in his work *The Myth of Sisyphus*.

Absurdist theatre discards traditional plot, characters, and action to assault its audience with a disorienting experience. Time, place and identity are ambiguous and fluid. Characters often engage in seemingly meaningless or nonsensical dialogue or activities, and, as a result, the audience senses what it is like to live in a universe that doesn't "make sense." The result is a dreamlike or even nightmare-like mood in the audience. 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, although Beckett disavowed the label. Eugene Ionesco's *The Bald Soprano* is another classic of the form. Ionesco's characters sit and talk, repeating the obvious until it sounds like nonsense—underscoring the inadequacy of verbal communication. Ionesco drew much of his dialogue from phrasebooks for people learning English as a second language; the nonsensicality is frequently hilarious, but a strong undercurrent of despair is also present.

According to Esslin, the four defining playwrights of the movement are Ionesco, Beckett, Jean Genet, and Arthur Adamov. Other writers often associated with The Theatre of the Absurd include Friedrich Dürrenmatt, Fernando Arrabal, Harold Pinter, Edward Albee and Jean Tardieu. Contemporary playwrights, like Tom Stoppard and Harold Pinter, have also been deeply influenced by this style of writing; and many of its conventions have, in recent decades, been absorbed into mainstream theatre.

### **3. Major Themes**

#### **3.1 Hope**

Vladimir and Estragon are lowly bums. Their only material possessions—besides their tattered clothes—are a turnip and a carrot. Nevertheless, they have not given up on life; they do not descend into depression, pessimism, and cynicism. Even though they frequently exchange insults, they enjoy each other's company and help each other. Above all, though, they wait. They wait for Godot. They do not know who he is or where he comes from. But they wait just the same, apparently because he represents hope.

### **3.2 Search for Meaning**

Vladimir and Estragon are homeless rovers attempting to find an answer to a question all human beings face: What is the meaning of life? Godot may have the answer for them. So they wait. After Godot fails to appear on the first day, they return to the tree the next day to continue waiting. He does not come. Vladimir and Estragon decide to leave the area. However, the stage direction at the end of the play says, "They do not move." Apparently, they plan to continue their search for meaning by continuing to wait for Godot.

### **3.3 Monotony**

Vladimir and Estragon depend on each other to survive. Although they exchange insults from time to time, it is clear that they value each other's company. One could imagine Pozzo without Lucky—until the second act, when the audience learns he has gone blind. Unable to find his way, Pozzo is totally dependent on Lucky. Lucky, of course, is tied to Pozzo—by a rope and by fear of being abandoned.

### **3.4 Dependency**

Life is tedious and repetitive for Vladimir and Estragon. In the first act of the play, they meet at a tree to wait for Godot. In the second act, they meet at the same tree to wait for Godot. Irish critic Vivian Mercer once wrote in a review of the play, "Nothing happens, twice."

### **3.5 Suffering**

Suffering is a constant and fundamental part of human existence in *Waiting for Godot*. Every character suffers and suffers always, with no seeming respite in sight. The

hardship ranges from the physical to the mental, the minor to the extreme. It drives some men to find companionship (so as to weather the storm together), causes others to abuse their companions (to lessen the suffering of the self), and for still others leads to self-isolation (since watching people suffer is a kind of anguish on its own).

### **3.6 Truth and Uncertainty**

*Waiting for Godot* is a play driven by a lack of truth – in other words, uncertainty. Characters are unable to act in any meaningful way and claim this is so because they are uncertain of the consequences. Without the presence of objective truth, every statement is brought to question, and even common labels (color, time, names) become arbitrary and subjective.

### **3.7 Life, Consciousness, and Existence**

The portrait of daily life painted by *Waiting for Godot* is a dismal one. It is repetitive and stagnant. It lacks meaning and purpose and entails perpetual suffering. The solution (which none of the characters take) would seem to be action and choice *despite* the ever-presence of uncertainty, and an awareness of one's surroundings and past actions. As one character says, "habit is a great deadener" – our actions should stem from conscious choice rather than apathy.

### **3.8 Time**

Time presents a slew of problems in *Waiting for Godot*. The very title of the play reveals its central action: waiting. The two main characters are forced to whittle away their days while anticipating the arrival of a man who never comes. Because they have nothing to

do in the meantime, time is a dreaded barrier, a test of their ability to endure. Because they repeat the same actions every day, time is cyclical. That every character seems to have a faulty memory further complicates matters; time loses meaning when the actions of one day have no relevance or certainty on the next.

### **3.9 Freedom and Confinement**

Every character in *Waiting for Godot* seems to live in a prison of his own making. Each is confined to a state of passivity and stagnancy by his own inability to act. The one character who is literally the slave of another is no more restricted than those who are technically free; in fact, he may be more free because he is at least aware of his imprisonment.

### **3.10 Mortality**

None of the characters in *Waiting for Godot* shy away from the fact that death is inevitable. In fact, death becomes at times a solution for the inanity of daily life. The main characters contemplate suicide as though it were as harmless as a walk to the grocery store, probably because there's nothing in their life worth sticking around for anyway. They ultimately do not commit suicide because they claim not to have the means, but also because they are uncertain of the result of their attempt (it may work, it may fail). Because they can't be sure of what their action will bring, they decide on no action at all.

### **3.11 Religion**

Religion is incompatible with reason in *Waiting for Godot*. Characters who attempt to understand religion logically are left in the dark, and the system is compared to such

absurd banalities as switching bowler hats or taking a boot on and off. Religion is also tied to uncertainty, since there is no way of knowing what is objectively true in the realm of faith.

### **3.12 Vagueness of Choice**

*Waiting for Godot* consists of two men unable to act, move, or think in any significant way while they kill time waiting for a mysterious man, Godot. The characters fail to realize that this very act of waiting is a choice; instead, they view it as a mandatory part of their daily routine. Even when these men manage to make a conscious decision, they can't translate that mental choice into a physical act. They often "decide" to leave the stage, only to find that they are unable to move. Such inaction leads to stagnancy and repetition in the seemingly endless cycle of their lives.

### **3.13 Friendship**

Friendship is tricky in *Waiting for Godot*, as each character is fundamentally isolated from every other. Relationships teeter between a fear of loneliness and an essential inability to connect. This tension is central to the play. The problems that keep characters apart vary from physical disgust to ego to a fear of others' suffering.

## **4. Summary and Analysis of Acts**

### **4.1 Summary of Act I: Introduction & Pozzo and Lucky's Entrance**

Estragon is trying to take off his boot when Vladimir enters. The two men greet each other; Vladimir examines his hat while Estragon struggles with his boot. They discuss the

versions of the story of the two thieves in the Gospels, and Vladimir wonders why one version of the story is considered more accurate than the others.

Estragon wants to leave, but Vladimir tells him that they cannot because they are waiting for Godot, who they are supposed to meet by the tree. They wonder if they are waiting in the correct spot, or if it is even the correct day.

Estragon falls asleep, but Vladimir wakes him because he feels lonely. Estragon starts to tell Vladimir about the dream he was having, but Vladimir does not want to hear his "private nightmares." Estragon wonders if it would be better for them to part, but Vladimir insists that Estragon would not go far. They argue and Vladimir storms off the stage, but Estragon convince him to come back and they make up.

They discuss what to do next while they wait, and Estragon suggests hanging themselves from the tree. However, after a discussion of the logistics, they decide to wait and see what Godot says.

Estragon is hungry, and Vladimir gives him a carrot. They discuss whether they are tied to Godot when they hear a terrible cry nearby and huddle together to await what is coming.

### **Analysis**

The beginning of the play establishes Vladimir and Estragon's relationship. Vladimir clearly realizes that Estragon is dependent on him when he tells Estragon that he would be "nothing more than a little heap of bones" without him. Vladimir also insists that Estragon would not go far if they parted. This dependency extends even to minute, everyday things, as Estragon cannot even take off his boot without help from Vladimir.

The beginning of the play makes Vladimir and Estragon seem interchangeable. For example, one of the characters often repeats a line that the other has previously said. This happens in the very beginning when the two characters switch lines in the dialogue, with each asking the other, "It hurts?" and responding, "Hurts! He wants to know if it hurts!" In addition to demonstrating the way that the two characters can be seen as interchangeable, this textual repetition will be found throughout the play as an indicator of the repetitiveness of life in general for Vladimir and Estragon.

Vladimir's discussion of the story of the two thieves brings up the question of textual uncertainty. He points out that the four gospels present entirely different versions of this story, and wonders why one of these versions is accepted as definitive. This question about the reliability of texts might cause the reader (or audience) of this play to question the reliability of this particular text. Also, the repetition of the story by the four gospels might allude to the repetitiveness of the action of the play.

The repetitiveness of the play is best illustrated by Estragon's repeated requests to leave, which are followed each time by Vladimir telling him that they cannot leave because they are waiting for Godot. The exact repetition of the lines each time this dialogue appears, including the stage directions, reinforces the idea that the same actions occur over and over again and suggests that these actions happen more times than the play presents.

In this beginning section we get the only clue of the nature of Vladimir and Estragon's relationship with Godot. They mention that they asked Godot for "a kind of prayer...a vague supplication," which he is currently considering. This creates a parallel between Godot and God, also suggested by their similar names, and it seems that Vladimir

and Estragon do consider Godot a kind of religious figure when they mention coming in on their hands and knees

#### **4.2 Summary of Act I: Pozzo and Lucky Scene**

Pozzo enters, driving Lucky ahead of him by a rope around his neck. Vladimir and Estragon wonder if Pozzo is Godot, but he tells them that he is Pozzo and asks if they have heard of him. They tell him that they have not. Pozzo commands Lucky to put down his stool, and sits down and begins to eat some chicken. While he eats, Vladimir and Estragon circle around Lucky, inspecting him. They notice a sore on his neck and begin to ask him a question, but Pozzo tells them to leave him alone.

Estragon asks Pozzo if he can have the bones from his chicken, and Pozzo tells him that Lucky gets priority over them. Estragon asks Lucky if he wants the bones, but he does not reply, and Pozzo tells Estragon that he can have the bones. He comments that he has never known Lucky to refuse a bone and hopes that he is not sick.

Vladimir suddenly explodes with anger at Pozzo's treatment of Lucky, but then seems embarrassed at his outburst. Pozzo decides to go, but then decides to stay and smoke another pipe. Vladimir wants to leave, but Pozzo reminds him of his appointment with Godot.

Estragon begins to wonder aloud why Lucky does not put down his bags. Pozzo begins to answer the question, after much preparation involving his vaporizer spray, but gives a convoluted and contradictory response. Vladimir asks Pozzo if he wants to get rid of Lucky; Pozzo responds that he does and is taking him to the fair to sell him.

Lucky begins to cry and Pozzo hands Estragon a handkerchief to wipe away his tears. Estragon approaches Lucky, but Lucky kicks him in the shins. Pozzo tells Vladimir and Estragon that he has learned a lot from Lucky, and that Lucky has been serving him for nearly sixty years. Vladimir becomes angry that Pozzo is going to get rid of Lucky after so much time, and Pozzo gets upset. Vladimir then gets angry at Lucky for mistreating Pozzo.

Pozzo calms down, but he realizes that he has lost his pipe and begins to get upset again. While Estragon laughs at Pozzo, Vladimir exits, apparently to go to the bathroom. He returns, in a bad mood, but soon calms down. Pozzo sits down again and begins to explain the twilight. When he finishes, he asks them to evaluate his performance and then offers to have Lucky perform for them. Estragon wants to see Lucky dance, while Vladimir wants to hear him think, so Pozzo commands him to dance and then think.

Lucky dances and Estragon is not very impressed. Pozzo tells them that he used to dance much better. Vladimir asks him to tell Lucky to think, but Pozzo says that he cannot think without his hat. Vladimir puts Lucky's hat on his head and he begins to think aloud, spouting a long stream of words and phrases that amount to gibberish. As he goes on, the other three suffer more and more and finally throw themselves on him and seize his hat to make him stop. Pozzo tramples on the hat, and the men help Lucky up and give him all the bags.

Pozzo is about to leave, but finds that he cannot. He decides that he needs a running start, so he starts from the opposite end of the stage and drives Lucky across as they exchange good-byes.

## **Analysis**

Pozzo's statement about his pipe, that the second pipe is never as "sweet" as the first, can apply to experience in general—it suggests that feelings and events dull with repetition.

Repetition of events in the play is emphasized by further textual repetition. When Vladimir and Estragon alternate short lines back and forth, Estragon often repeats himself at the end of a string of lines. This occurs for the first time in this exchange: "Estragon: The circus. Vladimir: The music-hall. Estragon: The circus." This same trope will recur several times in a row at the beginning of the second act, always with Estragon repeating himself.

We see here that Vladimir supports Estragon after Estragon is kicked by Lucky: when he cries that he cannot walk, Vladimir offers to carry him, if necessary. This illustrates Vladimir's attempt to protect and take care of Estragon.

Vladimir is often very quick to change his mind. When he learns of Lucky's long term of service to Pozzo, he becomes angry with Pozzo for mistreating his servant. However, when Pozzo gets upset and says that he cannot bear it any longer, Vladimir quickly transfers his anger to Lucky, whom he reproaches for mistreating his master after so many years. This illustrates how Vladimir's opinion can be easily swayed by a change in circumstances.

In this section we see the first suggestions that Vladimir and Estragon might represent all of humanity. When Pozzo first enters, he notes that Vladimir and Estragon are of the same species as he is, "made in God's image." Later, when Pozzo asks Estragon what his name is, he replies "Adam." This comparison of Estragon to Adam, the first man, suggests that he may represent all of mankind; and this link between Estragon and Adam also relates to the idea of Godot as God.

Pozzo's inquiry about how Vladimir and Estragon found him suggests that Pozzo is giving a performance. This notion is reinforced when he has Lucky perform for them. It seems that Pozzo and Lucky appear primarily to entertain Vladimir and Estragon—after Pozzo and Lucky leave, the other two men comment that their presence helped the time pass more rapidly.

Pozzo's failure to depart anticipates the way that Vladimir and Estragon remain waiting at the end of each of the acts, after saying they will depart. However, even after saying, "I don't seem to be able to depart," Pozzo does actually manage to leave. Pozzo moves on while Vladimir and Estragon remain fixed even as the curtain falls at the end of each act.

#### **4.3 Summary of Act I: Pozzo and Lucky's Exit to Conclusion**

After Pozzo and Lucky depart, Vladimir once again tells Estragon that they cannot leave because they are waiting for Godot. They argue about whether Pozzo and Lucky have changed, and Estragon suddenly complains of pain in his other foot.

A boy enters timidly, saying that he has a message from Mr. Godot. Estragon bullies the boy, who reveals that he has been waiting a while but was afraid of Pozzo and Lucky. When Estragon shakes the boy, badgering him to tell the truth, Vladimir yells at him and sits down and begins to take off his boots.

Meanwhile, Vladimir talks to the boy. He asks him if he is the one who came yesterday, but the boy tells him that he is not. The boy tells Vladimir that Mr. Godot will not come this evening, but that he will surely come tomorrow. Vladimir then asks the boy if he

works for Mr. Godot, and the boy tells him that he minds the goats. The boy says that Mr. Godot does not beat him, but that he beats his brother who minds the sheep.

Vladimir asks the boy if he is unhappy, but the boy does not know. He tells the boy that he can go, and that he is to tell Mr. Godot that he saw them. The boy runs off the stage and, as he goes, it suddenly becomes night.

Estragon gets up and puts his boots down at the edge of the stage. Vladimir tells him that the boy assured him that Godot will come tomorrow. He tries to drag Estragon offstage to shelter, but Estragon will not go. Estragon wonders if they should part, but they decide to go together. As the curtain falls, they remain still.

### **Analysis**

This section begins with the most commonly repeated dialogue in the play, in which Estragon wants to go and Vladimir tells him that they are waiting for Godot. This section provides evidence for a religious reading of the play as Estragon compares himself to Christ when he decides to go barefoot. When Vladimir tells him not to compare himself to Christ, Estragon responds that "all my life I've compared myself to him."

Vladimir's statement that he pretended not to recognize Pozzo and Lucky suggests that he has met them before. This indicates that the actions presented in the first act of the play may have happened before, calling attention to events that occur outside the frame of the play. The same thing occurs when Vladimir asks the boy if he came yesterday, revealing that they were waiting yesterday with the same result. This suggests that the same events have been going on for some time; the two acts of the play are merely two instances in a long pattern of ceaselessly repeating events.

The end of Act I establishes Vladimir and Estragon's hopelessness. Even when they both agree to go, and Vladimir says "Yes, let's go," the two men do not move. Even their resolution to go is not strong enough to produce action. This inability to act renders Vladimir and Estragon unable to determine their fates. Instead of acting, they can only wait for someone or something to act upon them.

#### **4.4 Summary of Act II: Introduction & Pozzo and Lucky's Entrance**

Act II takes place the next evening, at the same time and place. The tree now has four or five leaves on it. Estragon's boots and Lucky's hat remain onstage when Vladimir enters, looks around, and begins to sing. Estragon enters and suggests that Vladimir seemed happier without him. He says that he does not know why he keeps returning to Vladimir, since he too is happier alone, but Vladimir insists that it's because Estragon does not know how to defend himself.

Vladimir suggests that things have changed since yesterday, but Estragon does not remember yesterday. Vladimir reminds him about Pozzo and Lucky, and they begin to argue about whether Estragon has ever been in the Macon country. Estragon once again says that it would be better if they parted, but Vladimir reminds him that he always comes crawling back. They decide to converse calmly but soon run out of things to say, and Vladimir grows uncomfortable with the silence.

Vladimir looks at the tree and notices that it is now covered with leaves, although yesterday it was bare. Estragon says that it must be spring, but also insists that they were not here yesterday. Vladimir reminds him of the bones that Pozzo gave him and the kick that Lucky gave him and shows him the wound on his leg. He asks Estragon where his boots

are and—when Estragon replies that he must have thrown them away—points out the boots on the stage triumphantly. Estragon, however, examines the boots and says that they are not his. Vladimir reasons that someone must have come by and exchanged his boots for Estragon's.

Vladimir gives Estragon a black radish, but since he only likes the pink ones, he gives it back. Estragon says he will go and get a carrot, but he does not move. Vladimir suggests trying the boots on Estragon, and they fit, but Estragon does not want them laced. Estragon sits down on the mound and tries to sleep. Vladimir sings him a lullaby, and he falls asleep, but soon wakes up from a nightmare.

Vladimir is pleased to find Lucky's hat on the ground because he believes it confirms that they are in the correct place. He puts on Lucky's hat and hands his to Estragon, who takes off his hat and hands it to Vladimir. This switch occurs several times until once again Vladimir wears Lucky's hat, and Estragon wears his own hat. Vladimir decides that he will keep Lucky's hat, since his bothered him. They begin to play Pozzo and Lucky's roles, with Vladimir imitating Lucky and telling Estragon what to do to imitate Pozzo. Estragon leaves, but quickly returns because he hears someone coming.

Vladimir is sure that Godot is coming, and Estragon hides behind the tree. He realizes that he is not hidden and comes out, and the two men begin a watch with one stationed on each side of the stage. When they both begin to speak at once, they get angry and begin insulting each other. After they finish their insults, they decide to make up and embrace. They briefly do some exercises and then do "the tree," staggering around on one foot.

## **Analysis**

Vladimir's song about the dog who stole a crust of bread repeats itself perpetually. The two verses follow each other in succession so that it can be sung forever, although here Vladimir only sings each verse twice. This song is a representation of the repetitive nature of the play as a whole and of Vladimir and Estragon's circular lives. Like the verses of the song, the events of their lives follow one after another, again and again, with no apparent beginning or end.

The hat switching incident is another illustration of the endless, often mindless, repetition that seems to characterize the play. Like Vladimir's song at the beginning of Act II, the hat switching could go on perpetually and only stops when Vladimir decides arbitrarily to put an end to it.

Vladimir and Estragon's discussion about the noise made by "all the dead voices" brings back the theme of Estragon repeating himself to end a string of conversation. Three times in a row, Estragon repeats his phrase, with silence following each repetition. Estragon's repetition of the phrases "like leaves" and "they rustle" emphasizes these phrases, especially since Estragon comes back to "like leaves" in the third part of their discussion.

In this section we see again Vladimir's desire to protect Estragon. He believes that the primary reason Estragon returns to him every day, despite his declarations that he is happier alone, is that he needs Vladimir to help him defend himself. Whether or not Vladimir actually does protect Estragon, Vladimir clearly feels that this duty and responsibility defines their relationship.

Estragon's statement that he will go and get a carrot, followed by the stage directions "he does not move," recalls their immobility in Act I's conclusion, and is another illustration of the way that the characters do not act on their words or intentions. Vladimir recognizes this problem after he decides that they should try on the boots; he says impatiently, "let us persevere in what we have resolved, before we forget." Vladimir's clear awareness of his own problem makes his inability to solve it—to act and to move—y seem even more frustrating and unfathomable.

#### **4.5 Summary of Act II: Pozzo and Lucky Scene**

While Vladimir and Estragon stagger about pitying themselves, Pozzo and Lucky enter. Pozzo is blind and runs into Lucky, who has stopped at the sight of Vladimir and Estragon. They fall, along with all the baggage. Vladimir welcomes their arrival since it will help to pass the time. Pozzo calls for help while Vladimir and Estragon discuss asking him for another bone. Vladimir decides that they should help him, but first he and Estragon discuss how they have kept their appointment.

Pozzo continues to cry for help, and eventually Vladimir tries to assist him. However, he falls also while trying to pull up Pozzo. Estragon threatens to leave, but Vladimir begs him to help him up first, promising that they will leave together afterward. Estragon tries to help him up, but ends up falling as well.

All four men now lie on the ground, and Vladimir and Estragon begin to nap. They are woken shortly by Pozzo's shouting, and Vladimir strikes Pozzo to make him stop. Pozzo crawls away, and Vladimir and Estragon call to him. He does not respond, and Estragon decides to try other names. He calls out "Abel," and Pozzo responds by crying for help. He

wonders if the other one is called Cain, but Pozzo responds to that name as well, and Estragon decides that he must be all of humanity.

Vladimir and Estragon decide to get up, which they do with ease. They help Pozzo up and hold him, and Pozzo tells them that he does not recognize them since he is blind. They tell him that it is evening, and then begin to question him about the loss of his sight. He tells them that it came upon him all of a sudden and that he has no notion of time.

Pozzo asks the men about his slave, and they tell him that Lucky seems to be sleeping. They send Estragon over to Lucky, and Estragon begins kicking Lucky. He hurts his foot and goes to sit down. Vladimir asks Pozzo if they met yesterday, but Pozzo does not remember. Pozzo prepares to leave, and Vladimir asks him to have Lucky sing or recite before they leave. However, Pozzo tells him that Lucky is dumb. They exit, and Vladimir sees them fall offstage.

### **Analysis**

Here again Vladimir seems to recognize the problem of inaction when he decides that they should help Pozzo. He becomes suddenly vehement and shouts, "Let us not waste our time in idle discourse! Let us do something, while we have the chance!" This call to action seems like an urgent rally against the trend of inaction he and Estragon have been following throughout the play; however, Vladimir still takes plenty of time to begin to help Pozzo to his feet. This suggests that, even with good intentions and resolution, the habit of inaction cannot be broken immediately.

In this speech Vladimir also declares that at this point, "all mankind is us, whether we like it or not." This continues the theme of Vladimir and Estragon's representation of

mankind as a whole and shows that Vladimir is himself aware of this comparison. Estragon also illustrates the parallel between the two men and the rest of humanity when he tells Vladimir that "billions" of people can also claim that they have kept their appointment. In this case Vladimir attempts to distinguish them from the rest of mankind, but Estragon insists that they are actually the same.

Another biblical allusion is presented here through the comparison of Pozzo and Lucky to Cain and Abel. However, when Pozzo responds to the names Cain and Abel, Estragon decides that "he's all humanity." This suggestion indicates once more that the characters in the play represent the human race as a whole.

Vladimir's need of Estragon's help in order to get up is somewhat of a role reversal. For a brief exchange, Estragon holds the power in the relationship as Vladimir calls to him for help. However, when Estragon does finally stretch out his hand to help Vladimir up, he only falls himself. This seems to indicate that Estragon does not belong in this position of power and responsibility and cannot act to fulfill it.

#### **4.6 Summary of Act II: Pozzo and Lucky's Exit to Conclusion**

After Pozzo and Lucky leave, Vladimir wakes Estragon. Estragon is upset at being woken up, but Vladimir tells him that he was lonely. Estragon gets up, but his feet hurt, so he sits down again and tries to take off his boots. Meanwhile, Vladimir reflects upon the events of the day. Estragon dozes off again after unsuccessfully struggling with his boots.

The boy enters and calls to Vladimir. Vladimir recognizes the routine and knows what the boy is going to say before he says it. They establish that the boy was not there

yesterday, but that he has a message from Mr. Godot saying that he will not come this evening, but definitely tomorrow.

Vladimir asks the boy what Mr. Godot does, and the boy replies that he does nothing. Vladimir asks the boy about his brother, and the boy tells him that his brother is sick. Vladimir asks if Mr. Godot has a beard and what color it is. The boy asks Vladimir what he should tell Mr. Godot, and Vladimir tells him that he should say that he saw him. The boy runs away as Vladimir springs toward him.

The sun sets. Estragon wakes up, takes off his boots, and puts them down at the front of the stage. He approaches Vladimir and tells him that he wants to go. Vladimir tells him that they cannot go far away, because they have to come back tomorrow to wait for Godot. They discuss hanging themselves from the tree, but find that they do not have any rope. Estragon says that they can bring some tomorrow. Estragon tells Vladimir that he can't go on like this, and Vladimir tells him that they will hang themselves tomorrow, unless Godot comes. Vladimir tells Estragon to pull up his trousers, which have fallen down when he removed the cord holding them up in order to determine whether it would be suitable for hanging. They decide to go, but once again do not move as the curtain falls.

### **Analysis**

By this point in the play, the dialogue about waiting for Godot has been repeated so many times that even Estragon knows it. Every time he asked Vladimir to go previously, they went through the entire dialogue about why they could not go. However, this time, Estragon goes through a miniature version of this dialogue by himself: "Let's go. We can't. Ah!" It

seems that the numerous repetitions of this dialogue have finally impressed its hopeless resolution upon Estragon's mind.

Similarly, by the time the boy arrives in Act II, Vladimir already knows what he will say, and the boy does not have to tell him anything. This suggests that this dialogue has occurred many times before and furthers the indication that the play is just a representative sample of the larger circle that defines Vladimir and Estragon's lives.

The play's conclusion echoes the end of Act I. Even the stage directions reflect this similarity: after boy's exit and the moonrise, the stage directions read, "as in Act I, Vladimir stands motionless and bowed." While a live audience would not read these directions, they serve to emphasize the parallel between the two acts for readers and for actors performing the play.

The repetition of the final two lines from the previous act at the play's conclusion shows the continued importance of repetition and parallelism in *Waiting for Godot*. However, the characters have switched lines from the previous act, suggesting that ultimately, despite their differences, Vladimir and Estragon are really interchangeable after all.

#### **4.7 Overall Analysis of the Play**

Although very existentialist in its characterizations, *Waiting for Godot* is primarily about hope. The play revolves around Vladimir and Estragon and their pitiful wait for hope to arrive. At various times during the play, hope is constructed as a form of salvation, in the personages of Pozzo and Lucky, or even as death. The subject of the play quickly becomes

an example of how to pass the time in a situation which offers no hope. Thus the theme of the play is set by the beginning:

Estragon: Nothing to be done.

Vladimir: I'm beginning to come round to that opinion.

Although the phrase is used in connection to Estragon's boots here, it is also later used by Vladimir with respect to his hat. Essentially it describes the hopelessness of their lives.

A direct result of this hopelessness is the daily struggle to pass the time. Thus, most of the play is dedicated to devising games which will help them pass the time. This mutual desire also addresses the question of why they stay together. Both Vladimir and Estragon admit to being happier when apart. One of the main reasons that they continue their relationship is that they need one another to pass the time. After Pozzo and Lucky leave for the first time they comment:

V: That passed the time.

E: It would have passed in any case.

And later when Estragon finds his boots again:

V: What about trying them.

E: I've tried everything.

V: No, I mean the boots.

E: Would that be a good thing?

V: It'd pass the time. I assure you, it'd be an occupation.

Since passing the time is their mutual occupation, Estragon struggles to find games to help them accomplish their goal. Thus they engage in insulting one another and in asking each other question.

The difficulty for Beckett of keeping a dialogue running for so long is overcome by making his characters forget everything. Estragon cannot remember anything past what was said immediately prior to his lines. Vladimir, although possessing a better memory, distrusts what he remembers. And since Vladimir cannot rely on Estragon to remind him of things, he too exists in a state of forgetfulness.

Another second reason for why they are together arises from the existentialism of their forgetfulness. Since Estragon cannot remember anything, he needs Vladimir to tell him his history. It is as if Vladimir is establishing Estragon's identity by remembering for him. Estragon also serves as a reminder for Vladimir of all the things they have done together. Thus both men serve to remind the other man of his very existence. This is necessary since no one else in the play ever remembers them:

Vladimir: We met yesterday. (Silence) Do you not remember?

Pozzo: I don't remember having met anyone yesterday. But to-morrow I won't remember having met anyone to-day. So don't count on me to enlighten you.

Later on the same thing happens with the boy who claims to have never seen them before. This lack of reassurance about their very existence makes it all the more necessary that they remember each other.

Estragon and Vladimir are not only talking to pass the time, but also to avoid the voices that arise out of the silence. Beckett's heroes in other works are also constantly assailed by voices which arise out of the silence, so this is a continuation of a theme the author uses frequently:

E: In the meantime let's try and converse calmly, since we're incapable of keeping silent.

V: You're right, we're inexhaustible.

E: It's so we won't think.

V: We have that excuse.

E: It's so we won't hear.

V: We have our reasons.

E: All the dead voices.

V: They make a noise like wings.

E: Like leaves.

V: Like sand.

E: Like leaves.

Silence.

V: They all speak at once.

E: Each one to itself.

Silence.

V: Rather they whisper.

E: They rustle.

V: They murmur.

E: The rustle.

Silence.

V: What do they say?

E: They talk about their lives.

V: To have lived is not enough for them.

E: They have to talk about it.

V: To be dead is not enough for them.

E: It is not sufficient.

Silence.

V: They make a noise like feathers.

E: Like leaves.

V: Like ashes.

E: Like leaves.

Long silence.

V: Say something!

One of the questions which must be answered is why the bums are suffering in the first place. This can only be answered through the concept of original sin. To be born is to be a sinner, and thus man is condemned to suffer. The only way to escape the suffering is to repent or to die. Thus Vladimir recalls the thieves crucified with Christ in the first act:

V: One of the thieves was saved. It's a reasonable percentage. (Pause.) Gogo.

E: What?

V: Suppose we repented.

E: Repented what?

V: Oh . . . (He reflects.) We wouldn't have to go into the details.

E: Our being born?

Failing to repent, they sit and wait for Godot to come and save them. In the meantime they contemplate suicide as another way of escaping their hopelessness. Estragon wants them to hang themselves from the tree, but both he and Vladimir find it would be too risky. This apathy, which is a result of their age, leads them to remember a time when Estragon almost succeeded in killing himself:

E: Do you remember the day I threw myself into the Rhone?

V: We were grape harvesting.

E: You fished me out.

V: That's all dead and buried.

E: My clothes dried in the sun.

V: There's no good harking back on that. Come on.

Beckett is believed to have said that the name Godot comes from the French "godillot" meaning a military boot. Beckett fought in the war and so spending long periods of time waiting for messages to arrive would have been commonplace for him. The more common interpretation that it might mean "God" is almost certainly wrong. Beckett apparently stated that if he had meant "God," he would have written "God".

The concept of the passage of time leads to a general irony. Each minute spent waiting brings death one step closer to the characters and makes the arrival of Godot less likely. The passage of time is evidenced by the tree which has grown leaves, possibly indicating a change of seasons. Pozzo and Lucky are also transformed by time since Pozzo goes blind and Lucky mute.

There are numerous interpretations of *Waiting for Godot* and a few are described here:

Religious interpretations posit Vladimir and Estragon as humanity waiting for the elusive return of a saviour. An extension of this makes Pozzo into the Pope and Lucky into the faithful. The faithful are then viewed as a cipher of God cut short by human intolerance. The twisted tree can alternatively represent the tree of death, the tree of life, and the tree of Judas or the tree of knowledge.

Political interpretations also abound. Some reviewers hold that the relationship between Pozzo and Lucky is that of a capitalist to his labour. This Marxist interpretation is understandable given that in the second act Pozzo is blind to what is happening around him and Lucky is mute to protest his treatment. The play has also been understood as an allegory for Franco-German relations.

An interesting interpretation argues that Lucky receives his name because he is lucky in the context of the play. Since most of the play is spent trying to find things to do to pass the time, Lucky is lucky because his actions are determined absolutely by Pozzo. Pozzo on the other hand is unlucky because he not only needs to pass his own time but must find things for Lucky to do.

## 5. Important Quotes Explained

### Waiting For Godot Important Quotes

This list of important quotations from "Waiting for Godot" by --Samuel Beckett will help the students work with the essay topics and thesis statements on their paper topics from "Waiting for Godot" by allowing them to support their claims. All of the important quotes from "Waiting for Godot" listed here correspond, at least in some way, to the paper topics on "Waiting for Godot" and by themselves can give the students great ideas for an essay by offering quotes about other themes, symbols, imagery, and motifs than those already mentioned.

**“Astride of a grave and a difficult birth. Down in the hole, lingeringly, the gravedigger puts on the forceps.”**

This is a good example of a Freudian image, one similar to those seen in some of Shakespeare’s work. The image of womb and tomb being the same, we are born merely to

die, is less about the shortness of life here than it is for the meaningless of life. “Forceps” are the instrument that doctors use to extract a baby having a difficult birth.

**“But that is not the question. Why are we here, that is the question. And we are blessed in this, that we happen to know the answer. Yes, in this immense confusion one thing alone is clear. We are waiting for Godot to come.”**

Vladimir and Estragon find meaningless activities to occupy their time until the illustrious Godot appears. It’s as if they are passing their lives in meaningless activity in anticipation of something that may never happen, and doesn’t, in the play.

**“What are we doing here, that is the question.”**

This question is central to the play. The only answer possible to this rhetorical question is “waiting for Godot.” Life for the two characters is simple chain of meaningless events as they wait for something that never happens.

**“At this place, at this moment of time, all mankind is us, whether we like it or not.”**

In this quote Vladimir makes clear to the audience that not only he and Estragon wait for Godot, but they stand in for “all mankind.” Beckett’s idea is that we all distract ourselves with meaningless activities until we die. Humankind’s “Godot” never comes.

**“Given the existence ... of a personal God ... who ... loves us dearly ... it is established beyond all doubt ... that man ... wastes and pines ... for reasons unknown.”**

Here Lucky espouses a belief in a God, not unlike the Christian one, who is individual to each human being. Nevertheless man waits and deteriorates without ever knowing why—perhaps awaiting a God ever absent and never appearing. The absurdity of the human

life is clear in these lines, and so is Lucky's search for meaningful existence with a personal God.

**"We wait. We are bored. No, don't protest, we are bored to death, there's no denying it. Good. A diversion comes along and what do we do? We let it go to waste. Come, let's get to work! In an instant all will vanish and we'll be alone once more, in the midst of nothingness!"**

Beckett's existentialist ideas show through clearly in Vladimir's comment. For these thinkers, life isn't pleasant. "...bored to death..." has a double meaning. Bored to the point of misery and bored "till death." "Come, let's go to work" implies that it doesn't stop humans from trying to find meaning.

## **6. Character Analysis**

### **6.1 Major Characters**

#### **a) Vladimir**

In any comic or burlesque act, there are two characters, traditionally known as the "straight man" and the "fall guy." Vladimir would be the equivalent of the straight man. He is also the intellectual who is concerned with a variety of ideas. Of the two, Vladimir makes the decisions and remembers significant aspects of their past. He is the one who constantly reminds Estragon that they must wait for Godot. Even though it is left indefinite, all implications suggest that Vladimir knows more about Godot than does Estragon, who tells us that he has never even seen Godot and thus has no idea what Godot looks like.

Vladimir is the one who often sees religious or philosophical implications in their discussions of events, and he interprets their actions in religious terms; for example, he is concerned about the religious implications in such stories as the two thieves (two tramps) who were crucified on either side of Jesus. He is troubled about the fate of the thief who wasn't saved and is concerned that "only one of the four evangelists" speaks of a thief being saved.

Vladimir correlates some of their actions to the general concerns of mankind. In Act II, when Pozzo and Lucky fall down and cry for help, Vladimir interprets their cries for help as his and Estragon's chance to be in a unique position of helping humanity. After all, Vladimir maintains, "It is not everyday that we are needed . . . but at this place, at this moment in time," they are needed and should respond to the cries for help. Similarly, it is Vladimir who questions Pozzo and Lucky and the Boy Messenger(s), while Estragon remains, for the most part, the silent listener. Essentially, Vladimir must constantly remind Estragon of their destiny — that is, they must wait for Godot.

In addition to the larger needs, Vladimir also looks after their physical needs. He helps Estragon with his boots, and, moreover, had he been with Estragon at night, he would not have allowed his friend to be beaten; also, he looks after and rations their meager meals of turnips, carrots, and radishes, and, in general, he tends to be the manager of the two.

#### **b) Estragon**

In contrast, Estragon is concerned mainly with more mundane matters: He prefers a carrot to a radish or turnip, his feet hurt, and he blames his boots; he constantly wants to leave, and it must be drilled into him that he must wait for Godot. He remembers that he

was beaten, but he sees no philosophical significance in the beating. He is willing to beg for money from a stranger (Pozzo), and he eats Pozzo's discarded chicken bones with no shame.

Estragon, then, is the more basic of the two. He is not concerned with either religious or philosophical matters. First of all, he has never even heard of the two thieves who were crucified with Christ, and if the Gospels do disagree, then "that's all there is to it," and any further discussion is futile and absurd.

Estragon's basic nature is illustrated in Act II when he shows so little interest in Pozzo and Lucky that he falls asleep; also, he sleeps through the entire scene between Vladimir and the Boy Messenger. He is simply not concerned with such issues.

Estragon, however, is dependent upon Vladimir, and essentially he performs what Vladimir tells him to do. For example, Vladimir looks after Estragon's boots, he rations out the carrots, turnips, and radishes, he comforts Estragon's pain, and he reminds Estragon of their need to wait for Godot. Estragon does sometimes suggest that it would be better if they parted, but he never leaves Vladimir for long. Essentially, Estragon is the less intelligent one; he has to have everything explained to him, and he is essentially so bewildered by life that he has to have someone to look after him.

### **c) Vladimir and Estragon**

In spite of the existential concept that man cannot take the essence of his existence from someone else, in viewing this play, we have to view Vladimir and Estragon in their relationship to each other. In fact, the novice viewing this play for the first time often fails to note any significant difference between the two characters. In hearing the play read, even

the most experienced theater person will often confuse one of the characters for the other. Therefore, the similarities are as important as the differences between them.

Both are tramps dressed in costumes which could be interchanged. They both wear big boots which don't necessarily fit, and both have big bowler hats. Their suits are baggy and ill-fitting. (In Act II, when Estragon removes the cord he uses for a belt, his trousers are so baggy that they fall about his feet.) Their costumes recall the type found in burlesque or vaudeville houses, the type often associated with the character of the "Little Tramp," portrayed by Charlie Chaplin.

The Chaplinesque-type costume prepares us for many of the comic routines that Vladimir and Estragon perform. The opening scene with Estragon struggling with his boots and Vladimir doffing and donning his hat to inspect it for lice could be a part of a burlesque routine. The resemblance of their costumes to Chaplin's supports the view that these tramps are outcasts from society, but have the same plucky defiance to continue to exist as Chaplin's "Little Tramp" did.

Another action which could come directly from the burlesque theater occurs when Vladimir finds a hat on the ground which he tries on, giving his own to Estragon, who tries it on while giving his hat to Vladimir, who tries it on while giving the new-found hat to Estragon, who tries it on, etc. This comic episode continues until the characters — and the audience — are bored with it. Other burlesque-like scenes involve Vladimir's struggles to help Estragon with his boots while Estragon is hopping awkwardly about the stage on one foot to keep from falling; another scene involves the loss of Estragon's pants, while other scenes involve the two tramps' grotesque efforts to help Pozzo and Lucky get up off the

ground and their inept attempts to hang themselves. Thus, the two characters are tied together partly by being two parts of a burlesque act.

## **6.2 Minor Characters**

### **a) Pozzo**

Pozzo appears on stage after the appearance of Lucky. They are tied together by a long rope; thus, their destinies are fixed together in the same way that Pozzo might be a mother figure, with the rope being the umbilical cord which ties the two together.

Everything about Pozzo resembles our image of the circus ringmaster. If the ringmaster is the chief person of the circus, then it is no wonder that Vladimir and Estragon first mistook him for Godot or God. Like a ringmaster, he arrives brandishing a whip, which is the trademark of the professional. In fact, we hear the cracking of Pozzo's whip before we actually see him. Also, a stool is often associated with an animal trainer, and Pozzo constantly calls Lucky by animal terms or names. Basically, Pozzo commands and Lucky obeys.

In the first act, Pozzo is immediately seen in terms of this authoritarian figure. He lords over the others, and he is decisive, powerful, and confident. He gives the illusion that he knows exactly where he is going and exactly how to get there. He seems "on top" of every situation.

When he arrives on the scene and sees Vladimir and Estragon, he recognizes them as human, but as inferior beings; then he condescendingly acknowledges that there is a human likeness, even though the "likeness is an imperfect one." This image reinforces his authoritarian god-like stance: we are made in God's image but imperfectly so. Pozzo's

superiority is also seen in the manner in which he eats the chicken, then casts the bones to Lucky with an air of complete omnipotence.

In contrast to the towering presence exhibited by Pozzo in Act I, a significant change occurs between the two acts. The rope is shortened, drawing Pozzo much closer to his antithesis, Lucky. Pozzo is now blind; he cannot find his way alone. He stumbles and falls. He cannot get along without help; he is pathetic. He can no longer command. Rather than driving Lucky as he did earlier, he is now pathetically dragged along by Lucky. From a position of omnipotence and strength and confidence, he has fallen and has become the complete fallen man who maintains that time is irrelevant and that man's existence is meaningless. Unlike the great blind prophets of yore who could see everything, for Pozzo "the things of time are hidden from the blind." Ultimately, for Pozzo, man's existence is discomfiting and futile, depressing, and gloomy and, most of all, brief and to no purpose. The gravedigger is the midwife of mankind: "They give birth astride the grave, the light gleams an instant, then it's night once more."

## **b) Lucky**

As noted above, Lucky is the obvious antithesis of Pozzo. At one point, Pozzo maintains that Lucky's entire existence is based upon pleasing him; that is, Lucky's enslavement is his meaning, and if he is ever freed, his life would cease to have any significance. Given Lucky's state of existence, his very name "Lucky" is ironic, especially since Vladimir observes that even "old dogs have more dignity."

All of Lucky's actions seem unpredictable. In Act I, when Estragon attempts to help him, Lucky becomes violent and kicks him on the leg. When he is later expected to dance,

his movements are as ungraceful and alien to the concept of dance as one can possibly conceive. We have seldom encountered such ignorance; consequently, when he is expected to give a coherent speech, we are still surprised by his almost total incoherence. Lucky seems to be more animal than human, and his very existence in the drama is a parody of human existence. In Act II, when he arrives completely dumb, it is only a fitting extension of his condition in Act I, where his speech was virtually incomprehensible. Now he makes no attempt to utter any sound at all. Whatever part of man that Lucky represents, we can make the general observation that he, as man, is reduced to leading the blind, not by intellect, but by blind instinct.

### **c) Pozzo and Lucky**

Together they represent the antithesis of each other. Yet they are strongly and irrevocably tied together — both physically and metaphysically. Any number of polarities could be used to apply to them. If Pozzo is the master (and father figure), then Lucky is the slave (or child). If Pozzo is the circus ringmaster, then Lucky is the trained or performing animal. If Pozzo is the sadist, Lucky is the masochist. Or Pozzo can be seen as the Ego and Lucky as the Id. An inexhaustible number of polarities can be suggested.

## **7. Stylistic Devices**

**7.1 Even though the drama is divided into two acts, there are other natural divisions. For the sake of discussion, the following, rather obvious, scene divisions will be referred to:**

### **ACT I:**

(1) Vladimir and Estragon Alone

(2) Arrival of Pozzo and Lucky: Lucky's Speech

(3) Departure of Pozzo and Lucky: Vladimir and Estragon Alone

(4) Arrival of Boy Messenger

(5) Departure of Boy Messenger: Vladimir and Estragon Alone

## **ACT II:**

(1) Vladimir and Estragon Alone

(2) Arrival of Pozzo and Lucky

(3) Departure of Pozzo and Lucky: Vladimir and Estragon Alone

(4) Arrival of Boy Messenger

(5) Departure of Boy Messenger: Vladimir and Estragon Alone

The above divisions of the play are Beckett's way of making a statement about the nature of the play — that is, the play is circular in structure, and a third act (or even a fourth or fifth act, etc.) could be added, having the exact same structure. For further discussion, see the section on Circular Structure.

## **7.2 Humour**

*Waiting for Godot* contains the deadpan humor of the down and out, the destitute, who cope by making sport of their circumstances—and themselves. They are like Sisyphus and Tantalus, each doomed forever to seeking a goal that he cannot reach. But while trying to reach their goal, Vladimir and Estragon remain cheerful and jocular. Their hapless drollery calls to mind the buffoonery of film comedians Laurel and Hardy, Charlie Chaplin, and Buster

Keaton. A full appreciation of the humour requires a close reading of the play and/or attendance at a performance of it.

### **8. Study Questions**

- a) How is the setting of the drama reflective of the content?
- b) What is the relationship between Didi and Gogo? Discuss what they represent/symbolize/mean as individuals and as a pair.
- c) What is the relationship between Lucky and Pozzo? Discuss what they represent/symbolize/mean as individuals and as a pair.
- d) What is Lucky's "Big Think" all about? Attempt some interpretation.
- e) How do the characters use the few props like hats, carrots and boots? What may the symbolic significance of these objects?
- f) What function(s) does abuse serve? Locate and analyze several textual examples as evidence. What does Beckett think of the ways humans abuse each other?
- g) How do the character use or not use their memories? How does memory or the lack thereof function in the play?
- h) How does Beckett use traditional spirituality? Locate and analyze various examples of religious imagery, allusion and/or symbolism (Three per act). What does Beckett seem to think of traditional spirituality?
- i) What archetypes exist and what do they mean?

- j) How is *Waiting for Godot* reflective of the theatre of the absurd genre? Locate and analyze several textual examples as evidence.
- k) How does *Waiting for Godot* reflect an existentialist view of human reality?
- l) What themes arise from *Waiting for Godot*? Identify and explain at least two.
- m) Do Vladimir and Estragon represent humankind as fallen children of Adam and Eve and their original sin? The motif of redemption occurs several times in the play—notably, when Vladimir speaks of Christ as the "Saviour." On the last page of the play (in most texts), Estragon asks what will happen if Godot comes. Vladimir answers, "We'll be saved."
- n) Is the tree intended to be a symbol of the cross on which Christ was crucified? Keep in mind that Vladimir and Estragon discuss the thieves crucified with Christ.
- o) The tree is bare when Vladimir and Estragon meet near it on the first day. However, on the second day, author Becket says in his stage directions, it has "four or five leaves." Do the leaves symbolize hope? Anything like a new life?
- p) Does Godot represent God, as some essayists maintain? Bear in mind that at least a dozen French words (not counting suffixes, prefixes, and inflectional forms) begin with the first three letters of this name, including godasse, godelureau, goder, godailler, godet, godiche, godichon, godichonne, godille, godiller, godillot, godron, godronnage, and godronner.
- q) When Pozzo asks who Godot is, Estragon answers, "Personally I wouldn't even know him if I saw him." Estragon appears to be answering truthfully. Nevertheless, is his answer intended to mimic the apostle Peter's answer when he was asked whether he knew Christ?

## 9. Suggestions for Further Reading

a) Beckett's *Endgame* (1957) features a more antagonistic pair of men in an even drearier situation, while Beckett's *Happy Days* (1961) demonstrates his focus on women and *Come and Go* (1966) represents how "minimalistic" Beckett would eventually become in his drama.

b) Joseph Heller's *Catch22* (1961) is a famous dark comedy in novel form that deals with the absurdity of the military in World War II.

c) Tom Stoppard's *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead* (1966) is often seen as a play that consciously imitates Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*.

d) Eugene Ionesco's *The Bald Soprano* (1950), *The Lesson* (1951), and *The Chairs* (1952) all epitomize the Theatre of the Absurd and provide interesting similarities and contrasts with Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*.

e) Jean-Paul Sartre's *No Exit* (1944) shows how Existentialist ideas can be presented in a more traditional dramatic form.

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## **Paper XII: Unit V**

### **Harold Pinter's *The Birthday Party***

#### **1. Background**

1.1 Introduction to the Playwright

1.2 Introduction to the Play

#### **2. Major Themes**

#### **3. Summary and Analysis of Acts**

#### **4. Character Analysis**

#### **5. Stylistic Devices**

5.1 Theatre of Absurd

5.2 Absurdity

5.3 Unique Setting

#### **6. Suggested Essay Questions with Answers**

#### **7. Important Quotes Explained**

#### **8. Suggestions for Further Reading**

#### **9. Bibliography**

### **Structure**

#### **1. Background**

## 1.1 Introduction to the Playwright

Harold Pinter was born on October 10, 1930, in Hackney, a section of metropolitan London, England. His father, Hyman, and his mother, Frances Mann, were descended from Sephardic Jews from Portugal, who had, around 1900, migrated to England after an interim residence in Hungary. The family, relatively poor, lived very frugally, like the other working-class families in the area.

Between 1941 and 1947, Pinter attended the Hackney Downs Grammar School, where he began writing poetry and prose. He also took an interest in theatre, taking roles as both Macbeth and Romeo in school productions of Shakespeare. His education continued in 1948, when he obtained a grant to study at the Royal Academy of Dramatic Art, but, finding the academy oppressive, he only stayed for two terms. In the same year, he tried to obtain legal status as a conscientious objector, which he was denied, and he was eventually fined when he refused to answer an army draft call.

In 1949, while he continued to write non-dramatic works as Harold Pinta, he launched a career as professional actor. His first work was as a bit actor for the British Broadcasting Corporation's (BBC) Home Service radio, from which, in 1951, he moved up to a role in Shakespeare's Henry VIII, a production of BBC's Third Programme. He also resumed formal training at the Central School of Speech and Drama. Thereafter, under the stage name David Baron, he acted with Shakespearean and other repertory companies in both England and Ireland. On tour, he met and worked with the actress Vivien Merchant, whom he married on September 14, 1956. The pair struggled to make ends meet, and Pinter was forced to assume a variety of odd jobs, including stints as a dance-hall bouncer or "chucker," a dishwasher, a caretaker, and a salesman.

Pinter's first foray into play writing came in 1957, when a friend asked him to write a piece for production at Bristol University. The result was *The Room*, a one-act play that earned the favourable notice of critic Harold Hobson and revealed Pinter's unique talent and technique. The work was not professionally produced until after *The Birthday Party* opened and floundered in 1958, but it was Hobson's review of *The Room*'s university production that brought Pinter to the attention of the young, new-wave producer Michael Codron, who decided to stage *The Birthday Party*.

Pinter's first major staged success was *The Caretaker*, which, in 1960, began a run in London's West End and won the playwright The Evening Standard Award. Along with *The Birthday Party* and *The Homecoming* (1965), *The Caretaker* established Pinter's reputation as a major absurdist playwright, and, in the opinion of some commentators, his claim to being Britain's most important dramatist since George Bernard Shaw (Major Barbara).

In the 1960s, Pinter proved his diversity by producing a steady stream of both stage and media works. He began an extended association with the Royal Shakespeare Company in 1962 with *The Collection* at the Aldwych Theatre, but by then he had also begun writing for cinema, adapting *The Caretaker* to film. Although his creative energy remained unabated, he devoted more and more of it to scripting plays for television and the screen. Some of these were originally written for the stage, but most were first written for specific media. Some, like *The Pumpkin Eater* (1964) and *The Quiller Memorandum* (1966), were adaptations from the fiction of other writers. Acclaim for his media works quickly rivalled that awarded his stage works and greatly expanded his creative involvement and focus.

Although some believe that Pinter's best theatrical works were his earliest pieces in the absurdist mode, the playwright has remained a major voice in the British theater since

the early-1960s. If financial success and the diffusion of his creative energy have diminished his stage power, as some have claimed, there has been no real erosion in his reputation as England's premier, post-World War II playwright, his only serious rivals being John Osborne (*Look Back in Anger*) and Tom Stoppard (*Arcadia*). Nevertheless, despite some well-received plays like *One for the Road* (1984) and *Mountain Language* (1988), the playwright has met with some decline in his critical fortunes. It is almost become a scholarly truism that none of Pinter's works written for the stage after the 1960s has superseded *The Caretaker*, *The Homecoming*, or *The Birthday Party* as Pinter's major contributions to modern theatre.

## 1.2 Introduction to the Play

Harold Pinter was working as an actor in England when he stayed briefly at a dilapidated boarding-house that would serve as his inspiration for both *The Birthday Party* and *The Room*. As he has explained in many published works, he wrote more from intuition than from intellect, exploring his characters without pre-decided narratives in mind, and this one encounter was inspirational not because of people he met there, but because of a certain visceral feeling it gave him.

Pinter wrote *The Birthday Party* in 1957, after his one act play *The Room* attracted the attention of Michael Codron, a producer who saw much promise in the quirky playwright. *The Birthday Party* is Pinter's first full length play, and the first of three plays considered his "comedy of menace" pieces. The other two are *The Caretaker* and *The Homecoming*.

"Comedy of menace," a term coined by critic Irving Wardle, describes a play which paints a realistic picture while creating a subtext of intrigue and confusion, as if the

playwright were employing a sleight-of-hand trick. Pinter once said, “What I write has no obligation to anything other than to itself,” which both belies the designation Wardle gave his plays, and acknowledges the originality that inspired such a designation in the first place. Inspired by other unconventional playwrights such as Samuel Beckett, Pinter transcended traditional theatre by staging a familiar setting (the English home) and then throwing it into a state of confusion with lies, deceit, and chaos. These juxtapositions would be further explored by Martin Esslin in his seminal study *Theatre of the Absurd*.

The *Birthday Party* premiered in Cambridge's Arts Theatre on April 28, 1958, with Willoughby Gray as Petey and Richard Pearson as Stanley. Pinter directed the initial productions himself, but Peter Wood took his place as director once the play hit the pre-London stage. Though the play was received well in Cambridge, it was a resounding failure during its run at the Lyric Opera House in Hammersmith. The avant-garde writing and the confusing subtext sat poorly with critics and audiences alike.

Despite its initial commercial failure, *The Birthday Party* has since proven to be one of Pinter's most reproduced plays. It was revived by the Royal Shakespeare Company at the Aldwych Theatre in London in 1964, to critical success. Pinter directed this rendition of the show and later wrote, directed, and appeared in subsequent productions, including the 1968 film version which starred Robert Shaw as Stanley. The Lyric Opera House celebrated the play's 50th anniversary in May 2008, just months before Pinter's death.

## **2. Major Themes**

### **a) Confusion and Chaos**

A key element of “the absurdist theatre” is its focus on confusion and chaos. In *The Birthday Party*, these elements manifest constantly, especially through its characters.

The primary ways in which the themes manifest are through the ambiguities of lives and pasts. Stanley has some sort of mysterious past that deserves a violent reckoning, but nobody really provides its details. When Stanley describes his past to Meg in Act I, there is even the sense that he himself is confused about its particulars. Goldberg's name and past seem shrouded in mystery and delusion, and Meg convinces herself to believe things about her life that are clearly not true. Further, because of these type of confusions, the situation devolves into total chaos. From the moment Goldberg and McCann arrive, the audience can sense that the simplicity of the boardinghouse is about to be compromised, and indeed, the chaos at the end of Act II confirms it.

The only truth of *The Birthday Party* is that there is no truth, only chaos and confusion from which we make order if we choose.

### **b) Complacency**

Perhaps the most pessimistic aspect of *The Birthday Party* is that the only alternative Pinter gives to chaos and confusion is a life of apathy and complacency. The play's opening sets this up - Petey and Meg reveal a comfortable but bland life in which they talk in pleasantries and ignore anything of substance. Stanley might be more aggressive than they are, but he too has clearly chosen the safety of complacency, as he makes no effort to change his life. His lethargic lifestyle reflects the attraction comfort has for him. When Goldberg and McCann arrive, they challenge this complacent lifestyle until the whole place

falls into chaos. Ultimately, Petey chooses to refortify the complacency of the boarding-house over bravely fighting for Stanley; neither choice is truly attractive.

### **c) Language**

The precision Pinter employs in crafting his rhythmic silences is enough to justify language as a major theme, but he moreover reveals how language can be used as a tool. Each of the characters uses language to his or her advantage. In effect, characters manipulate words to suggest deeper subtexts, so that the audience understands that true communication happens beneath language, and not through words themselves. When Stanley insults Meg, he is actually expressing his self-hatred and guilt. Goldberg is a master of language manipulation - he uses speeches to deflect others questions, to redirect the flow of conversation, or to reminisce about past events. His words are rarely wasted. Meg, on the other hand, repeats herself, asking the same questions over and over again in a bid for attention. Even though she often speaks without affectation, her words mask a deep neurosis and insecurity. These are just a few examples of instances in which language is used not to tell the story, but to suggest that the story is hidden. In essence, language in *The Birthday Party* is a dangerous lie.

### **d) Atonement**

One of the great ironies in this play is that it uses what appears to be a fairly non-dramatic, realistic setting which nevertheless hides a surplus of guilt. The theme of atonement runs throughout the play. Stanley's past is never detailed, but he is clearly a guilty man. He is vague about his past, and does anything to distract Goldberg and McCann. He does not wish to atone for whatever he did, but is forced to do so through torture.

Goldberg, too, wishes to avoid whatever sins torture him but cannot fully escape them; his mood in Act III shows that he is plagued by feelings he does not wish to have. In the end, all of the characters are like Lulu, who flees when McCann offers her a chance to confess - everyone has sins to atone for, but nobody wants to face them.

#### **e) Nostalgia**

Perhaps most fitting for a contemporary audience who would see this play as something of a period piece, the theme of nostalgia is implicit but significant in *The Birthday Party*. Goldberg, particularly, is taken by nostalgia, frequently waxing poetic both on his own past and on the 'good old days' when men respected women. Certainly, Goldberg tells some of these stories to contrast with the way Stanley treats women, but they also suggest a delusion he has, a delusion that breaks down when he himself assaults Lulu between the second and third acts. He idealizes some past that he cannot live up to.

Other characters reveal affection for nostalgia as well. During the birthday party, Meg and Lulu both speak of their childhoods. However, their nostalgic feelings have darker sides. Meg remembers being abandoned, whereas Lulu's memories of being young lead Goldberg to bounce her perversely on his knee. Similarly, the characters play blind man's bluff specifically because it makes them nostalgic, but the sinister side of such nostalgia is inescapable in the stage image of Stanley preparing to rape Lulu. Nostalgia is lovely to feel, the play seems to suggest, but more insidious in its complexities.

#### **f) Violence**

*The Birthday Party* is full of violence, both physical and emotional, overall suggesting that violence is a fact of life. The violence is doubly affecting because the setting seems so

pleasant and ordinary. Most of the men show their potential for violence, especially when provoked. Stanley is cruel and vicious towards Meg, but much more cowardly against other men. Both McCann and Goldberg have violent outbursts no matter how hard they try to contain themselves. Their entire operation, which boasts an outward civility, has an insidious purpose, most violent for the way it tortures Stanley slowly to force him to nervous breakdown. In both Acts II and III, they reveal how language itself can be violent in the interrogation scenes.

Much of the violence in the play concerns women. Stanley not only intimidates Meg verbally, but he also prepares to assault Lulu. Goldberg in fact does assault Lulu. Finally, the threat of violence is ever-present in the play. Even before we realize that disaster might come, we can feel the potential through the many silences and tense atmosphere.

### **g) Sex**

Sexual tension is present throughout the entire play, and it results in tragic consequences. Meg and Stanley have a strange, possible sexual relationship that frees him to treat her very cruelly. The ugliness of his behaviour is echoed when Goldberg calls him a "mother defiler" and "a lecher." In fact, Goldberg suggests that Stanley's unnamed sin involves his poor treatment of a woman. Lulu seems interested in Stanley as well, but is quickly attracted to Goldberg in Act II. Her innocence makes her prey to men's sexuality. Her openness leads to two consecutive sexual assaults, and yet she is nevertheless upset to learn that Goldberg is leaving. All in all, it is a strange, perverse undercurrent throughout the play - sex is acknowledged as a fact of life, and yet does not ever reveal positive aspects of the characters.

### 3. Summary and Analysis of Acts

#### 3.1 Summary and Analysis of Act I

##### Summary

The Birthday Party begins in the living room of an English seaside boarding house in the 1950s. There is a door leading to a hall on the left. A hatch, or interior window, opens to a kitchen in the back of the room. Table and chairs are situated in the foreground.

Petey, a man in his sixties, enters the living room with his newspaper and sits at the table. His wife Meg, also in her sixties, greets him through the hatch. Meg appears with Petey's breakfast of cornflakes, and asks him "Are they nice?" Petey agrees that there are, and the couple then engages in dull conversation about the weather and about the birth announcement of a girl mentioned in the paper. Meg opines she would rather have a little boy than a girl, and then gives Petey a plate of fried bread, asking again whether it's nice. Petey says that it is.

Petey then tells his wife that he met two men the on the beach the night before, and that they had asked for a room. Meg is surprised by the news, but quickly recovers and considers that the men probably heard about their boardinghouse's reputation, since it's "on the list." She does have a room prepared for visitors, although the two men would have to share it.

Suddenly, Meg says she's going to "wake that boy," indicating for the first time that there is a boarder in the house. Petey asks her if she already brought him his cup of tea, and Meg replies that she had watched him drink it earlier that morning. Meg then heads up the stairs and yells for Stanley Webber, insisting he come down for breakfast. She threatens to

“come up and get him” otherwise. After a vocal count of three, she races offstage and up the stairs. From offstage, Meg's laughter and Stanley's shouts are heard as Petey continues to read the paper.

Meg re-enters, out of breath and adjusting her hair. She rushes to prepare Stanley's cornflakes. Stanley, a scruffy, bespectacled, unshaven man in his pajamas, enters and flops down in his seat at the table, where he stares morosely into his cornflakes. He and Petey exchange pleasantries about the weather, and Stanley complains that he can't eat his cereal because the milk has gone bad. Meg calls him a liar, but quickly replaces the cereal with fried bread.

Petey rises and exits out the side door for work, leaving Meg and Stanley alone in the room. The mood immediately shifts. Stanley teases Meg, calling her a bad wife for not giving her husband a cup of tea in the morning. Meg bristles and tells him to mind his own business, but quickly turns flirtatious when Stanley uses the word “succulent” to describe her fried bread. She ruffles his hair, but he pushes her arm roughly away.

Meg fetches a pot of tea and pours it, coyly telling Stanley he shouldn't call a married woman succulent. Stanley replies that a married woman has no place coming into his room and “waking him up.” Meg begins to dust the room, and asks him if he really thinks she's succulent. He says that he does, but when she sensually strokes his arm and tells him she has had “some lovely afternoons in that room,” Stanley recoils and starts to lambaste her for the state of the house. His room needs cleaning and papering; he wants a new room. He continues to insult her and denies her a cigarette, even when she tries to tickle him with the feather duster.

Either oblivious to his behaviour or accustomed to it, Meg changes the subject and mentions that two gentlemen are coming to stay. Stanley grows suddenly still. There has never been another boarder since he came to the house. He accuses her of lying, but Meg insists she is telling the truth. Stanley remains accusatory towards her, and they begin to shout until Stanley, very quietly, asks her, "who do you think you're talking to?"

This is the first indication of Stanley's mysterious past. Backtracking, he tells Meg that he has gotten a job, that he's going to travel the world, and that he is going to play piano as he once had. In a long monologue, he tells of a concert he once gave, stating that his father had almost come down to see him, but then suddenly changing his story to claim he never invited his father because he had lost the address. He describes the concert as a great success, but claims his next show was a disaster. Stanley refers to a mysterious collective (only calling it "they") who boarded up the concert hall and pulled a fast one on him. "They wanted me to crawl down on my bended knees. Well I can take a tip," he says.

After his speech, Meg asks him not to leave. She tries to comfort him, but he cruelly claims that a van is approaching the house with a wheelbarrow that will take her away. She panics and accuses him of lying as he advances on her.

A knock at the door interrupts them. Lulu, a young girl in her twenties, has arrived with a bulky package. Meg asks her to leave it in the living room, but to prohibit Stanley from opening it. Meg leaves to do her shopping as Lulu enters. She opens the door for air, and playfully insists Stanley needs a bath and a shave. She asks him to join her on a walk outside of the house. Stanley objects at first, but then agrees they should go somewhere, anywhere. When Lulu asks where they will go, Stanley replies, "nowhere," and quickly recedes back

into his own inner turmoil. Lulu affectionately calls him a “washout” and leaves. Stanley washes his face in the kitchen, and then exits.

Two gentlemen, Goldberg and McCann, enter the room from the street. McCann is nervous, and wants assurance that Goldberg has brought them to the right house. Goldberg, in a pleasing tone, reassures McCann. Goldberg reminisces about his Uncle Barney, who used to bring him to the seaside on the second Friday of every month. McCann remains nervous, but Goldberg calmly insists that this impending job will be no different than those they have performed in the past. This perspective quiets McCann, who calls Goldberg a “a true Christian” and indicates that he is grateful for being invited on this job. Goldberg insists McCann is the best in his profession, and they settle into a discussion about the mysterious job they have come to perform. This is the first indication that a person in the boarding house is “the job,” though the particulars of the job remain unclear.

Meg enters, and Goldberg charmingly introduces himself and McCann. He quickly establishes a flattering repartee with Meg, whom he calls a tulip. Meg informs the gentleman that they have arrived on Stanley Webber’s birthday. Goldberg seems very interested in Stanley, and learns from Meg that he is her only boarder, that he once gave a concert, that he was a good pianist, and that he has been at the boardinghouse for some time.

Goldberg suggests that they throw an impromptu birthday party for Stanley. Meg is thrilled at the idea, and decides she will wear her party dress. She then shows the gentlemen to their room, at McCann's insistence.

Meanwhile, Stanley reenters the room and sits at the table. When Meg reenters, he bombards her with questions about the gentlemen: Who are they? What are their names? When are they leaving? Stanley is visibly upset when he learns Goldberg's name. He sits very still as Meg reassures him that the men will not bother him. To cheer him up, she gives him the package that Lulu had brought over.

Fatigued, he denies that it is his birthday, but Meg refuses to listen. He opens the package to find a toy drum with two drumsticks. Meg asks him to give her a kiss and he does, albeit upon her cheek. She asks him to play, and he hangs the drum from his neck and prances around the table tapping a merry beat. Then, Stanley suddenly begins to bang the drum erratically, almost savagely. He arrives at her chair and, leaning in towards her face, he bangs the drum harder and harder as if he were possessed. The curtain closes on Act I.

### **Analysis**

Overall, *The Birthday Party* is both extremely conventional and entirely unique. Most of its elements are easy to recognize and understand, but the relationships between those elements are slippery and difficult to pinpoint. Pinter's work is prized for the way it approaches and comments upon the limitations of communication, and *The Birthday Party* is no exception. The play, especially in performance, suggests that our attempts to communicate with one another are futile and often tinged with deep-seeded resentments that we are unable to fully articulate. The truth, in other words, lies in the silence, not in the words characters use.

To best understand the play, it is useful to know about the famous 'Pinter pause.' Even a cursory scan of the play will reveal how precisely Pinter uses silence and pauses in

telling his story. While it is perhaps not accurate to interpret this silence as deliberately designed to communicate an idea, it certainly does create a general unease, a feeling of sinister motives that has become a hallmark of the writer's work. Please see the "Theatre of the Absurd" section of the note for more specifics about this style.

Act I of *The Birthday Party* opens with a traditional domestic scene of a husband and wife around the breakfast table. Their conversation is bland but comfortable. On the page, it can seem hardly theatrical: there is no conflict, no exposition, and no challenge to expectation. However, hidden beneath the surface of Petey and Meg's morning routine is a heavy sense of apathy, a recurring theme within the play. Both Petey and Meg, like Stanley, have accepted their tedious existence to the point that they fear change, as proven by Meg's reaction in Act III when she does not have breakfast ready. Her morning routine is disrupted and she is extremely upset. In performance, one can sense the undercurrent, which gives the scene tension if not conflict. Again, their relationship on the surface seems perfect - in the silence beneath it, however, an audience can sense a problem.

The specific setting of *The Birthday Party* is an English boardinghouse on an unnamed coast in the 1950s, but it is also set within the generalized idea of "the home" and "the family." By establishing such a recognizable setting - the domestic home - Pinter sets the stage to reverse expectation and make commentary upon it. Effectively, he reinvents the domestic scene by adding elements of confusion and chaos. This juxtaposition led critic Irving Wardle to describe the play as a "comedy of menace," one in which a seemingly realistic scene is complicated by lies, deceit and confusion.

Stanley, as a character, represents the essence of confusion; he lies about his past, speaks rudely, lies regularly, and later denies any wrongdoing, even though Goldberg and

McCann, who are also shrouded in mystery, strongly insist upon his guilt. Pinter establishes the layers of social norms so that he can later peel them back to reveal the ugly potential of the human condition.

Act I also introduces the odd relationship between Meg and Stanley. When Petey is present, Meg refers to Stanley as "that boy," a stern but affectionate choice for her boarder. Of course, their relationship is far more intimate. Pinter explores the difference between her relationship with the men through the motif of "tea," or "making tea." Meg does not forget Stanley's tea, but she does forget Petey's. Stanley later calls her a bad wife for sending her husband to work without any tea, and what is implied is that she is far more interested in having tea ready when she is left alone with the boarder. Their sexual tension is abundantly clear, though the particulars of their relationship remain ambiguous. Meg is much older than Stanley, which allows the reader to create his or her own details: is Stanley taking advantage of a lonely old woman? Did they have a sexual relationship that faltered? An examination of their relationship reveals how ambiguous Pinter's play truly is.

Stanley openly flirts with Meg as she preens and struts about the room, fishing for compliments. Unlike her conversation with Petey, which centers on whether the food was "nice" and other pleasantries, Meg wishes to know whether Stanley finds her "nice." She wants intimacy with him; she wants to something deeper than her relationship with Petey affords. In effect, she is confessing the depth of her loneliness, her desire to break from an apathetic routine, but she cannot fully express this. Instead, we are meant to discover it while she is more than happy simply to be called "succulent."

It can be argued that Meg is simply delusional. Certainly, she harbors delusions about the quality of her house. She believes it is "on the list," but its shabby quality is

mentioned by Stanley on several occasions. In Act II, Stanley will insist to Goldberg and McCann that it is not even a boardinghouse. Even if it is, its lack of boarders speaks volumes about its quality and reputation.

However, her greatest and most poignant delusions involve her relationship to Stanley. She may not have even had an affair with him. He may merely see her as comic relief, or as a way to ensure his security in the house. Her sentimental touches and her affectionate reminder of having spent “many lovely afternoons” in his room only inspire violent and rash outbursts from him. Is he tired of her flirtatious ways and delusions, or is he guilty of having entered into an affair with his much older, married landlady? Has Stanley taken advantage of her? They certainly seem familiar with one another, since Stanley allows her to enter his room uninvited, but again, Pinter leaves the exact details up to his audience.

Yet their conversation is barbed as well as comfortable. Meg worries both that Stanley will grow angry with her and that he will leave. The latter fear might connect to the pain of her own father's betrayal, as described in Act II. Regardless, it is rooted in a desire to break from the apathy of her life. Through the eyes of this younger man, Meg can see herself not as a generic housewife, but as something special - not as a failure (her business is quite meager, after all), but as a worthwhile woman. Stanley, on the other hand, is defined not by his fear but by his disgust. He is disgusted by himself, by the boardinghouse, and by Meg, who represents his guilty conscience, his jailer, or both. While she is comfortable because she accepts who he is, one could argue that she also makes him see himself too clearly, and hence does he hate her as well as accept her.

Pinter never confirms or denies the intimate details of Meg and Stanley's relationship. Petey, however, offers some insight when he lies to Meg about Stanley's

whereabouts at the end of Act III. He knows she will be hurt when she finds that Stanley has left, and in an effort to spare his wife pain, he allows her to go about her domestic routine instead of telling her the truth. If nothing else, Petey recognizes her delusion, her need to find self-worth through the boarder. There is no specific incident within the play which conclusively determines what Petey knows of Meg and Stanley's relationship, but lack of closure certainly aligns with the play's general ambiguities.

Confusion, one of the most dominant themes within the play, is perpetuated by the characters' needs to maintain their delusions by lying to one another. Stanley consistently lies within the play. He tells Meg he has a new job and will be leaving, but in reality, nothing could be further from the truth. Stanley does not want to leave the boardinghouse, and yet he feels trapped there, stuck in the mindless and repetitive world of Meg and Petey's relationship. He is both drawn to and disgusted by the safety of such a lifestyle. The exile is in many ways self-imposed, considering that he refuses Lulu's invitation to leave. His lies to Meg could be interpreted as yet another cruelty towards her, but they also reveal the extent of his self-hatred, and the brief respite these delusions bring. When he does cross the line into cruelty, telling Meg that she will be taken away by a wheelbarrow, he does not realize how poignantly he foreshadows his own fate within the play.

Stanley, like the other characters, is not what he seems. His continued deceit discredits him as a trustworthy character, and yet he suggests that he might indeed have a shady past when he asks Meg:

"Tell me Mrs Boles, when you address yourself to me, do you ever ask yourself who exactly you are talking to? Eh?" Such an address could suggest one of two pasts: either an

entitled, wealthy background, or the self-appointed swagger of a violent man. Further, he lies about his father, confusing even himself. Even he has forgotten what is true.

As he continues his story about the concerts, he begins to reveal serious paranoia. His passion during this part of the speech suggests either that he is speaking truthfully or that his delusions have taken over. Meg does mention that he used to play piano at the pier, so the talent itself is not an invention, even if it now lays dormant. Either way, Stanley seems to believe he has been forced from his career and vocation. Perhaps an initial nervous breakdown forced him from a high life (real or imagined) to this secluded seaside boardinghouse. Regardless, he has certainly left his old life behind, and now sees fit to reinvent the particulars of his old life. The question is whether, for Stanley, the difference between the reality and his delusion really matters.

Adding to the play's confusing atmosphere is the miscommunication manifest in Pinter's use of language; miscommunication is another recurring theme throughout the play. Each character uses language not only to express himself, but also to further his own cause, lie, mislead, and simply cause pain. Pinter once reflected that he had used too many dashes in *The Birthday Party*, and not enough dots. Although his example is esoteric, his meaning is clear. The language serves to confuse us, even as the characters give lots of information. For instance, Goldberg's long winded speeches reflect on a past which may or may not have relevance toward his current circumstances, and may or may not suggest a deeper interpretation. The dialogue is outwardly conversational, but his deliberately paced silences and carefully chosen language suggests a deeper turmoil than the characters mean to express. Consider how the superficiality of the opening dialogue hides deep apathy, or how Goldberg's charming demeanour only makes his presence doubly sinister. Similarly,

Stanley's hesitancy masks a deeper turmoil. His rash outbursts represent his fear, or perhaps his guilt. One of the most telling moments of the Act uses no dialogue at all - Stanley's possessive beating of the drum not only feeds the foreboding atmosphere, but foreshadows his own descent into madness.

Goldberg and McCann's conversation in Act I showcases Pinter's use of language as a dramatic element. Their entrance creates chaos, as they throw the seemingly unoriginal day at the boardinghouse into a state of perplexity. Goldberg and McCann's friendly but businesslike conversation ironically creates a ominous atmosphere. They are here to "do a job." By avoiding the particulars, the audience is left to construct their own sinister details, an effect made doubly effective when performances utilize the rhythmic silence and pauses.

Goldberg's cryptic message is partly for the benefit of the audience. Pinter certainly does not want to give too much away, and yet Pinter himself may not know what the job is. He was famous for following his characters intuitively, learning about them as he wrote, rather than determining their identities before writing. If we accept this approach as true, then Pinter himself would have discovered the existence of a "job" precisely at this point of the play, and continued writing to determine its conclusion. As there is no conclusive resolution within the *The Birthday Party*, one can assume that Pinter did not know what happened to Stanley after he left the boardinghouse. He may not know what Goldberg and McCann's "job" is, or if they successfully completed it. What this suggests, then, is that plot is far less important than atmosphere, and the general commentary on the limits of communication.

Pinter's later works would examine characters similar to Goldberg and McCann, who represented a corrupt 'organization.' However, in this early work, the two gentlemen only

represent a potential organization from which they may have been charged with a job. At its core, The Birthday Party is frustrating from a story perspective but wildly successful in terms of atmosphere. Its sense of confusion and delusion are all the more powerful for its narrative ambiguities.

### **3.2 Summary and Analysis of Act II**

#### **Summary**

Act II is set later that night. McCann sits at the table alone, methodically tearing pages of newspaper into five equal strips. Stanley enters the room, and is startled to see McCann. He starts to escape toward the kitchen, but changes course and casually greets McCann. When he hears some laughter nearby, he asks who it might be, but McCann does not answer.

He drinks a glass of water in the kitchen and then tries to leave. As Stanley approaches the door, McCann intercepts him. They introduce themselves and exchange pleasantries, although there is a barbed undertone to the exchange.

McCann insists Stanley stay for the birthday party that night, even though Stanley claims it is not his birthday and that the party will be just another booze-up. McCann whistles "The Mountains of Morne," an Irish folksong which Stanley recognizes. They whistle the tune together. Stanley then tries to leave again, but McCann insists he stay. Stanley acquiesces, and they sit together at the table. Stanley asks McCann if they have ever met before. McCann denies it, and grows angry when Stanley touches one of the strips of newspaper. Stanley insists that they have met before, but McCann again denies it.

Stanley tells how he once lived a quiet life, rarely going outdoors. However, business brought him to the boardinghouse, and he has been there ever since. He also insists he is the same man that he had always been, though he admits his appearance has faded from drink. He considers how no one would ever expect him to be a man who would cause trouble. He picks up a strip of newspaper, and McCann sternly chides him for it.

Stanley's demeanour suddenly changes, and he asks McCann why he and Goldberg have come to the boardinghouse. McCann deflects the questions and observes that Stanley seems depressed on his birthday. Stanley again denies it's his birthday, and offers that Meg has gone "round the bend." Becoming upset, Stanley grabs McCann's arm and insists the other sit down and listen to him. McCann savagely hits Stanley and pushes him away.

Stanley, slightly mollified, insists again that he and McCann have met before, and that McCann is being deceitful. Stanley demands his story is true - he once lived in Basingstoke and rarely left his home, he had things delivered to his door, and he was practically a recluse. Suddenly, he switches topics and tells McCann of his fondness for Ireland and its people, especially its sunsets and policemen. McCann seems unimpressed.

Petey and Goldberg arrive, and Stanley is introduced to the latter. Goldberg tells the group about his mother, and about a former girlfriend whom he had once loved but whom he had never unfairly taken advantage of. He tells how his mother called him "Simey," and prepared gefilte fish for dinner.

Goldberg asks Stanley about his childhood, but Stanley is unresponsive. Petey leaves for a game of chess with friends, and McCann follows to buy alcohol for the party. Stanley and Goldberg are left alone in the room. Goldberg, at ease, makes small talk, but Stanley

won't listen. Instead, he tells Goldberg there has been some kind of mistake that the boardinghouse has no rooms left for them and so they must leave. Goldberg smoothly changes the subject to birthdays, comparing them to waking up in the morning. He says some people know how to appreciate the wonder of waking up, while others act as if they are corpses waiting to be washed.

McCann returns with some bottles, which he sets down on the sideboard. Stanley again insists they leave, but this time, Goldberg and McCann respond aggressively, insisting Stanley sit down. McCann insists forcefully, but it is Goldberg's quiet, threatening tone that effectively inspires Stanley to acquiesce.

They begin to interrogate Stanley with a series of both unnerving and seemingly unrelated questions. Through their quick, short questions, they reveal details of Stanley's past to the audience (or at least details of the past they have fabricated for him.) Their interrogation suggests that Stanley chases Petey from the house so that he can drive Meg crazy, and that he treats Lulu like a leper. When they ask why he came to the boardinghouse, Stanley claims it was because his feet hurt. They accuse him of betraying their "organization," of being a traitor to the cloth, and of changing his name. They claim he left a girl at the altar, but also claim that he once had a wife whom he killed either by poison or by beating her to death. Stanley vehemently denies all of these claims. Goldberg and McCann's questions grow irrational, and include queries like "why did the chicken cross the road?" and "who watered the wick in Melbourne?" Goldberg asks the difference between "the possible and the necessary." They accuse him of lechery and of mother-defiling. They insist he is dead because he does not truly live. When they tell him he is nothing but an

"odour," Stanley suddenly comes to life and kicks Goldberg in the stomach. Before they can react, Meg comes down the stairs beating the drum.

Meg enters the room dressed for the party. She places the drum on the table, and the scene's mood immediately brightens as Goldberg resumes his suave demeanor. McCann helps Stanley pour the drinks. Stanley is overwhelmed, but calm. Goldberg slaps Meg on her behind in a playful manner as he admires her dress, and encourages Meg to give a toast. Meg hesitantly but affectionately tells Stanley that she is happy he is staying at her boardinghouse, and that he is her Stanley now even if he pretends otherwise. She starts to cry.

Lulu enters. There is an immediate attraction between Goldberg and Lulu. The party guests pair off (Lulu with Goldberg; McCann with Meg; Stanley remains alone), and the dialogue shifts between the two couples. Goldberg and Lulu engage in a conversation filled with sexual innuendos revolving around childhood imagery and children's games. Lulu confesses that she likes older men, and sits on Goldberg's lap while he bounces her. She wonders whether Goldberg knew her when she was a child, and says he reminds her of the first man she ever loved. Meanwhile, Meg and McCann speak drunkenly of Ireland, and Meg conjectures that her father might have gone there after he abandoned the family when she was still a child.

The talk of childhood inspires Meg to request a game. They decide on blind man's buff, and Meg blindfolds herself and stumbles about the room searching for the others. She stumbles across McCann, who then dons the blindfold while Goldberg fondles Lulu. McCann finds Stanley and ties the blindfold on him. In the process, he maliciously breaks Stanley's glasses. While Stanley stumbles around the room, uncharacteristically silent, McCann places

the toy drum on the floor, and Stanley steps in it. One foot in the drum, he continues to meander until he comes across Meg. Suddenly, Stanley lashes out and tries to strangle her. Goldberg and McCann rush forward and rescue her. Then, the lights go out.

Confusion ensues as the characters bump into one another. McCann loses his flashlight, while Lulu screams and faints. In the dark, Stanley places her on the table. When McCann finally finds his flashlight, he shines it on the table, where Stanley stands over Lulu, who is unconscious with her legs spread open. It resembles a sexual assault. As he is struck by the light, Stanley begins to giggle and retreats towards the kitchen. Goldberg and McCann slowly approach him, and finally converge on him as he continues to laugh, louder and louder. The curtain closes on Act II amid confusion and chaos.

### **Analysis**

The most prominent conflict in Act II is that between order and chaos. The act opens with a symbol of order taken to an almost perverse extreme - McCann methodically tears the newspaper into identical strips. The symbol serves as representation of how he and Goldberg approach their "job" - they are insidious and deliberate in their infiltration of the house, and not too quick to make their move. Interestingly, this same symbol will represent the chaos they leave behind when it resurfaces in Act III.

The tension between Stanley and McCann also reflects this conflict. On the surface, both men do their best to subscribe to social convention. Stanley is clearly unnerved and paranoid, and yet will not deliberately accuse McCann of what he suspects. Instead, he attempts to talk around the perceived threat, which further reflects the play's theme of imperfect communication. Similarly, McCann remains civil despite Stanley's bad attitude, at

least until the latter touches the newspaper. By threatening to disrupt the semblance of order, Stanley insults McCann and leads him towards violence.

Once Stanley has disturbed their semblance of order, he takes an offensive tact and tries to dictate the terms of the conversation. He insists upon his version of his own past, in effect defending himself against a perceived threat. The audience is left to fill in any details - is Stanley telling the truth? What are the sins McCann thinks him guilty of? - Even as Stanley demands his version is the absolute truth. Questions of identity, of who we think ourselves to be and who we truly are, resurface in this Act. Whereas in Act I, Stanley and Meg's conversation touched on dubious realities but had low stakes, the stakes here are much higher. We perceive that Stanley could be hurt if he cannot convince these men to accept his version of his past. The idea of an imprecise identity is reinforced in Stanley and McCann's exchange over previous acquaintance - McCann insists they have never met before, despite Stanley's insistence to the contrary.

Though Pinter does not give us details on Stanley's past, Stanley's behavior during this exchange suggests some past sin or crime. He is extremely paranoid even as he tries to maintain an air of civility, and insists preemptively that he does not seem the type of man who would ever cause any trouble. To confront the perceived threat would be to break decorum and risk violence, so Stanley relies on innuendo and subtext to communicate his point. McCann, a paragon of order and calm here, is unfazed.

Ultimately, the opening conversation is a masterpiece of theatrical conversation. There are many interpretations we can make, but we can only conjecture on motivations. The sudden shifts of intention, tone, and subject in the dialogue create through performance an uneasy feeling, a sense that nothing we see is easily categorized. While

every bit of the conversation is easy to understand on its own, the overarching subtext - what is really going on - is elusive. Words do not capture our meaning, the play suggests. Instead, they become a trap that fails to properly express our worries and emotions. The only act that truly shifts the power dynamic is McCann's assault. When he hits Stanley, both men understand for a moment what is going on. However, once they return to language, the confusion and disorientation resumes.

Goldberg offers similarly ironic contradictions. A master of language, he knows how to make people respond to him. Both men, like Petey, and women, like Meg and Lulu, respond to his suave ways. And yet behind this seeming control is a sense of gleeful chaos and violence. He uses his control of orderly language to disguise a vicious intent. Clearly, he is not a hitman insistent on efficiency. If he were, he and McCann could easily overpower or kill Stanley. Instead, he attempts to manipulate the situation, to force Stanley into a madness of paranoia. Goldberg intentionally creates chaos, but does so by manipulating the orderliness of language.

This sense is apparent from the moment he enters the Act, with Petey. His story about his mother and a former lover seems to profess proper attitudes on women, even as it unnerves Stanley. Some scholars of *The Birthday Party* propose that Stanley's past crime involved a woman, either his wife or a young Irish girl. This interpretation is supported both by this story and by several references during their interrogation scene. They mention that he was once married, and might have either killed his wife or left a woman at the altar. That they contradict themselves is not important - it's only language, after all - but what is important is the repeated motif of violence towards women.

Further, Stanley's attitudes help support this theory. Not only was he emotionally cruel towards Meg in Act I, but in Act II, he attempts to strangle her before preparing to sexually assault Lulu. Stanley is driven to a sort of madness by his oppressors, but rather than being the cause of this behaviour, the madness arguably enables Stanley to act out his true self. As with any interpretation of this play, it is impossible to prove definitively, though a repeated cruelty towards women does support the idea that Stanley is guilty of such crimes.

One of the play's most famous scenes is the interrogation, for several reasons. Most prominent is Pinter's use of language and overlapping dialogue. The interrogation begins with somewhat legitimate questions, but quickly falls into a surreal mirage of ridiculousness. Both tactics, coming so quick on top of one another, serve to deepen Stanley's paranoia, and lay the foundation for his nervous breakdown at the end of Act II. In performance, this scene plays quickly and violently, with the ridiculousness of the language only reinforcing the sinister, torturous intent of the characters. Again, what they say is less affecting than the way they say it, the true motivation behind the meaningless words.

There is almost a sense of a confession in the interrogation. Once Stanley submits to their judgment, he is quickly annihilated. This suggests a sense of non-confessed guilt, especially since their assessment of him is neither totally flawed nor totally truthful. After all, they contradict themselves, but he lacks the fortitude to argue. Instead, the interrogation forces him into a stupor that will not cease until he breaks down during the game. He will never again be the loquacious, arrogant fellow of Act I. He now has to look inward and confront whatever sins he has internalized. What he has done is never revealed - that he has done something is beyond question.

The one remark that does enliven Stanley is the accusation that he is only "an odour." By this point of the interrogation, Stanley has been reduced to a groaning animal, but the fear of death evoked by this claim is strong enough to force his resistance. They have pushed him too far and they prepare to be attacked, before they are saved by Meg's entrance.

Suddenly, order resumes. The scene quickly dissolves into civility once more as Goldberg again evokes a brighter tone. As the party kicks into gear, Goldberg controls the room through his command of language, while Stanley remains in a stupor. Order and chaos share the stage, and while most of the characters are drawn towards Goldberg's controlled order, the audience is aware of the chaos in Stanley, which creates a suspense and tension as counterpoint to the civility of the celebration.

Meanwhile, the theme of sexuality and the objectification of women continue to manifest through Goldberg's actions. He speaks to Lulu as a little girl, a role she quickly accepts when she bounces on his knee. It is a sick parody of the father/daughter relationship, a parallel to Meg's strange, sexual mother/son relationship with Stanley. What a contradictory and confusing image, especially since Goldberg has come supposedly to punish Stanley for similar crimes. However, Goldberg's hypocrisy would never bother him - after all, his atonement is not at issue.

Finally, blindness becomes a motif in this Act. The final act that breaks Stanley is the destruction of his glasses, which leaves him blind to the world. The darkness of the blindfold reflects his confusion over the reasons for his torture, and is further manifest in the darkness that overtakes the room. However, when light is finally brought back, we see Stanley as he truly is, ready to repeat some kind of violence. The act closes on chaos - order

has broken down, and the truth of Stanley's ugliness has come to light. The order he has maintained for these years on the boardinghouse has proved as fragile as the drum.

### **3.3 Summary and Analysis of Act III**

#### **Summary**

Act III is set the next morning. Petey sits at the kitchen table reading his newspaper. Meg calls out to him, thinking he is Stanley. When she enters and realizes it's Petey, she confesses she has run out of cornflakes and that she has a headache from the party. She also tells Petey that the drum is broken. He reassures her that she can always get another one.

Meg wants to call Stanley down to breakfast, but Petey stops her, saying, "let him sleep... this morning. Let him sleep." Meg misses Petey's cryptic tone, and tells him how she tried to bring Stanley his tea earlier, but was stopped in the hallway by McCann, who informed her that Stanley had already had tea. Peter interrupts her story to ask when she will go food shopping. She hurries out the door for that purpose, but quickly returns with news that a car is parked outside. Frightened, she asks if Petey had looked in the car and noticed whether there was a wheelbarrow in it. When Petey tells her it's Goldberg's car, she is relieved.

Just as Meg prepares to leave again, she hears footsteps on the stairs and thinks it is Stanley coming down for breakfast. She flutters about, distressed that she cannot offer him cornflakes. However, it turns out to be Goldberg, which upsets Meg. Goldberg assures her that Stanley will be down eventually. Meg asks him questions about his car, but Goldberg ignores her and instead speaks to Petey about the car's reliability.

After Meg leaves, Petey asks Goldberg about Stanley, and Goldberg explains that Stanley suffered a nervous breakdown at the party. Though he cannot explain why or how it happened, Goldberg is certain that is the case. Petey explains how he came home the night before to find the lights out, and had to put a “shilling in the slot” to reactive the power. He then ran into McCann, who first told him about what happened. Goldberg senses Petey's worry and reassures him that they will connect Stanley with a fellow named Monty, whom Goldberg considers the best doctor available.

Petey argues with Goldberg, suggesting Stanley should stay at the boardinghouse, but Goldberg quickly dismisses his offer. Petey exits to the kitchen as McCann enters. He has packed their bags and is anxious to leave. He refuses to “go up there again,” and says Stanley is trying to shove his broken glasses into his eyes. Petey reappears and offers to fix the glasses with Sellotape, but Goldberg again refuse his help.

Petey says he has to tend the peas in the garden, but asks to be called when Stanley comes down. However, Goldberg is adamant that Petey should be gone when they leave, and in a pleasant but anxious tone of voice, he suggests that Petey go to the pier to set up the deck chairs for tourists. Petey says he's fine where he is, and then exits to the garden, leaving an exhausted Goldberg.

McCann picks up Petey's newspaper and begins to shred it into strips. Goldberg demands he stop, calling the activity childish. McCann says he “wants to get it over,” and asks Goldberg whether he should bring Stanley downstairs. Goldberg ignores the question, and instead tells McCann that he feels “knocked out.” Angry at being ignored, McCann grabs the back of Goldberg's chair and shouts at him to “get the thing done.” When Goldberg does not respond, McCann calls him "Nat," and when that does not elicit a response, calls him

“Simey.” Goldberg reacts immediately and violently at this name, screaming “never call me that” as he seizes McCann by the throat.

Backpedaling, McCann denies using the name, and then asks if he should fetch Stanley. Instead of answering, Goldberg asks McCann to look in his mouth, and then claims he has never been sick and still has all of his teeth. Goldberg next reminisces about his father, whose deathbed words were, “never forget your family, for they are the rock, the constitution, the core!” Goldberg rambles a bit, and then asks McCann to blow into his mouth, which McCann does twice without question. The activity calms Goldberg down.

Lulu enters, and McCann leaves them alone, promising to return within five minutes. Lulu accuses Goldberg of using her for his perverse, sexual games. He swears he has never touched another woman, but she does not believe him. She wonders what her father would think of their sexual activity, which she does not describe. She claims that her first lover, Eddie, was respectful and never used her as Goldberg did, for a “passing fancy.” Goldberg insists their liaison was consensual, but she counters that he took advantage of her while her defenses were down. She also mentions a mysterious briefcase that Goldberg brought and which she opened out of curiosity. When McCann enters and hears her mention the briefcase, he threateningly asks her whether she has anything to confess. Goldberg senses her confusion and adds that McCann has only been “unfrosted for six months.” McCann chases her away, and the men's conversation return to Stanley's condition.

McCann leaves the room, and quickly returns with a clean-shaven Stanley, who holds his broken glasses in his hands as he sits quietly in a chair. Goldberg compliments Stanley's appearance and promises to buy him a new pair of glasses. He and McCann then try to entice Stanley to accompany them of his own free will. They promise they want to care for

him, to save him from a fate worse than death, and to make a man out of him. In an assault that mirrors the Act II interrogation, they bombard Stanley with promises which grow more ridiculous as the scene progresses. For example, they promise to gift him ear plugs, stomach pumps, and crutches while they help him skip rope.

During their speeches, Stanley remains immobile, his gaze distant. Goldberg kindly but firmly demands to know how Stanley feels about their offer to take him away. After a few moments of silence, Stanley attempts to speak but can only muster gurgling sounds. He continues to try, but ultimately drops his chin to his chest, converging in on himself as he produces nonsense words and sounds.

Goldberg gently takes Stanley in hand and leads him towards the door. Meanwhile, Petey has arrived, unnoticed, and insists they leave Stanley alone with him. Goldberg and McCann then turn towards Petey and insidiously suggest that he should accompany them as well. Though Petey does not stop them from leaving the house, he does shout, "Stan, don't let them tell you what to do!"

Petey turns toward the table and sits down. He picks up his newspaper and begins to read. Meg enters and asks after Stanley. With trepidation in his voice, Petey lies and says Stanley is still sleeping. Meg tells him that she had a lovely time at the party, forgetting that Petey was not there. In her closing remark, Meg insists that she was the bell of the ball, and Petey agrees with her assessment.

### **Analysis**

As a whole, the structure of *The Birthday Party* seems very traditional. There are three acts, arranged in chronological order, and the first and third acts parallel one another.

Both Act I and Act III begin with Meg and Petey's morning routine, although Act III reflects the play's descent into depravity. Meg does not have breakfast to serve in Act III, and she is frantic to remedy the oversight. As an interesting side detail, she does remember to pour Petey's tea, whereas she forgot in Act I. Because of what she has gone through since Act I, Meg is ungrounded, not so easily submerged into the superficial routine of the beginning.

In many ways, Petey is the central character of Act III, since he changes during it. At the beginning, when Meg realizes that the drum has broken but does not remember how it happened, Petey simply tells her she can get another one. There is a bit of dramatic irony since the audience realizes that the drum represents Stanley - much as it is broken, so is he mentally unstable. Petey's growth in the Act is realizing that while Meg could conceivably get a new boarder like Stanley, his particular absence will likely shatter her fragile world. The play ends with his lie to her; a lie intended to prolong her eventual breakdown. Considering the implications that Petey might have a sense of the strange Meg/Stanley relationship, his desire to maintain her illusion reveals his discovery of Stanley's importance. If she falls apart, then their pleasant, comfortable life might also fall apart.

Petey is also central because we realize he might always have had some intuition his world's sinister nature. He has largely been absent from the play thus far, and in many ways is pitiable for being a potentially willing cuckold (something Goldberg and McCann suggest to Stanley during their Act II interrogation). Yet Petey reveals astuteness in Act III through his conversation about Stanley's mental breakdown. The fact that he is not surprised to hear Goldberg suggest it gives us reason to suspect he had seen indications of mental problems before.

When we learn that Petey is an accomplished chess player, the symbol helps us to understand him. He seems to know more than any other single character. He knows that Goldberg and McCann are not what they seem; he knows that Stanley might have mental problems; he knows that his wife's mental problems might be exacerbated if he were to end her affair with Stanley; and he realizes when he cannot win the battle to keep Stanley around. And yet he chooses to live in a pleasant stupor, to not address any of these problems. Certainly, this can be interpreted as cowardice, but it is not accidental. Like a chess player, he knows how to strategize, and has chosen a life of pleasant comfort over potential difficulties. He chooses not to live, in the sense that Goldberg accuses Stanley of in Act II, but it is a choice. When he yells to Stanley, "don't let them tell you what to do," he is in many ways describing his own life, one in which he engages nobody and hence has little responsibility. He is cowardly safe in his domestic delusion, but it is his own choice.

The Act is full of sinister images and situations. Meg's discovery of the black car brings a theatrical mystery to the fore, and she immediately interprets it as a sign of her own breakdown. She remembers Stanley's threat to have her taken away in a wheelbarrow, and worries this car is intended for that purpose. As a vehicle intended to remove debris from place to place, the wheelbarrow represents motion of unworthy objects. Meg's fear of the wheelbarrow reflects not only her fear of her own irrelevance, but also her fear of movement, of change from the comfort wherein she can maintain her delusions of importance. What is ironic is that Stanley's threat has come true not for her, but for himself. And yet her fear over the black car is not misplaced - as we can intuit from the earlier Acts, Stanley's absence might in fact compromise her own sanity.

Goldberg also reveals the depth of his sinister potential in Act III. He is able to maintain some air of charm, apparent when he assuages Meg's concerns about the car, but he refuses to answer any questions about it. His silence about certain details only deepens the aura of dread that permeates the play, both in terms of the car and in terms of other details, like the briefcase or his purpose for Stanley.

Most sinister is Goldberg's own breakdown. His world is clearly coming undone, most likely as a result of whatever sexual behaviour he forced upon Lulu. Whereas he has shown nothing but suave detachment in Acts I and II, he is a wreck in Act III, "knocked out" and undone. He is unnerved by such feelings, since he has never been sick before. He lacks his characteristic control, even lashing out at McCann for calling him "Simey." Is this sickness perhaps a sign of a guilty conscience? Or has his liaison with Lulu submerged some childhood neuroses? As he mentioned the name "Simey" as a name from his past, this latter interpretation could certainly be defended.

What Goldberg's breakdown reveals is that every person is reliant upon his own delusion, and hence subject to pain and difficulty when that delusion falters. Though he has presented himself as strong and untouchable, Goldberg centers his world on a pretence of family morals, of a nostalgia for the "old days" which were better, bigger, and more respectful. Considering the way he speaks of his mother in Act II, it is possible to interpret this delusion as an expression of childhood and control. Indeed, he shows a desire to be something of a parent both to Stanley, whom he forces into an infantile state of confusion and fear, and to Lulu, who he treated as a daughter in Act II and then as a prostitute in Act III. Lulu's confrontation leads Goldberg into further lies about her compliance, a situation he does not handle well until McCann finally chases her away. Interestingly, his final tactic is to

elicit a confession from her. In a world where we are guilty of our own delusions and sins, forced confession becomes a threat.

Stanley's situation also reveals the sinister nature of the play. Ironically, he is most frightening because he is suddenly so presentable. The reprise of their Act II interrogation now has the sense less of attack and more of a bedside vigil. All of his delusions shattered, Stanley can only receive these promises silently. With repeated readings or viewings of the play, an audience might realize how Stanley's breakdown could be any person's fate if he or she were forced to confront his or her past sins and delusions too forcibly. From this perspective, the scene is even more horrifying.

At the end, Meg remains blissfully unaware of the situation. It is telling that the play ends with a confirmation of her delusion. The final exchange is full of dramatic irony - she has constructed a reality that we know to be false, both because Meg was not the belle of the ball, and because Petey was not there to know it. The play ends with a scenario of ambiguity and delusion, which falls perfectly in line with the themes it explores throughout.

In a published speech entitled "Writing for the Theatre," Pinter offered that Petey's exclamation - "Stan, don't let them tell you what to do!" - defined his mindset, his plays, and his entire career. Neither Pinter nor his characters conform to established means of interpretation, and he makes every effort to avoid easy answers that could be interpreted as the author's moral message. Instead, we are to leave Pinter's plays - *The Birthday Party* included - unsure exactly what is true, both about the character on stage and about ourselves.

#### **4. Character Analysis**

**a) Petey**

Petey Boles is the owner of the rundown boarding house in which the play takes place. He is 60 years old and married to Meg. Petey works a deckchair attendant at an unspecified seaside resort near his home on the shores of England.

As the play continues, Petey's character is revealed to be more astute. He realizes that Goldberg and McCann are more insidious than they seem, and probably knows of his wife and Stanley's strange relationship. While Petey seems to know quite a lot more than he lets on, he ultimately reveals that he will do little to compromise the comfortable, delusional existence he shares with Meg.

**b) Meg**

Meg Boles is a kind woman who helps run the boardinghouse. She is sixty years old and married to Petey in a seemingly childless marriage. Absentminded and simplistic, Meg often asks repetitive questions and constantly requires attention. While she does carry on a sexually-tinged relationship with Stanley, Meg lives a rather humdrum life that allows her to maintain certain delusions about her attractiveness and popularity, delusions which she works hard to protect even as the play goes to darker places.

**c) Goldberg**

Nat Goldberg, also called "Simey" and "Benny," is a Jewish gentleman who works for an unnamed "organization" that has employed him to take Stanley away from the boardinghouse. He is defined by his outwardly polite and suave demeanor, which stands in stark contrast to that of his associate McCann. However, he ultimately reveals an angry, violent streak beneath this suave demeanor.

Goldberg's problems seem to be connected to his past - he is nostalgic about family, and waxes poetic about the old days. To what extent these delusions explain and/or feed his anger and violence are left to the reader's imagination.

#### **d) McCann**

Dermot McCann is an Irish member of an unnamed "organization" that has hired him to take Stanley away from the boardinghouse. Unlike Goldberg, who uses words and charm to his advantage, McCann is a paragon of bodily aggression. He lacks much social skill, and is something of a simpleton.

#### **e) Lulu**

A young woman in her twenties, Lulu is an acquaintance of Meg's and a visitor to the boardinghouse. She is childish and flirtatious, and though she seems initially interested in Stanley, she is easily attracted to Goldberg's charms. Her girlish qualities become ironically unsettling after she is sexually assaulted.

#### **f) Stanley**

Stanley Webber is ostensibly the protagonist of the play. He is the only boarder at the Boles's boardinghouse, and is initially defined by laziness, unkemptness, and smug cruelty towards Meg. The many details of his past are never confirmed - he might be a musician, might have been famous, etc. - although there is a sense that he has sins unatoned for. His aggressive depression transitions into a nervous breakdown when Goldberg and McCann arrive, until he is nothing but a bumbling idiot in Act III.

### **5. Stylistic Devices**

## 5.1 Theatre of Absurd

Martin Esslin, a theatre critic, coined the term “Theatre of the Absurd” to describe a number of works being produced in the late 1950s and early 1960s that defied any traditional genres. The most famous playwright associated with this movement include Samuel Beckett, Eugene Ionesco, Jean Genet, and of course, Harold Pinter.

The term "absurd" was originally used by Albert Camus in his 1942 essay “Myth of Sisyphus,” wherein he described the human condition as “meaningless and absurd.” The key element to an absurdist play is that the main characters are out of sync with the world around them. There is no discernible reasoning behind their strangeness, though a threatening sense of change shakes their existence to the core.

Influences on the absurdist theatre go as far back as the Elizabethan tragicomedies of Shakespeare and his contemporaries. The tragic plays Macbeth and Hamlet offer segments of comedy that shifts the play's perspective, if only for the briefest moments. For example, Hamlet's wit and the porter scene in Macbeth offer moments of comedy to alleviate the drama's intensity. Other influences on the absurdist playwrights include the work of Sigmund Freud, and the Surrealist movement of the 1920s and 1930s, which introduced the avant-garde to mainstream media.

However, the largest influence was World War II and its aftermath. Like Pinter, who was a child during the war, many Englishmen and women felt disillusioned once the war was over. They were angry and upset with the world, but found it difficult to express their collective opinions. In such a damaged world, it was no longer feasible to use traditional

methods of storytelling on stage. The human condition was too complex and fragmented, and the old forms of language were hence inappropriate for exploring it.

To shake audiences from their more conventional viewing habits, the playwrights of the Absurdist Theatre used traditional settings to ease the audience into their plays, and then shocked them with surreal imagery, uncommon circumstances, or fragmented language. Language within the Absurdist Theatre often transcended its base meaning. As in *The Birthday Party*, nothing is as it seems and no one speaks the whole truth. Also, the use of silence as language was often utilized in these plays.

The drama of the absurdist theatre is dreamlike, almost lyrical. Like the Surrealists before them, the absurdist playwrights use imagery, subtext, mythology, and allegory to express a deeper meaning which is often never fully explained. In fact, the playwrights of the Theatre of the Absurd allowed their plays to speak for themselves. Pinter explained this absurdist concept best in his 1962 speech "Writing for the Theatre," which was presented at the National Student Drama Festival in Bristol. He said, "I suggest there can be no hard distinctions between what is real and what is unreal, or between what is true and what is false." The thin line between truth and lies is perhaps the defining characteristic of the Theatre of the Absurd.

## **5.2 Absurdity**

As in many absurdist works, *The Birthday Party* is full of disjointed information that defies efforts to distinguish between reality and illusion. For example, despite the presentation of personal information on Stanley and his two persecutors, who or what they really are remains a mystery. Goldberg, in particular, provides all sorts of information about

his background, but he offers only oblique clues as to why he has intruded upon Stanley's life.

What has Stanley done to deserve persecution? The facts of his past are so unclear that his claim to be a pianist may even be false. The Birthday Party influences the audience to doubt anything with certainty, which as it does in Kafka's work, intensifies the dreadful angst experienced by the protagonist. This effect is achieved through truncated dialogue, by Pinter's deliberate failure to provide conclusive or consistent information, and by his use of ambiguity and nonsense.

### **5.3 Unique Setting**

The Birthday Party uses a single setting, the living-dining room of a seaside boarding house somewhere on the coast of England. Its anonymity contributes to a sense of place as symbol, especially in allegorical interpretations of the play.

Although doors permit characters to enter and exit the room, there are features suggesting that the room is isolated from the world outside. The wall separating the room from the kitchen has a hatch allowing characters in the kitchen to peer into the room, like jailors peering into a prison cell. There are also windows that permit characters to see into the room but give no real glimpse of what lies beyond them.

## **6. Suggested Essay Questions with Answers**

### **6.1 Discuss Stanley and Meg's relationship.**

Stanley and Meg's relationship is complicated and ambiguous, but clearly shows how depressed they both are. In the most obvious way, they are boarder and boardinghouse

owner. However, there is also a mother/son dynamic at work. Meg mothers Stanley, fussing over his breakfast and kidding with him at the table. Most strange is their sexual dynamic. She also flirts with him by invading his room, tickling him, and affectionately touching his arm. She demands kisses in return for good behaviour. Stanley responds to all her affronts with disgust, but this arguably comes from feeling trapped within her house. He makes no effort to change his life, and so must see his acceptance of her as the cost of living anonymously. Likewise, she sees in him an escape from the drudgery of her banal life with Petey. No matter what the truth of their relationship is, it is clear they accept it to fill in deeper fears and insecurities.

## **6.2 How does the state of the boardinghouse mirror the personalities of the characters?**

The house, which is untidy and poorly kept, reflects the characters of Meg, Stanley, and Petey, though in different ways. Meg is scatterbrained, and the boardinghouse suffers for her lack of attention to it. She spends too much time prancing around in front of Stanley to notice that her home is in disrepair. In short, she is more interested in her delusion of the house than in the house itself. Stage productions and films of *The Birthday Party* further illuminate Meg's untidiness with scenes in a dirty but quaint living room and dilapidated kitchen. The house also reflects Stanley's moodiness and generally unkempt appearance. He lives in a state of disruption. Finally, Petey's general disinterest in his life is reflected by his disinterest in the house. He would rather glance at the paper.

## **6.3 Discuss Stanley's and Lulu's interaction in Act I. What does it show about Stanley?**

Lulu is interested in Stanley, but he is unwilling to consider any deeper relationships. He is too much committed to an anonymous life of lethargy. Lulu's questions bother Stanley,

since they touch on the past he would like to forget. Further, he is bothered by her sexual interest in him. More than anything, she feels bad for him and treats him like a disgruntled child. When she leaves, Stanley washes his face, which suggests their sexual tension and the fact that he has little use for such sexuality. He needs to be alone, perhaps to stay hidden from his past, and perhaps because he is too depressed for anything else.

**6.4 Stage directions are essential in a play. Discuss Pinter's stage directions in relation to character development.**

After Meg gives Stanley his toy drum, he hangs it around his neck and parades around the table. Pinter uses this scene to develop Stanley's character, to reveal how he is both a conformist and a rebel. As he playfully taps a beat on the drum while circling the table and then begins to bang it "as if he were possessed," Pinter uses very specific stage directions so that the action of the play, which was once stagnant, suddenly explodes. This creates tension, drama and unease. So much of the play has been unspoken and tense, and now the violence is made manifest. The same thing happens with the stage directions at the end of Act II. By using very few stage directions and then using specific ones, Pinter makes sure that his dramatic moments serve as a pay-off to the lingering tension of the play.

**6.5 Pinter was influenced by the surrealists. Provide one example of surrealism within the play.**

Surrealism needs the pretence of reality, which is then subverted. The play is full of such juxtapositions from its very opening. The interrogation scene in Act II is a particularly great example. While the set-up is recognizable - they are interrogating a suspect - their language is nonsensical and somewhat irrelevant. What matters is the power dynamic,

which is exaggerated and menacing because they do not rely on language to cement it. Goldberg and McCann here appear prophetic and haunting in their interrogation of poor Stanley, who is neither guilty nor innocent, and yet is both. The play's essence of surrealism lies in the chaos between that which is real and that which is imagined.

#### **6.6 Describe Stanley's decent into madness.**

Stanley is a depressed character, rumpled and unkempt. He is nasty and rude to everyone except Petey, to whom he shows a begrudging respect. However, these behaviours mask a deep depression that Goldberg and McCann exacerbate to lead him into madness. They threaten his poorly constructed world. From the moment he hears that two men are coming, he grows less arrogant and more on edge. His conversation with McCann in Act II reveals that he has lost control of his life, and is now desperate. The interrogation scene, though it only obliquely mentions specific offenses, drives him into a guilt-fuelled stupor that then explodes into full-on madness during the party itself. Rather than physically harming Stanley, Goldberg and McCann attack his delusions, and all he has left is silence.

#### **6.7 There are several acts of submission within the play. Provide an example and discuss the motivation of the characters.**

The play is very much concerned with power struggles. One example is the interrogation scene in Act II. Goldberg and McCann must first convince Stanley to sit down, an act which proves difficult since he refuses to cooperate. Despite McCann's forceful attitude and Goldberg's sugar-coated words, Stanley will not sit until they corner him. Their intent is to reinforce the power dynamic, to make sure he knows that they have the upper hand. Although Stanley refuses to sit from fear that they will physically harm him, he is not

relieved to be untouched when he sits. Instead, he is more harmed by accepting the power dynamic, since it leads him further down his slow descent to madness.

### **6.8 Pinter often used language as a buffer between silence and action in his plays.**

**Describe a scene within the *The Birthday Party* when language was used to create silence.**

Goldberg's speeches often silence another character's opinions or arguments. For instance, when he and McCann first arrive, Goldberg speaks at length about his Uncle Barney in an effort to calm McCann. Goldberg uses his stories to distract, educate, and perhaps annoy. His words are so closely cropped together that they engender a silence, a void after he finishes speaking. His words are not confusing, but his strange use of them creates confusion. Language seems more a tool or a weapon in this way.

### **6.9 Elements of realism are markedly present within the play. How is realism used in *The Birthday Party*?**

The boardinghouse and its inhabitants define realism within Pinter's play. Meg is the simpleminded matron, her husband the inattentive owner, and Stanley their disgruntled guest. The domestic scene of the living room, table, and chairs creates a comparison to other popular English plays of the time period. Further, the relationships - a potential affair between matron and boarder, a pleasant but dull marriage relationship, a pretty young girl from the town - all seem recognizable. It is important that Pinter make these elements seem so realistic so that his subversion of them is more affecting. By stripping away the layers of

realism, by revealing long hidden truths and creating chaos, the surrealist elements of the play soon take the foreground, leaving realism and any illusion of truth behind.

### **6.10 Are Petey and Meg happily married? Provide examples to support your argument.**

It can be argued that Petey and Meg are happy because they have obviously made a life together. They are used to each other's personalities, and have set a very strict routine wherein Meg prepares Petey's breakfast, they talk to one another in the morning, and then Petey goes off to work. Neither Petey nor Meg is openly affectionate toward one another, but neither are they rude or dismissive. Lastly, Petey shows his protectiveness when he lies to her about Stanley's whereabouts in Act III.

However, this complacency bleeds into disinterest. Meg frequently forgets his tea and even forgets he was not at the party. In fact, Meg clearly gets more validation from Stanley's cruelty than she does from Petey's pleasant kindness. Further, it seems plausible that he knows of her sexual attraction to Stanley, but ignores it. Ultimately, the question is whether happiness comes from unpleasant passions or from pleasant, comfortable apathy.

## **7. Important Quotes Explained**

### **7.1 "Are they nice?"**

Meg to Petey, p.19. Meg's query to Petey reveals how important her delusions are to her. The play opens as Meg and Petey at breakfast. She asks Petey inane and repetitive questions, which sets the tone of not only their marriage but also the atmosphere of the boardinghouse. They are clearly in a rut - the boardinghouse is in disrepair and they have only one boarder - but Meg wants assurance to the contrary. Her delusion allows her escape from the tedium of her life, but it requires constant attention.

### **7.2 “Oh Stan, that’s a lovely room. I’ve had some lovely afternoons in that room.”**

Meg to Stanley, p.29. Although it is never openly stated, there is a strange sexually-tinged relationship between Meg and Stanley. Meg is openly affectionate with him, sometimes in mothering ways but more often in flirtatious ways. However, the cruelty with which Stanley rebukes her flirtation makes the truth ambiguous. Nevertheless, she ignores his repudiations, insisting he cares for her; her delusions of importance and beauty require that she not only believe the affair is happening, but also that he enjoys it. When Meg says the above line, she is both indicating her belief in their affair, and revealing how she will reinvent his feelings to suit her delusion. It is a "lovely room," no matter what he says.

### **7.3 “You’re a bit of a washout, aren’t you?”**

Lulu to Stanley, p.36. Lulu is closer to Stanley’s age than any other character is. She is described as an attractive woman in her twenties, but Stanley seems unimpressed. In Act I, Lulu berates Stanley for not leaving the house, and for always being underfoot. When Stanley refuses to go out with her, she insults him in the above manner. The insult still contains a bit of flirtation, though, which indicates both the strange relationship between men and women in the play, and her desperate desire to have someone, so strong that she even pursues the out-of-sorts, lethargic boarder.

### **7.4 “At all events, McCann, I can assure you that the assignment will be carried out and the mission accomplished with no excessive aggravation to you or myself. Satisfied?”**

Goldberg to McCann, p.40. In this reassurance to McCann, Goldberg reveals the depth of his insidiousness. Not only do they have a sinister purpose in mind - the "assignment" - but they will also treat it with little personal investment. The tone is

businesslike and detached, which is unsettling when we realize that Stanley is the target. This quote also reveals the differences in their characters at the top - Goldberg is collected, whereas McCann is jumpy. These roles later reverse somewhat.

### **7.5 “Shall I put it around my neck?”**

Stanley to Meg, 46. Like a noose, Stanley puts the toy drum Meg bought him for his supposed birthday around his neck. This death imagery adds to the ominous atmosphere, suggesting that things are about to change at the boardinghouse, and not for the better. This scene also indicates how Stanley’s depressive rages can turn violent very quickly, as he wildly bangs the drums while the curtain closes.

### **7.6 “Why do you call me sir?”**

Stanley to McCann, p.51. Stanley’s mysterious past is alluded to in several scenes. Here, Stanley tries to convince McCann that they are mistaken about his identity without ever directly admitting that they might know him. It is one of the many scenes in which characters talk around one another. When McCann refers to Stanley as "sir," he overreacts, suggesting that the truth of the scene is the tension beneath it, and not the meaningless language they use.

### **7.7 “You’re dead. You can’t live, you can’t think, you can’t love. You’re dead. You’re a plague gone bad. There’s no juice in you. You’re nothing but an odor.”**

Goldberg to Stanley, p.62. During the bizarre interrogation scene in Act II, Goldberg gives this assessment, one of the play’s most poignant. It is poignant because it is true not only of Stanley, but ostensibly of everyone in the play, as well as of the apathetic post-war Britain that Pinter was commenting on. Too many of the characters choose comfort because

it is safer, but the flipside is a depressing apathy. And, as the play suggests, the truth of life never goes away and will sooner or later rear its dangerous, ugly head.

**7.8 “Well - it’s very, very nice to be here tonight, in my house, and I want to propose a toast to Stanley, because it’s his birthday, and he’s lived here for a long while now, and he’s my Stanley now. And I think he’s a good boy, although sometimes he’s bad. And he’s the only Stanley I know, and I know him better than all the world, although he doesn’t think so. Well, I could cry because I’m so happy, having him here and not gone away, on his birthday, and there isn’t anything I wouldn’t do for him, and all you good people here tonight...”**

Meg's toast, p.65. Meg’s rambling affection for Stanley explains why she has invited these strangers to his birthday party. In her simplistic fashion, she wants what is best for Stanley; she is the only person in the play who truly cares about him. However, her toast also reveals her own personal blindness. Part of his misery is her unceasing attention to him, and her delusions which he must continue to entertain. When he attempts to strangle her before being taken away after his breakdown, he shows her how he truly feels, which makes her delusions all the more upsetting.

**7.9 “Yes she does sometimes. Sometimes she forgets.”**

Petey to Goldberg, p.80. Petey seems unconcerned during much of the play, but this line, spoken to Goldberg in Act III, shows he knows more than he lets on. When he explains that she sometimes gives him tea and sometimes forgets, he in some ways suggests that he sees nothing more than his physical surroundings. However, considering how tea is a symbol for Meg's affection (Stanley establishes this in Act I), and considering Petey's willingness to

lie to her at the end about Stanley's disappearance, the line also has a significant subtext - Petey knows that his wife walks a fine line of sanity, held together by her delusions that can often distract her.

**7.10 “Let’s finish and go. Let’s get it over and go. Get the thing done. Let’s finish the bloody thing. Let’s get the thing done and go!”**

McCann to Goldberg, p.86. Usually, McCann is extremely deferential to Goldberg. Here, however, McCann is flustered and upset because of Goldberg’s seeming disinterest in the job. McCann relies on Goldberg to keep them calm and focused, and Goldberg's trouble in this Act make McCann doubly nervous. He does not want to get invested, since the job troubles him, but Goldberg has seemingly gotten invested. McCann cannot handle losing his calm mentor, and so he snaps for a moment.

**8. Suggestions for Further Reading**

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