

# British Drama

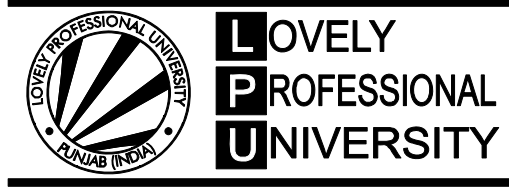
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DENG403



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# **BRITISH DRAMA**

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# SYLLABUS

## British Drama

### Objectives:

- To enable the learners to identify the major themes and concerns of literature in the eighteenth century.
- To enable the learners to relate biographical information about authors to the works by these authors.
- To introduce the learners to the selected British dramatists and plays.
- To develop a thinking and receptive leader.

Sr. No.	Description
1	Literary Terms: Classical and Aristotle's Concept of Tragedy and Tragic Hero
2	Literary Terms: Problem Play, Kitchen Sink Drama, and Angry Young Man.
3	Literary Terms: Comedy of Manners, Absurd Theatre, and Existentialism
4	Shakespeare: <i>Macbeth</i> – Introduction to the Author and the Text; Detailed Analysis of the Text; Concept of Tragedy of Aristotle and its Application on Macbeth, Poetic Tragedy and Motifs; Characterization and Superstition; Plot Construction and Themes; Macbeth: History and its Impact on 18th and 19th Century
5	<i>Doctor Faustus</i> : Morality Play; Plot Construction Including Detailed Analysis of Sub Plot and Theme; Detailed Analysis of Seven Deadly Sins; Characterization and Faustus Character; Doctor Faustus: A Tragedy and all Concepts of Tragedy
6	Ben Jonson: Introduction of the Text of <i>Volpone</i> ; Satire and all its Detailed Analysis and Comedy; Characterization and Plot Construction and Sub-plots.
7	Richard Sheridan: <i>The School for Scandal</i> – Introduction to the Author and the Text; Detailed Analysis of the Text Act I to Act V; Criticism to the Text and Characterization; All Major and Minor Themes.
8	G. B. Shaw: <i>Saint Joan</i> – Introduction to the Author and the Text; Detailed Analysis of the Text; Epilogue and Plot; Characterization; Themes.
9	Harold Pinter – Introduction to the Author and the Text <i>The Birthday Party</i> ; Detailed Analysis of the Text; Characterization and Theme.
10	Arnold Wesker – Introduction to the Author and the Text <i>Roots</i> ; Detailed Analysis of the Text; Characterization and Theme.

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## Unit 1: Literary Terms: Classical and Aristotle's Concept of Tragedy and Tragic Hero

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Objectives

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  - 1.1.4 Development of Classical Tragedy
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  - 1.2.1 Definition of Tragic Hero
  - 1.2.2 Characteristics of a Tragic Hero
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- 1.4 Keywords
- 1.5 Review Questions
- 1.6 Further Readings

### Objectives

After studying this unit, you will be able to:

- Describe the classical concept of tragedy and tragic hero;
- Illustrate the Aristotle's views on the concept of tragedy and tragic hero;
- Elaborate the development of classical tragedy;
- Define the terms classical tragedy and tragic hero.
- Enumerate the characters of tragic hero.

### Introduction

Literature is the art of written works. It may be divided into three major literary forms, viz. poetry, fiction, and drama. Poetry is usually categorized into three main types: epic, dramatic and lyric. All three subtypes share common traits, including specific patterns of rhythm and syntax, frequent use of figurative language, and emphasis on the way that words are arranged on the page.

## Notes

Fiction is, in general, any narrative about invented characters and events, whether in verse or prose. The narrower meaning of the term, however, refers to works written in prose. The major genres of fiction are the novel, the short story, and the novella.

Drama differs from poetry and fiction in that it is usually intended for performance. The form may be divided into the broad categories of comedy and tragedy. A third and smaller category, tragicomedy, combines features of each of those major genres.

Genre is an important word in the English class. We teach different genres of literature such as poetry, short stories, myths, plays, non-fiction, novels, mysteries, and so on. When we speak about a kind of literature we are really speaking about a genre of literature. So when someone asks you what genre of literature you like, you might answer, poetry, novels, comics, and so on. On the other hand literary terms are words used in, and having specific meaning in discussion, review, criticism and classification of genres. Words that are used frequently for the purposes described above are recognized as literary terms. For example, personification, simile, hyperbole, metaphor, tragedy, and tragic hero are used to describe various forms of writing by an author. Here in this unit we will explain the terms tragedy and tragic hero. More emphasis will be given on the classical and Aristotle's concept of tragedy and tragic hero.



*Example:* The word “personification” is a word or a literary term. The definition of personification is an object, thing, or nonhuman character having human traits. Writers/ Authors may use examples of personification in their writings. An example of personification used may be “The wind howled through the trees.” The wind is the nonhuman and the howling is something that a human may do. Thus, the wind has a human characteristic or is an example of personification.

## 1.1 Classical and Aristotle's Concept of Tragedy

**Tragedy** (Ancient Greek: *tragoidia*, “the-goat-song”) is a form of art based on human suffering that offers its audience pleasure. Though throughout the world most cultures have developed forms that provoke this paradoxical response, tragedy refers to a specific tradition of drama that has played a unique and important role historically in the self-definition of Western civilization. That tradition has been multiple and discontinuous, yet the term has often been used to invoke a powerful effect of cultural identity and historical continuity – “the Greeks and the Elizabethans, in one cultural form; Hellenes and Christians, in a common activity.” From its obscure origins in the theatres of Athens 2,500 years ago, from which there survives only a fraction of the work of Aeschylus, Sophocles and Euripides, through its singular articulations in the works of Shakespeare, Lope de Vega, Racine, and Schiller, to the more recent naturalistic tragedy of Strindberg, Beckett's modernist meditations on death, loss and suffering, and Müller's postmodernist reworkings of the tragic canon, tragedy has remained an important site of cultural experimentation, negotiation, struggle, and change. A long line of philosophers – Plato, Aristotle, Saint Augustine, Voltaire, Hume, Diderot, Hegel, Schopenhauer, Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, Freud, Benjamin, Camus, Lacan, and Deleuze have analysed, speculated upon, and criticised the tragic form. In the wake of Aristotle's *Poetics* (335 BCE), tragedy has been used to make genre distinctions, whether at the scale of poetry in general (where the tragic divides against epic and lyric) or at the scale of the drama (where tragedy is opposed to comedy). In the modern era, tragedy has also been defined against drama, melodrama, the tragicomic, and epic theatre.



*Notes* In the theatre, a play dealing with a serious theme, traditionally one in which a character meets disaster as a result either of personal failings or circumstances beyond his or her control. Historically the classical view of tragedy, as expressed by the Greek tragedians Aeschylus, Euripides, and Sophocles, and the Roman tragedian Seneca, has been predominant in the Western tradition.



*Did u know?* The tragedies of English dramatist William Shakespeare and his contemporaries tend to involve wasted potential, for example in a man's power (*Macbeth*, 1605–06, *King Lear*, 1605–06), or in love (*Romeo and Juliet*, 1594–95, *Othello*, 1604–05).

The word tragedy literally means “goat song,” probably referring to the practice of giving a goat as a sacrifice or a prize at the religious festivals in honour of the god Dionysos. Whatever its origins, tragedy came to signify a dramatic presentation of high seriousness and noble character which examines the major questions of human existence: Why are we here? How can we know the will of the gods? What meaning does life have in the face of death? In tragedy people are tested by great suffering and must face decisions of ultimate consequence. Some meet the challenge with deeds of despicable cruelty, while others demonstrate their ability to confront and surpass adversity, winning our admiration and proving the greatness of human potential.

### 1.1.1 Origin of Classical Tragedy

Tragedy's origins are obscure, but it apparently started with the singing of a choral lyric (called the *dithyramb*) in honour of Dionysus. It was performed in a circular dancing-place (*orchestra*) by a group of men who may have impersonated satyrs by wearing masks and dressing in goat-skins. In the course of time, the content of the *dithyramb* was widened to any mythological or heroic story, and an actor was introduced to answer questions posed by the choral group. The Greek word for actor is *hypokrites*, which literally means “answerer.” It is the source for our English word “hypocrite.” Tragedy was recognized as an official state cult in Athens in 534 BC. According to tradition, the playwright Aeschylus added a second actor and Sophocles added a third.

In Greece, tragedies were performed in late March/early April at an annual state religious festival in honor of Dionysus. The presentation took the form of a contest between three playwrights, who presented their works on three successive days. Each playwright would prepare a trilogy of three tragedies, plus an unrelated concluding comic piece called a *satyr* play. Often, the three plays featured linked stories, but later writers like Euripides may have presented three unrelated plays. Only one complete trilogy has survived, the *Oresteia* of Aeschylus. The Greek theatre was in the open air, on the side of a hill, and performances of a trilogy and satyr play probably lasted most of the day. Performances were apparently open to all citizens, including women, but evidence is scanty. The presentation of the plays probably resembled modern opera more than what we think of as a “play.” All of the choral parts were sung (to flute accompaniment) and some of the actors' answers to the chorus were sung as well. The play as a whole was composed in various verse meters. All actors were male and wore masks, which may have had some amplifying capabilities. A Greek chorus danced as well as sang. No one knows exactly what sorts of steps the chorus performed as it sang. But choral songs in tragedy are often divided into three sections: *strophe* (“turning, circling”), *antistrophe* (“counter-turning, counter-circling”) and *epode* (“after-song”). So perhaps the chorus would dance one way around the *orchestra* (“dancing-floor”) while singing the *strophe*, turn another way during the *antistrophe*, and then stand still during the *epode*.



*Notes* The Greek word *choros* means “a dance in a ring.”

### 1.1.2 Definition of Classical Tragedy

Tragedy depicts the downfall of a noble hero or heroine, usually through some combination of *hubris*, fate, and the will of the gods. The tragic hero's powerful wish to achieve some goal inevitably



## Notes

encounters limits, usually those of human frailty (flaws in reason, *hubris*, society), the gods (through oracles, prophets, fate), or nature. Aristotle says that the tragic hero should have a flaw and/or make some mistake (*hamartia*). The hero need not die at the end, but he/she must undergo a change in fortune. In addition, the tragic hero may achieve some revelation or recognition (*anagnorisis* – “knowing again” or “knowing back” or “knowing throughout”) about human fate, destiny, and the will of the gods. Aristotle quite nicely terms this sort of recognition “a change from ignorance to awareness of a bond of love or hate.”

### Elements of Classical Tragedy

According to Aristotle who first defined tragedy using the Greek plays (*Death of a Salesman*) that were available to him, tragedy is “the imitation of an action that is serious and also, as having magnitude, complete in itself.” Tragedy typically includes “incidents arousing pity and fear, wherewith to accomplish the catharsis of such emotions.” The elements of a classical tragedy include:

- The tragic hero who, though not perfect, is certainly in some way morally superior to most of the audience (and who is nearly always upper class), but also exhibits
- “*Hamartia*,” the tragic flaw (literally, it translates as “error of judgement”) which is often
- *hubris*, loosely translated as arrogance, that causes the hero to believe he can outwit fate or violate a moral law, which leads in turn to
- some kind of *catastrophe*, which results in
- *peripeteia* or a complete reversal of fortune from happiness to disaster

How this relates to *Death of a Salesman*:

Although there are aspects of classical tragedy here, in fact *Salesman* is far closer in genre to the 18 c “bourgeois” or “domestic” tragedy, wherein an ordinary person suffers a rather commonplace disaster.

Willy Loman is not a *classical* tragic hero, given the definition above. Rather, he is what’s known as an “antihero.” This is a more common figure in modern tragedy, since the modern age tends to lack clear-cut ethics and morals by which to judge its heroes.

- The antihero, instead of manifesting dignity, power, and heroism, tends to manifest passivity and ineffectualness. This is not altogether the case with Willy – he has, in spite of his unexalted nature, a certain innate dignity about him.
- Willy does, however, have a tragic flaw – and it relates directly to *hamartia* as an “error of judgement” – what is Willy’s error? (that style can get you farther than either hard work or skill)
- This ties into the idea of *hubris* in a bit of a skewed way. Ordinarily, *hubris*, because it results from a kind of arrogance, is a conscious attempt to outwit fate or transcend moral law. In Willy’s case, this is not really conscious – that is, he attempts to break a moral law, but one that he doesn’t really recognize as moral. The moral law he consciously breaks leads not to his own downfall so much as the downfall of Biff.
- One other typically modern feature of this play is that it does not, as classical tragedies do, move the hero from an exalted position to an abased one. Rather, the hero is already near the bottom of the wheel of fortune when the play begins.

### Definition

Tragedy is a process of imitating an action which has serious implications, is complete, and possesses magnitude; by means of language which has been made sensuously attractive, with each of its

varieties found separately in the parts; enacted by the persons themselves and not presented through narrative; through a course of pity and fear completing the purification (*catharsis*, sometimes translated "purgation") of such emotions."

- (a) **Imitation (*mimesis*):** Contrary to Plato, Aristotle asserts that the artist does not just *copy* the shifting appearances of the world, but rather imitates or *represents* Reality itself, and gives form and meaning to that Reality. In so doing, the artist gives shape to the *universal*, not the *accidental*. Poetry, Aristotle says, is "a more philosophical and serious business than history; for poetry speaks more of universals, history of particulars."
- (b) **An action with serious implications:** *serious* in the sense that it best raises and purifies pity and fear; serious in a moral, psychological, and social sense.
- (c) **Complete and possesses magnitude:** not just a series of episodes, but a whole with a beginning, a middle, and an end. The idea of *imitation* is important here; the artist does not just slavishly *copy* everything related to an action, but *selects* (represents) only those aspects which give form to universal truths.
- (d) **Language sensuously attractive...in the parts:** language must be appropriate for each part of the play: choruses are in a different meter and rhythm and more melodious than spoken parts.
- (e) Tragedy (as opposed to epic) relies on an enactment (dramatic performance) not on "narrative" (the author telling a story).
- (f) **Purification (*catharsis*):** tragedy first raises (it does not create) the emotions of pity and fear, then purifies or purges them. Whether Aristotle means to say that this purification takes place only within the action of the play, or whether he thinks that the audience *also* undergoes a cathartic experience, is still hotly debated. One scholar, Gerald Else, says that tragedy purifies "whatever is 'filthy' or 'polluted' in the *pathos*, the tragic act". Others say that the play arouses emotions of pity and fear in the *spectator* and then purifies them (reduces them to beneficent order and proportion) or purges them (expels them from his/her emotional system).



**Task** "Tragedy first raises the emotions of pity and fear, then purifies or purges them."  
Illustrate this statement taking an example of Shakespearean tragedy.

### 1.1.3 Aristotle's Definition of Classical Tragedy

In fourth century BC, Aristotle, in his work the *Poetics*, gave Western civilization a definition of tragedy which has greatly influenced writers of tragedy and the form of tragedy over twenty-four centuries.

Aristotle indicates that the medium of tragedy is drama, not narrative; tragedy "shows" rather than "tells." According to Aristotle, tragedy is higher and more philosophical than history because history simply relates what has happened while tragedy dramatizes what may happen, "what is possible according to the law of probability or necessity." History thus deals with the particular, and tragedy with the universal. Events that have happened may be due to accident or coincidence; they may be particular to a specific situation and not be part of a clear cause-and-effect chain. Therefore they have little relevance for others. Tragedy, however, is rooted in the fundamental order of the universe; it creates a cause-and-effect chain that clearly reveals what may happen at any time or place because that is the way the world operates. Tragedy therefore arouses not only pity but also fear, because the audience can envision themselves within this cause-and-effect chain.

## Notes



*Did u know?* The treatise we call the *Poetics* was composed at least 50 years after the death of Sophocles. Aristotle was a great admirer of Sophocles' *Oedipus the King*, considering it the perfect tragedy, and not surprisingly, his analysis fits that play most perfectly.

Aristotle begins his analysis of tragedy with this famous definition: *Tragedy, then, is an imitation of an action that is serious, complete, and of a certain magnitude; in language embellished with each kind of artistic ornament, the several kinds being found in separate parts of the play; in the form of an action, not of narrative; through pity and fear effecting the proper purgation for these emotions.*

Collectively, throughout the *Poetics*, Aristotle divides his analysis into six basic parts: plot-making, character delineation, speech (diction), thought and language, spectacle, and song (melody). Aristotle confined most of his analysis to play-making, mentioning the final three merely as components of the whole. Therefore, to understand Aristotle's definition of tragedy more clearly, consider the following facets of his analysis:

1. The writer of tragedy imitates a serious and complete action, of a certain magnitude, represented by what characters on stage say and do.
2. "Action" is the motivation from which deeds emanate, or the rational purpose of the play.
3. The element of pathos is essential to the whole.
4. Plot is the arrangement of carefully selected, carefully sequenced, tragic incidents to represent one complete action.
5. The plot consists of parts or types of incidents in the beginning, middle and end of the play.
  - (a) Quantitative parts: Prologos (introduction to the play), Parados (Chorus, in unison, tells us what has happened before the beginning of the action of the play), Episodes (The sections of storytelling within the play, usually characterized by what information is revealed in them), Choric Odes (Chorus speaks about something connected with the theme of the story, but not necessarily about the story itself, and Exodus (As or after the characters leave, the chorus tells us what we have learned from the story).
  - (b) Organic Parts: Reversal of the situation—a change by which the situation turns around toward its opposite.
    - (1) Recognition—a change from ignorance to knowledge.
    - (2) Pathos (or scene of suffering)—a moment of passion which may be aroused by spectacular means, or may also result from the inner structures of the play.
6. Plots vary in kind:
  - (a) Complex versus simple—Complex plots include reversal and recognition; simple plots do not include these elements.
  - (b) Ethically motivated versus pathetically motivated.
7. The story must seem probable.
8. Plot is divided into two main parts.
  - (a) Complication—the part of the play which extends from the Prologos to the turning point.
  - (b) Unraveling or Denouement—The part of the play which extends from the turning point to the end.
9. A play can be unified only if it represents one action, and the best plays are unified by a single plot and a single catastrophe.

10. A central action of the play springs from character and thought, manifested in the dialogue.
11. The chorus most directly represents the action (or purpose) of the play.
12. Characters should be carefully delineated to contrast sharply with one another, should be full of life individually, should vary ethically, should be probable, consistent, and should reflect the central action of the play in the development of character.
13. The tragic hero should be a ruler or leader, whose character is good and whose misfortune is brought about by some error or frailty.
14. Language should be elevated and in verse (which in fifth century BC was reminiscent of our blank verse today) and should reflect rhetorical strategies of persuasion (primarily represented in the Episodes and Choric Odes).
15. The special quality of man's pleasure in tragedy comes from the purgation of the passions of fear and pity felt by the audience as they watch the fate of the tragic hero unfold, recognizing in it the universal human lot.

### Parts of a Tragedy

Every tragedy as mentioned above must have six basic parts. They may be explained as below:

#### *Plot*

Of the six elements of tragedy as distinguished by Aristotle, plot is the most important. The best tragic plot is single and complex, rather than double ("with opposite endings for good and bad" – a characteristic of comedy in which the good are rewarded and the wicked punished). All plots have some pathos (suffering), but a complex plot includes reversal and recognition.

- (a) **"Reversal" (peripeteia):** occurs when a situation seems to be developing in one direction, and then suddenly "reverses" to another. For example, when Oedipus first hears of the death of Polybus (his supposed father), the news at first seems good, but then is revealed to be disastrous.
- (b) **"Recognition" (anagnorisis or "knowing again" or "knowing back" or "knowing throughout"):** a change from ignorance to awareness of a bond of love or hate. For example, Oedipus kills his father in ignorance and then learns of his true relationship to the King of Thebes.

Recognition scenes in tragedy are of some horrible event or secret, while those in comedy usually reunite long-lost relatives or friends. A plot with tragic reversals and recognitions best arouses pity and fear.

- (c) **"Suffering" (pathos):** Also translated as "a calamity," the third element of plot is "a destructive or painful act." The English words "sympathy," "empathy," and "apathy" (literally, absence of suffering) all stem from this Greek word.

#### *Character*

Character has the second place in importance and should have the following qualities:

1. **"Good or fine."** Aristotle relates this quality to moral purpose and says it is relative to class: "Even a woman may be good, and also a slave, though the woman may be said to be an inferior being, and the slave quite worthless."
2. **"Fitness of character"** (true to type); e.g. valor is appropriate for a warrior but not for a woman.
3. **"True to life"** (realistic)
4. **"Consistency"** (true to themselves). Once a character's personality and motivations are established, these should continue throughout the play.

Notes

5. **“Necessary or probable”** Characters must be logically constructed according to “the law of probability or necessity” that governs the actions of the play.
6. **“True to life and yet more beautiful”** (idealized, ennobled).

In a perfect tragedy, character will support plot, i.e. personal motivations will be intricately connected parts of the cause-and-effect chain of actions producing pity and fear in the audience. The protagonist should be renowned and prosperous, so his change of fortune can be from good to bad. This change “should come about as the result, not of vice, but of some great error or frailty in a character.” Such a plot is most likely to generate pity and fear in the audience, for “pity is aroused by unmerited misfortune, fear by the misfortune of a man like ourselves.” The term Aristotle uses here, hamartia. The meaning of the Greek word is closer to “mistake” than to “flaw,” and I believe it is best interpreted in the context of what Aristotle has to say about plot and “the law or probability or necessity.” In the ideal tragedy, claims Aristotle, the protagonist will mistakenly bring about his own downfall—not because he is sinful or morally weak, but because he does not know enough. The role of the hamartia in tragedy comes not from its moral status but from the inevitability of its consequences.

**Thought**

Thought is third in importance, and is found “where something is proved to be or not to be, or a general maxim is enunciated.” Aristotle says little about thought, and most of what he has to say is associated with how speeches should reveal character. However, we may assume that this category would also include what we call the themes of a play.

**Diction**

Diction is fourth in importance and is “the expression of the meaning in words” which is proper and appropriate to the plot, characters, and end of the tragedy. In this category, Aristotle discusses the stylistic elements of tragedy; he is particularly interested in metaphors: “But the greatest thing by far is to have a command of metaphor; it is the mark of genius, for to make good metaphors implies an eye for resemblances.”

**Song or Melody**

Song or melody is fifth in importance and is the musical element of the chorus. Aristotle argues that the Chorus should be fully integrated into the play like an actor; choral odes should not be “mere interludes,” but should contribute to the unity of the plot.

**Spectacle**

Spectacle is sixth in importance and is last, for it is least connected with literature; “the production of spectacular effects depends more on the art of the stage machinist than on that of the poet.” Although Aristotle recognizes the emotional attraction of spectacle, he argues that superior poets rely on the inner structure of the play rather than spectacle to arouse pity and fear; those who rely heavily on spectacle “create a sense, not of the terrible, but only of the monstrous.”

**The End of Tragedy—Catharsis**

The end of the tragedy is a catharsis (purgation, cleansing) of the tragic emotions of pity and fear. It is another Aristotelian term that has generated considerable debate. The word means “purging and Aristotle seems to be employing a medical metaphor—tragedy arouses the emotions of pity and fear in order to purge away their excess, to reduce these passions to a healthy, balanced proportion. Aristotle also talks of the “pleasure” that is proper to tragedy, apparently meaning the aesthetic pleasure one gets from contemplating the pity and fear that are aroused through an intricately constructed work of art.

However, it is uncharacteristic of Aristotle to define tragedy in terms of audience psychology; throughout the *Poetics* he focuses on dramatic form, not its effects on viewers. Therefore, commentators such as Else and Hardison prefer to think of catharsis not as the effect of tragedy on the spectator but as the resolution of dramatic tension within the plot. The dramatist depicts incidents which arouse pity and fear for the protagonist, and then during the course of the action, he resolves the major conflicts, bringing the plot to a logical and foreseeable conclusion.

This explanation of catharsis helps to explain how an audience experiences satisfaction even from an unhappy ending. Human nature may cause us to hope that things work out for Antigone, but, because of the insurmountable obstacles in the situation and the ironies of fate, we come to expect the worst and would feel cheated if Haemon arrived at the last minute to rescue her, providing a happy but contrived conclusion. In tragedy things may not turn out as we wish, but we recognize the probable or necessary relation between the hero's actions and the results of those actions, and appreciate the playwright's honest depiction of life's harsher realities.



*Notes* Aristotle's definition does not include an unfortunate or fatal conclusion as a necessary component of tragedy. Usually we think of tragedy resulting in the death of the protagonist along with several others. While this is true of most tragedies (especially Shakespeare), Aristotle acknowledges that several Greek tragedies end happily.



*Caution* We should remember that Aristotle's theory of tragedy, while an important place to begin, should not be used to prescribe one definitive form which applies to all tragedies past and present.

### 1.1.4 Development of Classical Tragedy

The Greek view of tragedy was developed by the philosopher Aristotle, but it was the Roman Seneca (whose works were probably intended to be read rather than acted) who influenced the Elizabethan tragedies of the English dramatists Marlowe and Shakespeare. French classical tragedy developed under the influence of both Seneca and an interpretation of Aristotle which gave rise to the theory of unities of time, place, and action, as observed by Racine, one of its greatest exponents. In Germany the tragedies of Goethe and Schiller led to the exaggerated melodrama (*Sturm und Drang*), which replaced pure tragedy.

Tragedy was always intended to have a beneficial effect on its audience. The classical catharsis (the audience's experience of emotional purification when watching tragedy) was replaced by Brecht's concept of alienation, in which the audience is intellectually (as opposed to emotionally) involved. Brecht's contention was that an emotional audience accepts what happens as inevitable, whereas they should be angered and leave the theatre bent on preventing such tragedies happening again. Despite the general division of tragedies into classical (dealing with noble characters) and modern (dealing with ordinary people), there has been a consistent, but less well known, genre of tragedy that has dramatised contemporary events. Even the Elizabethan theatre staged works inspired by contemporary events. The German dramatist Piscator dramatized German political controversies between World War I and II. Thus the genre moved from the merely sensational to the realm of agitprop.

Notes

**Self Assessment**

Multiple Choice Questions:

1. Plot is the arrangement of carefully
  - (a) emanating the rational purpose of the play
  - (b) selected and sequenced tragic incidents to represent one complete action
  - (c) imitating a serious and complete action
  - (d) represents the action (or purpose) of the play.
2. Drama differs from poetry and fiction in that
  - (a) it is only tragedy and meant for stage play
  - (b) it is divided into comedy and tragedy and intended for performance
  - (c) it is only comedy and not for performance
  - (d) it is divided into comedy and tragedy and not intended for performance.
3. Choral songs in a tragedy are often divided into three sections as
  - (a) strophe, turning and circling
  - (b) circling, epode, and counter-circling
  - (c) strophe, antistrophe and epode
  - (d) After song, epode, and turning.
4. All plots have some pathos but a complex plot also includes
  - (a) recognition
  - (b) reversal
  - (c) peripeteia
  - (d) both reversal and recognition.
5. The end of a tragedy is
  - (a) catharsis
  - (b) Spectacle
  - (c) melody
  - (d) plot.

Fill in the blanks:

6. The finest tragedy is ..... rather than simple.
7. Tragedy is a representation of terrible and ..... events.
8. Song or melody is the ..... of the chorus.
9. The end of the tragedy is a ..... of the tragic emotions of pity and fear.
10. Suffering, the third element of plot is a destructive or ..... act.

State whether the following statements are true or false:

11. Aristotle indicated that the medium of tragedy is drama.
12. Plot most likely generate horror and terror in the audience.

13. In an ideal tragedy, the protagonist will mistakenly bring about his own downfall.
14. The term hamartia is more closer to flaw than to mistake.
15. Aristotle gave more emphasis on the inner structure of the play rather than spectacle to arouse pity and fear.

Notes

## 1.2 Classical and Aristotle's Concept of Tragic Hero

A tragic hero is the main character (or "protagonist") in a tragedy. Tragic heroes appear in the dramatic works of Aeschylus, Sophocles, Euripides, Seneca, Marlowe, Shakespeare, Webster, Marston, Corneille, Racine, Goethe, Schiller, Kleist, Strindberg, and many other writers.

The tragic hero is "a great man who is neither a paragon of virtue and justice nor undergoes the change to misfortune through any real badness or wickedness but because of some mistake."

Aristotle indicates the kind of hero who should serve as the main character, but first, he tells us the kind of hero who does not qualify for service as a "main character," or "tragic hero." He tells us that, for tragedy, we can't have:

- A good man falling from happiness to misfortune (this will only inspire revulsion, not pity or fear)
- An evil man rising from ill fortune to prosperity (that won't inspire sympathy, so it can't arouse pity or fear)
- A wicked man falling from prosperity into misfortune (that might inspire sympathy, but not pity or fear, because (1) pity can't be felt for a person whose misfortune is deserved, and (2) if we don't identify with the character's wickedness, we won't be afraid of his fate falling on us).

The appropriate tragic hero, then, is the character who sits between these extremes. He's not "preeminent in virtue and justice," but on the other hand, he isn't guilty of "vice or depravity," just some "mistake." He is a person of some importance, from a "highly renowned and prosperous place," a king, like Oedipus.

The hero of tragedy is not perfect, however. To witness a completely virtuous person fall from fortune to disaster would provoke moral outrage at such an injustice. Likewise, the downfall of a villainous person is seen as appropriate punishment and does not arouse pity or fear. The best type of tragic hero, according to Aristotle, exists "between these extremes . . . a person who is neither perfect in virtue and justice, nor one who falls into misfortune through vice and depravity, but rather, one who succumbs through some miscalculation".

Aristotle explains that with regard to the tragic hero there are four things, viz. goodness, appropriateness, lifelike, and consistency to aim at. These are mentioned below:

### **Goodness**

They should reveal through speech and action what their moral choices are, and a "good character will be one whose choices are good." Any "class of person" may be portrayed as "good" –even women and slaves, though on the whole women are "inferior" and slaves are "utterly base."

### **Appropriateness**

Men can be domineering or "manly" but for a woman to appear formidable would be inappropriate. Oedipus shows the appropriate stateliness and intelligence you would expect from the ruler of a great city.



Notes

**Lifelike**

Aristotle means lifelike “believable” or “true to life” that means the tragic hero should not be godlike, not like the mythical heroes of legend, but like real human beings. Oedipus is obviously human. He has human strengths and weaknesses. There’s nothing supernatural about him.

**Consistency**

Once a character is established as having certain traits, these shouldn’t suddenly change. Oedipus’ character traits, revealed throughout the play, remain consistent. He’s a truth-seeker, a riddle solver; he’s questing after self-knowledge; he wants to be a savior; he’s also very proud, a little arrogant, and he has a real temper.

**1.2.1 Definition of Tragic Hero**

A tragic hero in a literary work can be defined as someone who is endowed with a tragic fatal flaw that dooms him to make a serious error in judgment. As a result of this error in judgment, the hero falls from great heights or from high esteem, realizes that he has made an irreversible mistake, then faces and accepts a tragic death with honor, evincing pity or fear in the audience.

The fatal flaw is an essential element in the tragic hero, being the pivotal condition that causes his downfall. The concept of the fatal flaw derives from the Greek word “hamartia,” which is a word used frequently throughout the New Testament and is usually translated there as “sin” or “missing the mark” (“Hamartia”). The tragic hero is in effect compelled to sin because of his fatal flaw; he cannot escape it. The great tragedians, such as Sophocles, identify the tragic hero as one who is destined to fall because he carries the evil seed of a fatal flaw that at some point in the play springs up into a full-grown flaw that causes him to commit a fatal and irreversible mistake. The audience watching the tragic hero is touched with pity or fear, watching the downfall of the mighty from such a relatively small factor as a little flaw.



*Example:* The characters Troy Maxson of “*Fences*” and Oedipus of “*Oedipus the King*” serve as good examples of characters that can be analyzed, compared, and contrasted to determine whether they fit the classical concept of tragic hero.

**1.2.2 Characteristics of Tragic Hero**

Aristotle gave the following characteristics of tragic hero.

- A great man, usually of noble birth: “one of those who stand in great repute and prosperity, like Oedipus and Thyestes: conspicuous men from families of that kind.” The hero is neither a villain nor a model of perfection but is basically good and decent.
- Hamartia (mistake)—a.k.a. the tragic flaw that eventually leads to his downfall. The term hamartia, which Golden translates as “miscalculation,” literally means “missing the mark,” taken from the practice of archery. This Greek word, which Aristotle uses only once in the *Poetics*, has also been translated as “flaw” or as “error.” The great man falls through—though not entirely because of—some weakness of character, some moral blindness, or error. We should note that the gods also are in some sense responsible for the hero’s fall.

Much confusion exists over this crucial term. Critics of previous centuries once understood hamartia to mean that the hero must have a “tragic flaw,” a moral weakness in character which inevitably leads to disaster. This interpretation comes from a long tradition of dramatic criticism which seeks to place blame for disaster on someone or something: “Bad things don’t just happen

to good people, so it must be someone's fault." This was the "comforting" response Job's friends in the Old Testament story gave him to explain his suffering: "God is punishing you for your wrongdoing." For centuries tragedies were held up as moral illustrations of the consequences of sin.



*Caution* Given the nature of most tragedies, however, we should not define hamartia as tragic flaw. While the concept of a moral character flaw may apply to certain tragic figures, it seems inappropriate for many others.



*Example:* There is a definite causal connection between Creon's pride which precipitates his destruction, but can Antigone's desire to see her brother decently buried be called a flaw in her character which leads to her death? Her stubborn insistence on following a moral law higher than that of the state is the very quality for which we admire her.

Most of Aristotle's examples show that he thought of hamartia primarily as a failure to recognize someone, often a blood relative. In his commentary Gerald Else sees a close connection between the concepts of hamartia, recognition, and catharsis. For Aristotle the most tragic situation possible was the unwitting murder of one family member by another. Mistaken identity allows Oedipus to kill his father Laius on the road to Thebes and subsequently to marry Jocasta, his mother; only later does he recognize his tragic error. However, because he commits the crime in ignorance and pays for it with remorse, self-mutilation, and exile, the plot reaches resolution or catharsis, and we pity him as a victim of ironic fate instead of accusing him of blood guilt.

While Aristotle's concept of tragic error fits the model example of Oedipus quite well, there are several tragedies in which the protagonists suffer due to circumstances totally beyond their control. Hamartia plays no part in these tragedies.



*Example:* In the *Oresteia* trilogy, Orestes must avenge his father's death by killing his mother. Aeschylus does not present Orestes as a man whose nature destines him to commit matricide, but as an unfortunate, innocent son thrown into a terrible dilemma not of his making. In *The Trojan Women* by Euripides, the title characters are helpless victims of the conquering Greeks; ironically, Helen, the only one who deserves blame for the war, escapes punishment by seducing her former husband Menelaus. Heracles, in Euripides' version of the story, goes insane and slaughters his wife and children, not for anything he has done but because Hera, queen of the gods, wishes to punish him for being the illegitimate son of Zeus and a mortal woman.

Searching for the tragic flaw in a character often oversimplifies the complex issues of tragedy. For example, the critic predisposed to looking for the flaw in Oedipus' character usually points to his stubborn pride, and concludes that this trait leads directly to his downfall. However, several crucial events in the plot are not motivated by pride at all: (1) Oedipus leaves Corinth to protect the two people he believes to be his parents; (2) his choice of Thebes as a destination is merely coincidental and/or fated, but certainly not his fault; (3) his defeat of the Sphinx demonstrates wisdom rather than blind stubbornness. True, he kills Laius on the road, refusing to give way on a narrow pass, but the fact that this happens to be his father cannot be attributed to a flaw in his character. Furthermore, these actions occur prior to the action of the play itself. The central plot concerns Oedipus' desire as a responsible ruler to rid his city of the gods' curse and his unyielding search for the truth, actions which deserve our admiration rather than contempt as a moral flaw. Oedipus falls because of a complex set of factors, not from any single character trait.

## Notes



*Notes* The misunderstanding over the term hamartia can be corrected if we realize that Aristotle discusses hamartia in the Poetics not as an aspect of character but rather as an incident in the plot. What Aristotle means by hamartia might better be translated as “tragic error”. Caught in a crisis situation, the protagonist makes an error in judgment or action, “missing the mark,” and disaster results.

- Peripeteia—a reversal of fortune brought about by the hero’s tragic flaw.
- His actions result in an increase of self- awareness and self-knowledge.
- The audience must feel pity and fear for this character.
- His downfall is usually due to excessive pride (hubris).
- He is doomed from the start, he bears no responsibility for possessing his flaw, but bears responsibility for his actions.
- He has discovered fate by his own actions, and not by things happening to him.
- He is usually a king, a leader of men— his fate affects the welfare of a whole nation or number of people. Peasants do not inspire pity and fear as great men do. The sudden fall from greatness to nothing provides a sense of contrast.
- The suffering of the hero must not be senseless: it must have meaning!
- The hero of classical tragedies is almost all male: one rare exception is Cleopatra, from *Antony and Cleopatra*.



*Task* The heroes of all classical tragedies are almost all male, elaborate this statement citing some examples of dramatic works where tragic hero appears.

## Self Assessment

Multiple Choice Questions:

16. Tragic hero, does not appear in which of the following dramatist’s works
  - (a) P.B. Shelley
  - (b) Aeschylus
  - (c) Seneca
  - (d) Shakespeare.
17. According to Aristotle, the tragic hero who should serve as the main character may not be
  - (a) a good man falling from prosperity to misfortune as it will inspire revulsion
  - (b) a good man falling from happiness to misfortune as it will inspire revulsion, not pity or fear
  - (c) a wicked man rising from ill fortune to prosperity
  - (d) an evil man falling from prosperity to misfortune.

18. Which of the following statements about hamartia is not correct?
- (a) It is translated as miscalculation
  - (b) Literally, it means missing the mark
  - (c) Aristotle uses this term in his poetics translated as success
  - (d) Aristotle translated it as flaw or as error.
19. The great tragedians, such as Sophocles, identify the tragic hero as one
- (a) who is destined to rise
  - (b) who carries the evil seed of fatal flaw
  - (c) who destined to commit a reversible mistake
  - (d) who destined to commit a fatal and irreversible mistake.
20. A good man falling from happiness to misfortune may not be tragic hero because
- (a) it will only inspire revulsion, not pity or fear
  - (b) it will inspire sympathy, so can't arouse pity or fear
  - (c) it will inspire sympathy, but not pity or fear
  - (d) it will inspire revulsion and also pity or fear.

Fill in the blanks:

21. The tragic hero is a great man who is not a paragon of virtue and .....
22. The fall from fortune to disaster of a completely virtuous person would provoke moral ..... at such an injustice.
23. The tragic hero is in effect compelled to sin because of his .....; he cannot escape it.
24. Tragic hero is a great man, usually of noble birth who stand in ..... and prosperity.
25. Aristotle thought of hamarti primarily as a failure to recognize someone, often a .....

State whether the following statements are true or false:

26. A wicked man falling from prosperity to misfortune may not a tragic hero as it may not inspire pity or fear.
27. The downfall of a villainous person is considered as an appropriate tragedy.
28. The fatal flaw is an essential element in the tragic hero, being the pivotal condition that causes his downfall.
29. The concept of hamartia as tragic flaw may not apply to all tragic figures.
30. Most critics understood hamartia to mean that the hero must have a tragic flaw.

### **1.3 Summary**

- Tragedy is an imitation of an action that is serious, complete, and of a certain magnitude.
- Every tragedy must have six elements which determine its quality, namely, plot, characters, diction, thought, spectacle, and melody.
- The end of the tragedy is catharsis (purgation, cleansing) of the tragic emotions of pity and fear.
- In catharsis, tragedy first raises (it does not create) the emotions of pity and fear, then purifies or purges them. Whether the purification takes place only within the action of the play, or the

## Notes

audience *also* undergoes a cathartic experience, is still hotly debated. One scholar, Gerald Else, says that tragedy purifies “whatever is ‘filthy’ or ‘polluted’ in the *pathos*, the tragic act”. Others say that the play arouses emotions of pity and fear in the *spectator* and then purifies them.

- Plot is the most important element of tragedy. The best tragic plot is single and complex, rather than double, but a complex plot includes reversal and recognition.
- A tragic hero is the main character in a tragedy. He is a great man who is neither a paragon of virtue and justice nor undergoes the change to misfortune through any real badness or wickedness but because of some mistake.
- The tragic hero is a character of noble stature and has greatness. This should be readily evident in the play. The character must occupy a “high” status position but must also embody nobility and virtue as part of his/her innate character.
- Though the tragic hero is pre-eminently great, he/she is not perfect. Otherwise, the rest of us--mere mortals--would be unable to identify with the tragic hero. We should see in him or her someone who is essentially like us, although perhaps elevated to a higher position in society.
- The hero’s downfall, therefore, is partially her/his own fault, the result of free choice, not of accident or villainy or some overriding, malignant fate. In fact, the tragedy is usually triggered by some error of judgment or some character flaw that contributes to the hero’s lack of perfection. This error of judgment or character flaw is known as hamartia and is usually translated as “tragic flaw” (although some scholars argue that this is a mistranslation). Often the character’s hamartia involves hubris (which is defined as a sort of arrogant pride or over-confidence).
- The hero’s misfortune is not wholly deserved. The punishment exceeds the crime.
- The fall is not pure loss. There is some increase in awareness, some gain in self-knowledge, some discovery on the part of the tragic hero.
- Though it arouses solemn emotion, tragedy does not leave its audience in a state of depression. Aristotle argues that one function of tragedy is to arouse the “unhealthy” emotions of pity and fear and through a catharsis (which comes from watching the tragic hero’s terrible fate) cleanse us of those emotions. It might be worth noting here that Greek drama was not considered “entertainment,” pure and simple; it had a communal function—to contribute to the good health of the community. This is why dramatic performances were a part of religious festivals and community celebrations.

## 1.4 Keywords

**Catharsis** : An emotional discharge that brings about a moral or spiritual renewal or welcome relief from tension and anxiety. According to Aristotle, catharsis is the marking feature and ultimate end of any tragic artistic work. He writes in his *Poetics* (c. 350 BCE): “Tragedy is an imitation of an action that is serious, complete, and of a certain magnitude; . . . through pity [*eleos*] and fear [*phobos*] effecting the proper purgation [*catharsis*] of these emotions.”

**Character** : A person who is responsible for the thoughts and actions within a story, poem, or other literature. Characters are extremely important because they are the medium through which a reader interacts with a piece of literature. Every character has his or her own personality, which a creative author uses to assist in forming the plot of a story or creating a mood. The different attitudes, mannerisms, and even appearances of characters can greatly influence the other major elements in a literary work, such as theme, setting, and tone.

- Denouement** : Literally meaning the action of untying, a denouement is the final outcome of the main complication in a play, as of a drama or novel. Usually the climax (the turning point or “crisis”) of the work has already occurred by the time the denouement occurs. It is sometimes referred to as the explanation or outcome of a drama that reveals all the secrets and misunderstandings connected to the plot.
- Diction** : It is the expression of the meaning in words which is proper and appropriate to the plot, characters, and end of the tragedy.
- Enhanced Language** : It refers to the fact that all plays at the time were written in poetic verse rather than language of everyday speech.
- Genre** : A type of literature. We say a poem, novel, story, or other literary work belongs to a particular genre if it shares at least a few conventions, or standard characteristics, with other works in that genre. For example, works in the Gothic genre often feature supernatural elements, attempts to horrify the reader, and dark, foreboding settings, particularly very old castles or mansions.
- Hamartia** : (from Greek hamartanein, “to err”), inherent defect or shortcoming in the hero of a tragedy, who is in other respects a superior being favoured by fortune or the flaw or error in character which leads to the downfall of the protagonist in a tragedy.
- Magnitude** : It refers to the appropriate length of a production.
- Melody** : Also known as song is the musical element of the chorus.
- Motif** : A recurring object, concept, or structure in a work of literature. A motif may also be two contrasting elements in a work, such as good and evil.
- Pathos** : The third element of plot, is a destructive or painful act.
- Peripeteia** : It is a condition when a situation seems to be developing in one direction, and then suddenly reverses to another .
- Point of view** : A way the events of a story are conveyed to the reader, it is the “vantage point” from which the narrative is passed from author to the reader. The point of view can vary from work to work.
- Protagonist** : A protagonist is considered to be the main character or lead figure in a novel, play, story, or poem. It may also be referred to as the “hero” of a work. Over a period of time the meaning of the term protagonist has changed. The word protagonist originated in ancient Greek drama and referred to the leader of a chorus. Soon the definition was changed to represent the first actor onstage. In some literature today it may be difficult to decide who is playing the role of the protagonist.
- Recognition** : Also means knowing again or knowing back or knowing throughout, is a change from ignorance to awareness of a bond of love or hate.
- Tragedy** : It depicts the downfall of a noble hero or heroine, usually through some combination of hubris, fate, and the will of the gods.

## 1.5 Review Questions

1. Define tragedy.
2. Mention any two qualities of Aristotle’s tragedy.
3. What is meant by tragic hero?
4. Write short notes on the following terms:
  - (a) Plot
  - (b) Character
  - (c) Melody

Notes

5. Write the two characters each of  
(a) Tragic hero (b) Character (c) Melody
6. Explain the relation among the concepts of hamartia, recognition and catharsis.
7. What are the six elements of tragedy as distinguished by Aristotle?
8. What are the inclusions of a complex plot?
9. Explain the term hamartia in terms of character of a tragic hero.
10. Write short notes on the following terms:  
(a) Consistency (b) Appropriateness (c) Peripeteia
11. Illustrate that catharsis is the end of a tragedy.
12. Elaborate the role of plot in a tragedy.

**Answers: Self Assessment**

- |                    |                    |                  |
|--------------------|--------------------|------------------|
| 1. (b)             | 2. (b)             | 3. (c)           |
| 4. (d)             | 5. (a)             | 6. complex       |
| 7. piteous         | 8. musical element | 9. katharsis     |
| 10. painful        | 11. True           | 12. False        |
| 13. True           | 14. False          | 15. True         |
| 16. (a)            | 17. (b)            | 18. (c)          |
| 19. (d)            | 20. (a)            | 21. justice      |
| 22. outrage        | 23. fatal flaw     | 24. great repute |
| 25. blood relative | 26. True           | 27. False        |
| 28. True           | 29. True           | 30. True         |

**1.6 Further Readings**



Books

- Banham, Martin, (ed.). 1998. *The Cambridge Guide to Theatre*. Cambridge University Press, UK.
- Barker, Howard. 1989. *Arguments for a Theatre*. 3rd ed. John Calder, London.
- Carlson, Marvin. 1993. *Theories of the Theatre: A Historical and Critical Survey from the Greeks to the Present*. Cornell University Press, Ithaca and London.
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Online links

- <http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/601884/tragedy>
- [http://larryavisbrown.homestead.com/Aristotle\\_Tragedy.html](http://larryavisbrown.homestead.com/Aristotle_Tragedy.html)
- <http://www.paredes.us/tragedy.html>
- <http://vccslitonline.cc.va.us/tragedy/aristotle.htm>
- [http://www.britaininprint.net/shakespeare/study\\_tools/tragic\\_hero.html](http://www.britaininprint.net/shakespeare/study_tools/tragic_hero.html)

## Unit 2: Literary Terms: Problem Play, Kitchen Sink Drama, and Angry Young Man

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### Objectives

After studying this unit, you will be able to:

- Explain the literary term problem play;
- Understands kitchen sink drama;
- Elaborate the meaning and origin of the term angry young man;
- Elucidate that the term kitchen sink drama was enacted for the dramas related to family tensions;
- Illustrate that angry young man were a new breed of intellectuals of working class or of lower middle-class origin.



## Notes

**Introduction**

Literary terms are words used in, and having specific meaning in discussion, review, criticism and classification of literary works such as stories, poetry, drama, and essays. In 19th century a wave of writing on social issues has emerged. The driving force behind this wave is the exploration of social problems, like alcoholism or prostitution. A new term – problem play was given to such writings. It deals with contentious social issues through debates between the characters on stage, who typically represent conflicting points of view within a realistic social context. In most cases tragedy springs from the individual's conflict with the laws, values, traditions, and representatives of society.

Another term kitchen sink drama was also enacted for the dramas related to family tensions with realistic conflict between husband and wife, parent and child, between siblings and with the wider community. The family may also pull together in unity against outer forces that range from the rent-collector to rival families.

Various British novelists and playwrights who emerged in the 1950s and expressed scorn and disaffection with the established sociopolitical order of their country. Their impatience and resentment were especially aroused by what they perceived as the hypocrisy and mediocrity of the upper and middle classes. They were a new breed of intellectuals who were mostly of working class or of lower middle-class origin. They shared an outspoken irreverence for the British class system and their writings frequently expressed raw anger and frustration as the postwar reforms failed to meet exalted aspirations for genuine change.

These words are used frequently for the purposes described above come to be recognized as literary terms. Here in this unit we will explain these terms – problem play, kitchen sink drama, and angry young man. More emphasis will be given on their critical analysis.

**2.1 Problem Play**

The problem play is a form of drama that emerged during the 19th century as part of the wider movement of realism in the arts. It deals with contentious social issues through debates between the characters on stage, who typically represent conflicting points of view within a realistic social context.

The critic F. S. Boas adapted the term to characterise certain plays by Shakespeare that he considered to have characteristics similar to Ibsen's 19th-century problem plays. Boas's term caught on, and *Measure for Measure*, *The Merchant of Venice*, *Timon of Athens*, *Troilus and Cressida*, and *All's Well That Ends Well* are still referred to as "Shakespeare's problem plays".



*Notes* The term problem play is used more broadly and retrospectively to describe pre-19th-century, tragicomic dramas that do not fit easily into the classical generic distinction between comedy and tragedy.

While social debates in drama were nothing new, the problem play of the 19th century was distinguished by its intent to confront the spectator with the dilemmas experienced by the characters. The earliest forms of the problem play are to be found in the work of French writers such as Alexandre Dumas, fils, who dealt with the subject of prostitution in *The Lady of the Camellias* (1852). Other French playwrights followed suit with dramas about a range of social issues, sometimes approaching the subject in a moralistic, sometimes in a sentimental manner.

The most important exponent of the problem play, however, was the Norwegian writer Henrik Ibsen, whose work combined penetrating characterisation with emphasis on typical social issues,

usually concentrated on the moral dilemmas of a central character. In a series of plays Ibsen addressed a range of problems, most notably the restriction of women's lives in *A Doll's House* (1879), sexually-transmitted disease in *Ghosts* (1882) and provincial greed in *An Enemy of the People* (1882). Ibsen's dramas proved immensely influential, spawning variants of the problem play in works by George Bernard Shaw and other later dramatists.



*Did u know?* The earliest form of problem play are found in the work of French writers such as Alexandre Dumas, who dealt with the subject of prostitution in *The Lady of the Camellias* in 1852.

### 2.1.1 Origin of Problem Play

The problem play (also called "thesis play," "discussion play," and "the comedy of ideas") is a comparatively recent form of drama. It originated in nineteenth-century France but was effectively practised and popularized by the Norwegian playwright Ibsen. It was introduced into England by Henry Arthur Jones and A. W. Pinero towards the end of the nineteenth century. G. B. Shaw and Galsworthy took the problem play to its height in the twentieth century. H. Granville Barker was the last notable practitioner of this dramatic type. Thus the problem play flourished in England in the period between the last years of the nineteenth century and the middle of the twentieth.

The concept of problem plays arose in the 19th century, as part of an overall movement known as realism. Prior to the 19th century, many people turned to art as a mode of escape which allowed them to look outside the world they lived in. In the 19th century, however, art began to take on a more introspective, realistic air, with a conscious focus on ongoing issues such as the social inequalities exacerbated by the Industrial Revolution.

Although the idea of creating problem plays was popularized in the 19th century, numerous works have been retroactively termed problem plays. Several Greek playwrights, for example, addressed ongoing social issues like war, in the case of *Lysistrata*, by Aristophanes. Several works of Shakespeare are also considered to be problem plays, like *Measure for Measure*, which has very Biblical themes of justice and truth, or *Troilus and Cressida*, which confronts viewers with infidelity, sexuality, and betrayal.

Many people regard Henrik Ibsen as a master of the problem play, along with authors like George Bernard Shaw and some 19th century French playwrights, many of whom were also authors. Problem plays can cover a wide variety of topics, ranging from women's rights to greed and inequality, and they can tell their stories in a wide variety of ways. For example, it is common to have a tragic protagonist who ultimately suffers as a result of his or her refusal to confront social problems.



*Notes* Essentially, problem plays are a form of commentary on the societies they are performed in. Because social problems are often universal across cultures and eras, many people find something to appreciate in problem plays, whether they are contemporary or not, and such plays tend to be popular in performance. They can also be difficult to watch, as many people find something of themselves in the characters, and struggle with this revelation.

Far from being plays with fatal flaws, as one might imagine from the name, problem plays are actually plays which are designed to confront viewers with modern social problems. Typically, the theme of the play is socially relevant, and the characters confront the issue in a variety of ways, presenting viewers with different approaches and opinions. After seeing a problem play, one is supposed to be filled with interest in the topic at hand, and hopefully inspired to enact social change.

## Notes

**2.1.2 Definition of Problem Play**

According to Henrik Ibsen, a problem play is a type of drama that presents a social issue in order to awaken the audience to it. These plays usually reject romantic plots in favor of holding up a mirror that reflects not simply what the audience wants to see but what the playwright sees in them. Often, a problem play will propose a solution to the problem that does not coincide with prevailing opinion. The term is also used to refer to certain Shakespeare plays that do not fit the categories of tragedy, comedy, or romance.

**2.1.3 Shakespearean Problem Play**

In Shakespeare studies, the term problem plays normally refers to three plays that William Shakespeare wrote between the late 1590s and the first years of the seventeenth century: *All's Well That Ends Well*, *Measure for Measure* and *Troilus and Cressida*, although some critics would extend the term to other plays, most commonly *The Winter's Tale*, *Timon of Athens*, and *The Merchant of Venice*. The term was coined by critic F. S. Boas in *Shakespeare and his Predecessors* (1896), who lists the first three plays and adds that "*Hamlet*, with its tragic close, is the connecting-link between the problem plays and the tragedies in the stricter sense." The term can refer to the subject matter of the play, or to a classification "problem" with the plays themselves.

The term derives from a type of drama that was popular at the time of Boas' writing. It was most associated with the Norwegian playwright Henrik Ibsen. In these problem plays the situation faced by the protagonist is put forward by the author as a representative instance of a contemporary social problem. For Boas this modern form of drama provided a useful model with which to study works by Shakespeare that had previously seemed to be uneasily situated between the comic and the tragic, though nominally the three plays identified by Boas are all comedies. For Boas, Shakespeare's "problem plays" set out to explore specific moral dilemmas and social problems through their central characters. Boas writes, throughout these plays we move along dim untrodden paths, and at the close our feeling is neither of simple joy nor pain; we are excited, fascinated, perplexed, for the issues raised preclude a completely satisfactory outcome, even when, as in *All's Well* and *Measure for Measure*, the complications are outwardly adjusted in the fifth act. In *Troilus and Cressida* and *Hamlet* no such partial settlement of difficulties takes place, and we are left to interpret their enigmas as best we may. Dramas so singular in theme and temper cannot be strictly called comedies or tragedies. We may therefore borrow a convenient phrase from the theatre of today and class them together as Shakespeare's problem plays.

The problem plays are characterised by their complex and ambiguous tone, which shifts violently between dark, psychological drama and more straightforward comic material; *All's Well* and *Measure for Measure* have happy endings that seem awkward, artificial and perfunctory, while *Troilus* ends with neither a tragic death, nor a happy ending. Boas used the term for plays in which the resolution of the themes and debates seems inadequate, and in the final act the deliverance of justice and completion one expects does not occur. Other definitions have followed, but all center on the fact that the plays cannot be easily assigned to the traditional categories of comedy or tragedy. The three plays are also referred to as the dark comedies, since despite ending on a generally happy note for the characters concerned, the darker, more profound issues raised cannot be fully resolved or ignored.



Task

Boas used the term problem play for plays in which the resolution of the themes and debates seems inadequate and in the final act the deliverance of justice and completion, one expects does not occur. Keeping in view this, explain the concept of problem play.

Many critics have suggested that this sequence of plays marked a psychological turning point for Shakespeare, during which he lost interest in the romantic comedies he had specialized in and turned towards the darker worlds of *Hamlet*, *Othello*, *King Lear* and *Macbeth*. The term has also been applied to other odd plays from various points in his career, as the term has always been somewhat vaguely defined and is not accepted by all critics.

## Self Assessment

Multiple Choice Questions:

1. The problem play is a form of drama that emerged during
  - (a) during 19th century as part of the wider movement of realism
  - (b) during 19th century emanating the rational purpose of the play
  - (c) during 19th century imitating a serious and complete action
  - (d) during 19th century as selected and sequenced tragic incidents.
2. While social debates in drama were nothing new, the problem play of the 19th century was distinguished by
  - (a) its content and are meant for stage play
  - (b) its intent to confront the spectator with the dilemmas experienced by the characters
  - (c) its character of comedy and not for performance
  - (d) its contents of social issues not intended for stage play.
3. The problem plays are characterised by their complex and ambiguous tone, which shifts violently between
  - (a) dark, psychological drama and more straightforward tragic material
  - (b) tragic, psychological drama and more straightforward comic material
  - (c) dark, psychological drama and more straightforward comic material
  - (d) comic, psychological drama and more straightforward tragic material.

Fill in the blanks:

4. According to Henrik Ibsen, a problem play is a type of drama that presents a ..... in order to awaken the audience to it.
5. The problem plays are characterised by their ..... and ambiguous tone.
6. The concept of problem plays arose in the 19th century, as part of an overall movement known as .....
7. The term derives from a type of drama that was popular at the time of .....

State whether the following statements are true or false:

8. The term problem play is also used to refer to certain Shakespeare plays that do not fit the categories of tragedy, comedy, or romance.
9. The problem plays usually reject romantic plots in favor of holding up a mirror that reflects simply what the audience wants to see and not what the playwright sees in them.

## Notes

10. The problem play is also called as thesis play, discussion play, and the comedy of ideas.

## 2.2 Kitchen Sink Drama

Kitchen sink drama also known as kitchen sink realism is a term coined to describe a British cultural movement which developed in the late 1950s and early 1960s in theatre, art, novels, film and television plays, whose 'heroes' usually could be described as angry young men. It used a style of social realism, which often depicted the domestic situations of working-class Britons living in rented accommodation and spending their off-hours drinking in grimy pubs, to explore social issues and political controversies.

The films, plays and novels employing this style are set frequently in poorer industrial areas in the North of England, and use the rough-hewn speaking accents and slang heard in those regions. The film *It Always Rains on Sunday* (1947) is a precursor of the genre, and the John Osborne play *Look Back in Anger* (1956) is thought of as the first of the idiom.



*Example:* The gritty love-triangle plot of *Look Back in Anger* is centred on a cramped, one-room flat in the English Midlands. The conventions of the genre have continued into the 2000s, finding expression in such television shows as *Coronation Street* and *Eastenders*.

### Antecedents and influences

The cultural movement was rooted in the ideals of social realism, an artistic movement, expressed in the visual and other realist arts, which depicts working class activities. Many artists who subscribed to social realism were painters with socialist political views. While the movement has some commonalities with Socialist Realism, the "official art" advocated by the governments of the Soviet Union and other Eastern Bloc countries, the two had several differences.

Unlike Socialist realism, social realism is not an official art produced by, or under the supervision of the government. The leading characters are often 'anti-heroes' rather than part of a class to be admired, as in Socialist realism. Typically, they are dissatisfied with their lives and the world – rather than being idealised workers who are part of a Socialist utopia (supposedly) in the process of creation. As such, social realism allows more space for the subjectivity of the author to be displayed.

Partly, social realism developed as a reaction against Romanticism, which promoted lofty concepts such as the "ineffable" beauty and truth of art and music, and even turned them into spiritual ideals. As such, social realism focused on the "ugly realities of contemporary life and sympathized with working-class people, particularly the poor."

The kitchen-sink drama is placed in an ordinary domestic setting and typically tells a relatively mundane family story. Family tensions often come to the fore with realistic conflict between husband and wife, parent and child, between siblings and with the wider community. The family may also pull together in unity against outer forces that range from the rent-collector to rival families. Examples of kitchen sink drama are *Look Back in Anger*, *A Taste of Honey*, and *The Glass Menagerie*.

### 2.2.1 Definition of the Term Kitchen Sink Drama

Genre of British drama which depicts the real and often sordid quality of family life. The plays are socially and politically motivated, seeking to focus attention on the destruction of moral values caused by consumerism and the break down of community. Writers include Arnold Wesker and John Osborne. Kitchen-sink drama is related to the kitchen-sink movement in art, a loose-knit group of British painters, active in the late 1940s and early 1950s.

## Discussion

## Notes

Kitchen sink dramas can be rather dismal and unrelentingly negative, so what is their value? Perhaps they may resonate with us as they remind us of our own humdrum lives. Perhaps they will wake us up and prod us to get out of the rut and see a wider world. May be they will make us grateful that we do not have to live in such social squalor.

Kitchen sink dramas may also framed as 'serious art', intending to impress rather than entertain. They may capture social setting for posterity and gain admiration in later days by students of history. They may even be a cathartic act by their authors, expunging the traumas of a deprived childhood.



*Notes* This is a genre in which the British seem to specialize. Americans prefer their soaps and dramas to be a bit less dismal. There was in particular a group of 'angry young men' in the 1960s UK playwright scene that specialised in such plays.

### 2.2.2 Origin of the Term Kitchen Sink Drama

The 1950's through the 1970's saw the rise of one of the most important movements in modern British theater: the Kitchen Sink drama. These types of plays had several characteristics that distinguished them as a break from the forms of theater before them. They can be compared against theatrical movements such as Avant Garde Theater, or the theater of the absurd, characterized by the plays of authors such as Samuel Beckett.

In UK, the term "kitchen sink" derived from an expressionist painting by John Bratby, which contained an image of a kitchen sink. Bratby painted several kitchen subjects, often turning practical utensils such as sieves and spoons into semi-abstract shapes. He also painted bathrooms, and made three paintings of toilets. The term was then applied to a then-emerging style of drama, which favoured a more realistic representation of working class life. The term was adopted in the United States to refer to the live television dramas of the 1950s by Paddy Chayefsky and others. As Chayefsky put it, this "drama of introspection" explored "the marvelous world of the ordinary."



*Did u know?* The critic David Sylvester wrote an article in 1954 about trends in recent English art, calling his article "The Kitchen Sink" in reference to Bratby's picture.

Before the 1950s, the United Kingdom's working class were often depicted stereotypically in Noel Coward's Drawing room comedies and British films. It was also seen as being in opposition to the 'well-made play', the kind which theatre critic Kenneth Tynan once denounced as being set in 'Loamshire', of dramatists like Terence Rattigan. The works of the 'kitchen sink' were created with the intention of changing all this. Their political views were initially labeled as radical, sometimes even anarchic.

John Osborne's play *Look Back In Anger* (1956) showed Angry Young Men not totally dissimilar to the film and theatre directors of the movement; the hero is a graduate, but working in a manual occupation. It dealt with social alienation, the claustrophobia and frustrations of a provincial life on low incomes.

The impact of this work inspired Arnold Wesker and Shelagh Delaney, among numerous others, to write plays of their own. The English Stage Company at the Royal Court Theatre, headed by George Devine, and Theatre Workshop organised by Joan Littlewood were particularly prominent in bringing these plays to the public's attention. Critic John Heilpern wrote that *Look Back in Anger* expressed such "immensity of feeling and class hatred" that it altered the course of English theater.

Notes

This was all part of the British New Wave—a transposition of the concurrent *Nouvelle Vague* film movement in France, some of whose works, such as *The 400 Blows* of 1959, also emphasized the lives of the urban proletariat. British filmmakers such as Tony Richardson and Lindsay Anderson channelled their vitriolic anger into film making. Confrontational films such as *Saturday Night and Sunday Morning* (1960) and *A Taste of Honey* (1962) were noteworthy films in the genre.

Later, as many of these writers and directors diversified, kitchen sink realism was taken up by television. The single play was then a staple of the medium, and *Armchair Theatre* (1956-68), produced by the ITV contractor ABC, *The Wednesday Play* (1964-70) and *Play for Today* (1970-84), both BBC series, contained many works of this kind. Jeremy Sandford's television play *Cathy Come Home* or instance, addressed the then-stigmatized issue of homelessness.

### 2.2.3 Characteristics of Kitchen Sink Drama

1. Perhaps the first, and most notable, characteristic of these Kitchen Sink dramas was the way in which they advanced a particular social message or ideology. This ideology was most often leftist. The settings were almost always working class. The previous trend in Victorian theater had been to depict the lives of the wealthy members of the ruling classes. These classes of people were often conservative in their politics and their ideologies. This was not the case for Kitchen Sink Theater. The Kitchen Sink drama sought, instead, to bring the real lives and social inequality of ordinary working class people to the stage. The lives of these people were caught between struggles of power, industry, politics, and social homogenization.
2. Another chief characteristic of the Kitchen Sink drama was the way in which its characters expressed their unvarnished emotion and dissatisfaction with the ruling class status quo. This can be seen clearly in the play considered to be the standard bearer of this Kitchen Sink genre: John Osborne's *Look Back in Anger*. In Osborne's play, Jimmy Porter plays the role of the Angry Young Man. He is angry and dissatisfied at a world that offers him no social opportunities and a dearth of emotion. He longs to live a "real life." He feels, however, that the trappings of working class domesticity keep him from reaching this better existence. His anger and rage are thus channeled towards those around him. Osborne's play is a study in how this pent up frustration and social anger can wreak havoc on the ordinary lives of the British people.

### 2.2.4 Criticism of Kitchen Sink Drama

Some critics have noted the irony in the term Kitchen Sink drama. The domestic world during this time was believed to be the domain of the feminine. Almost all of the major Kitchen Sink works which take place in the mid-twentieth century, however, are centered around a masculine point of view. These plays rarely centered around the emotions and tribulations of its women characters. The power dynamic between male and female often assumed to be masculine and is an unexamined critical component in many of these plays. Women are often assumed to serve the men of their household and, when conflicts do arise, it is often the man who is portrayed as the suffering protagonist. Women's suffering is always a result of the suffering of the male.

Though Kitchen Sink dramas gained notoriety in twentieth century British culture for their unflinching anger and criticism directed towards the social, political, and economic establishment, the plays were also significant for the way they depicted the most intimate aspects of domestic life. This was in stark contrast to popular classical or Victorian dramas and comedies which largely centered around the public lives of socially established characters. Before the Kitchen Sink dramas, commentators have noted that in the mid-twentieth century, British theater still produced plays as if it were the nineteenth century. The Kitchen Sink drama, in contrast, moved the action and emotion of the theater from depictions of the public space of people's lives into the most intimate of settings. The kitchen was considered to be the realm of the domestic, of females and servants, and Victorian drama often excluded any mention of it. Kitchen Sink dramas, however, turned this notion around

and made the kitchen the center of familial and social life. In the case of the Porter's attic apartment, the kitchen and living spaces were all one room on the stage. The boundaries of intimate domestic life and public life were blurred and created a realism not seen before in British theater.

Whether social or domestic, the Kitchen Sink drama changed the trajectory of British theater. Though many of the authors considered to have written in this genre such as Osborne, Arnold Wesker, Shelagh Delaney, and John Arden never claimed the title of Kitchen Sink dramatist, these authors's plays contained themes of common life that deeply resonated with British culture of the period. These types of plays signaled a resolute shift of British theater into the 20th century.

## 2.2.5 Examples of Kitchen Sink Drama

English social realist movies, kitchen sink dramas (a term derived from a painting by John Bratby), the angry young men—whatever you want to call them, you can't deny the power that a brace of plays, books and films produced in the 50s and 60s continues to exert to this very day. Certainly, the influence of movies like *A Taste of Honey*, *Saturday Night*, *Sunday Morning*, *A Kind of Loving*, *Look Back in Anger* and *Billy Liar* can be seen in everything from the music of Morrissey to the kind of dialogue you see in *Coronation Street*, Britain's longest running and arguably most popular soap.

### A Taste of Honey

Adapted from a landmark play written by 18 year old Shelagh Delaney, *A Taste of Honey* has stood the test of time better than many of its contemporaries. With a plotline that has been pillaged and plagiarised by just about every soap ever (young neglected girl finds love in the arms of a stranger and is left holding the baby), the movie is characterised by a clutch of terrific performances. Music fans may also care to note that *A Taste of Honey* featured the first solo work by then young Beatle, Paul McCartney, as well as a whole host of lines later stolen virtually wholesale by Morrissey.

### The Loneliness of the Long Distance Runner

Adapted from his own book by Alan Silitoe and directed by Tony Richardson, a key figure in the British Social Realist movement who would later go on to direct John Osborne's *Look Back in Anger* to great acclaim, *The Loneliness of the Long Distance Runner* is an exemplar in kitchen sink drama: there is a central sympathetic, albeit mildly ambiguous, central character played by Tom Courtenay; a bruising, uncomfortable home life; petty crime; redemption offered in the form of a love that doesn't work out; and, finally, cathartically, a conclusion that leaves our awkward protagonist where he feels he needs to be. Beautifully shot, *The Loneliness of the Long Distance Runner* is a stone classic.

### A Kind of Loving

As kitchen sink as kitchen sink drama ever got, *A Kind of Loving* follows the fortunes of Vic Brown (played in perfect dour Northern bloke fashion by Alan Bates) as he takes up with a typist Ingrid (played with a sort of wounded chagrin by June Ritchie) in the factory where he works as a draftsman. There is an unsatisfactory one-night stand that leaves him wanting no more to do with her—until he learns she is pregnant and 'does the right thing'. Which is where Ingrid's mother Mrs Rothwell (a vengeful and mean-spirited Thora Hird) comes in, piling misery on top of misery until Vic and Ingrid agree to make do with the eponymous 'kind of loving'. As with *Saturday Night Sunday Morning*, *A Kind of Loving* is all about reflecting life as it truly was—and a marvellous job it does.

### Up the Junction

Unlike the great majority of social realist movies (your *Taste of Honey*, *Saturday Night Sunday Morning*, *Billy Liar*, *A Kind of Loving* etc), *Up the Junction* is based in London—in Clapham to be



Notes

exact – and is as much about celebrating the time in which it was set (1968) as it was about saying, ah well, life can be a bit grim sometimes, can't it? Adapted from a groundbreaking novel by Nell Dunn, the film concerns a girl (played by Suzy Kendall) who gives up a privileged life in Chelsea to work in a factory in Battersea, where she takes up with a young Dennis Waterman and comes to learn just how hard life can be. Admirably unsentimental, *Up the Junction* is a rare gem, a film that has until recent years been languishing awaiting a reappraisal that the current reissue should go some way towards delivering.

**Billy Liar**

Billy Fisher is a dreamer. He has a whole country in his head, a place he goes to when grim reality proves too much. And reality, in *Billy Liar*, doesn't come much grimmer: there is his home life, where his mum and dad perpetually grind on about how it's time for him to grow up; there is work, in the funeral parlour under Leonard Rossiter's malevolent Mr Shadrach; and, for Billy, there are women – Rita, a shrewish blonde played by Gwendolyn Watts, Barbara, a mumsy housewife type played by Helen Fraser, and Liz played – in a career-defining performance – by Julie Christie. Pinging from one setback to another like a pinball, Billy's problems are all largely of his own making but that doesn't stop you siding with him every time he takes up his imaginary machine-gun.

**Self Assessment**

Multiple Choice Questions:

11. Kitchen sink drama also known as kitchen sink realism is a term coined to describe a
  - (a) British cultural movement
  - (b) British socialist realism
  - (c) British working class people
  - (d) British cultural movement against romanticism.
12. Social realism developed as a reaction against
  - (a) British working class
  - (b) romanticism
  - (c) British aristocratic class
  - (d) British family tensions.
13. Kitchen Sink dramas gained notoriety in twentieth century British culture for their unflinching anger and criticism directed towards
  - (a) the social establishment
  - (b) the political establishment
  - (c) the economic establishment
  - (d) the social, political, and economic establishment.

Fill in the blanks:

14. Kitchen sink drama also known as kitchen sink realism is a term coined to describe a British .....
15. The cultural movement was rooted in the ideals of ....., an artistic movement, expressed in the visual and other realist arts.
16. The domestic world during mid-twentieth century was believed to be the domain of the.....

17. The Kitchen Sink Drama were significant for the way they depicted the most intimate aspects of .....

State whether the following statements are true or false:

18. Whether social or domestic, the Kitchen Sink drama changed the trajectory of British theater.
19. The chief characteristic of the Kitchen Sink drama was the way in which its characters expressed their unvarnished emotion and dissatisfaction with the working class.
20. The kitchen-sink drama is placed in an ordinary domestic setting and typically tells a relatively mundane family story.

## 2.3 Angry Young Men

### 2.3.1 Meaning

The term Angry Young Man often applied to the British 'kitchen sink' playwrights of the 1950s and also anyone, particularly young men obviously, who rails against the establishment.

Angry Young Men were various British novelists and playwrights who emerged in the 1950s and expressed scorn and disaffection with the established sociopolitical order of their country. Their impatience and resentment were especially aroused by what they perceived as the hypocrisy and mediocrity of the upper and middle classes.

The Angry Young Men were a new breed of intellectuals who were mostly of working class or of lower middle-class origin. Some had been educated at the postwar red-brick universities at the state's expense, though a few were from Oxford. They shared an outspoken irreverence for the British class system, its traditional network of pedigreed families, and the elitist Oxford and Cambridge universities. They showed an equally uninhibited disdain for the drabness of the postwar welfare state, and their writings frequently expressed raw anger and frustration as the postwar reforms failed to meet exalted aspirations for genuine change.

### 2.3.1 Origin

The term was applied most notably to John Osborne and it was from comments about his *Look Back in Anger*, first performed in 1956, that the phrase became known. That wasn't its first use though. In 1941, the writer Rebecca West used it in her *Black Lamb and Grey Falcon: the Record of a Journey through Yugoslavia in 1937*.



*Example:* Their instinct is to brace themselves against any central authority as if it were their enemy. The angry young men run about shouting.

West wasn't using the phrase in the quite specific way it became used in the 1950s. She was just referring to young men who were angry.

John Osborne's play *Look Back in Anger* was first performed in 1956. The term doesn't appear in the play but it was in the reporting of it later that it became known. In October 1957 George Fearon, Press Officer for the Royal Court Theatre, wrote this piece for the *Daily Telegraph*: "I had read John Osborne's play. When I met the author I ventured to prophesy that his generation would praise his play while mine would, in general, dislike it... 'If this happens,' I told him, 'you would become known as the Angry Young Man.' In fact, we decided then and there that henceforth he was to be known as that."

## Notes

The angry young men were a group of mostly working and middle class British playwrights and novelists who became prominent in the 1950s. The group's leading members included John Osborne and Kingsley Amis. The phrase was originally coined by the Royal Court Theatre's press officer to promote John Osborne's *Look Back in Anger*. It is thought to be derived from the autobiography of Leslie Paul, founder of the Woodcraft Folk, whose *Angry Young Man* was published in 1951. Following the success of the Osborne play, the label was later applied by British newspapers to describe young British writers who were characterised by disillusionment with traditional English society. The term, always imprecise, began to have less meaning over the years as the writers to whom it was originally applied became more divergent, and many of them dismissed the label as useless.

The trend that was evident in John Wain's novel *Hurry on Down* (1953) and in *Lucky Jim* (1954) by Kingsley Amis was crystallized in 1956 in the play *Look Back in Anger*, which became the representative work of the movement. When the Royal Court Theatre's press agent described the play's 26-year-old author John Osborne as an "angry young man," the name was extended to all his contemporaries who expressed rage at the persistence of class distinctions, pride in their lower-class mannerisms, and dislike for anything highbrow or "phoney." When Sir Laurence Olivier played the leading role in Osborne's second play, *The Entertainer* (1957), the Angry Young Men were acknowledged as the dominant literary force of the decade.

Their novels and plays typically feature a rootless, lower-middle or working-class male protagonist who views society with scorn and sardonic humour and may have conflicts with authority but who is nevertheless preoccupied with the quest for upward mobility.

Among the other writers embraced in the term are the novelists John Braine (*Room at the Top*, 1957) and Alan Sillitoe (*Saturday Night and Sunday Morning*, 1958) and the playwrights Bernard Kops (*The Hamlet of Stepney Green*, 1956) and Arnold Wesker (*Chicken Soup with Barley*, 1958). Like that of the Beat movement in the United States, the impetus of the movement was exhausted in the early 1960s.



*Did u know?* On May 8, 1956, a new play called *Look Back in Anger* opened at the Royal Court Theatre in Sloane Square. The author was a young actor/stage manager named John Osborne, and the play was actually a blast of rage directed at his ex-wife, actress Pamela Lane, from whom he had separated rather painfully. Osborne was working-class; Pamela was middle-class, and they had married secretly; however, her parents had learned about the wedding and came all the same – an episode that forms the subject of one of the play's best-known tirades.

## Self Assessment

Multiple Choice Questions:

21. The angry young men were a group of mostly
  - (a) working and middle class British playwrights
  - (b) novelists who became prominent in the 1980s.
  - (c) middle and high class British playwrights
  - (d) high and aristocratic class British playwrights.
22. The term Angry Young Man often applied to
  - (a) anyone who rails for the establishment
  - (b) British 'kitchen sink' playwrights of the 1950s

- (c) the social class playwrights  
(d) the high class playwrights.
23. The Angry Young Men were a new breed of intellectuals who were
- (a) 1940s working class playwrights  
(b) mostly of lower middle-class or of high class origin  
(c) mostly of working class or of lower middle-class origin  
(d) mostly of working class or of lower high class origin.

Fill in the blanks:

24. Angry Young Men were various ..... and playwrights who emerged in the 1950s.  
25. The angry young men were a group of mostly ..... and middle class British playwrights.  
26. The term angry young men was applied most notably to .....  
27. John Osborne's play *Look Back in Anger* was first performed in .....

State whether the following statements are true or false:

28. The angry young men group's leading members included John Osborne and Kingsley Amis.  
29. Among the other writers embraced in the term angry young men are the novelists John Braine, Alan Sillitoe, and the playwrights George Bernard Shaw.  
30. The angry young men shared an outspoken irreverence for the British social system.

## **2.4 Summary**

- The problem play is a form of drama that emerged during the 19th century as part of the wider movement of realism in the arts.
- It deals with contentious social issues through debates between the characters on stage, who typically represent conflicting points of view within a realistic social context.
- The critic F. S. Boas adapted the term to characterise certain plays by Shakespeare that he considered to have characteristics similar to Ibsen's 19th-century problem plays.
- While social debates in drama were nothing new, the problem play of the 19th century was distinguished by its intent to confront the spectator with the dilemmas experienced by the characters.
- The most important exponent of the problem play, however, was the Norwegian writer Henrik Ibsen, whose work combined penetrating characterisation with emphasis on typical social issues, usually concentrated on the moral dilemmas of a central character.
- The earliest form of problem play are found in the work of French writers such as Alexandre Dumas, who dealt with the subject of prostitution in *The Lady of the Camellias* in 1852.
- The problem play (also called "thesis play," "discussion play," and "the comedy of ideas") is a comparatively recent form of drama. It originated in nineteenth-century France but was effectively practised and popularized by the Norwegian playwright Ibsen.
- The concept of problem plays arose in the 19th century, as part of an overall movement known as realism.
- According to Henrik Ibsen, a problem play is a type of drama that presents a social issue in order to awaken the audience to it.

Notes

- Kitchen sink drama also known as kitchen sink realism is a term coined to describe a British cultural movement which developed in the late 1950s and early 1960s in theatre, art, novels, film and television plays, whose 'heroes' usually could be described as angry young men.
- It used a style of social realism, which often depicted the domestic situations of working-class Britons living in rented accommodation and spending their off-hours drinking in grimy pubs, to explore social issues and political controversies.
- The films, plays and novels employing this style are set frequently in poorer industrial areas in the North of England
- The cultural movement was rooted in the ideals of social realism, an artistic movement, expressed in the visual and other realist arts, which depicts working class activities.
- Unlike Socialist realism, social realism is not an official art produced by, or under the supervision of the government. The leading characters are often 'anti-heroes' rather than part of a class to be admired, as in Socialist realism.
- The kitchen-sink drama is placed in an ordinary domestic setting and typically tells a relatively mundane family story.
- Kitchen sink drama is a genre of British drama which depicts the real and often sordid quality of family life. The plays are socially and politically motivated, seeking to focus attention on the destruction of moral values caused by consumerism and the break down of community.
- The 1950's through the 1970's saw the rise of one of the most important movements in modern British theater: the Kitchen Sink drama.
- The term Angry Young Man often applied to the British 'kitchen sink' playwrights of the 1950s and also anyone, particularly young men obviously, who rails against the establishment.
- Angry Young Men were various British novelists and playwrights who emerged in the 1950s and expressed scorn and disaffection with the established sociopolitical order of their country. Their impatience and resentment were especially aroused by what they perceived as the hypocrisy and mediocrity of the upper and middle classes.
- The Angry Young Men were a new breed of intellectuals who were mostly of working class or of lower middle-class origin. Some had been educated at the postwar red-brick universities at the state's expense, though a few were from Oxford.
- The term was applied most notably to John Osborne and it was from comments about his *Look Back in Anger*, first performed in 1956, that the phrase became known.

## 2.5 Keywords

- Criticism** : Literary criticism is a type of critical theory that interprets a text by focusing on recurring myths and archetypes.
- Character** : A person who is responsible for the thoughts and actions within a story, poem, or other literature. Characters are extremely important because they are the medium through which a reader interacts with a piece of literature. Every character has his or her own personality, which a creative author uses to assist in forming the plot of a story or creating a mood. The different attitudes, mannerisms, and even appearances of characters can greatly influence the other major elements in a literary work, such as theme, setting, and tone.
- Genre** : A type of literature. We say a poem, novel, story, or other literary work belongs to a particular genre if it shares at least a few conventions, or standard characteristics, with other works in that genre. For example, works in the Gothic genre often feature supernatural elements, attempts to horrify the reader, and dark, foreboding settings, particularly very old castles or mansions.

<b>Stories</b>	: A narrative, either true or fictitious, in prose or verse, designed to interest, amuse, or instruct the hearer or reader; tale.
<b>Poetry</b>	: The art of rhythmical composition, written or spoken, for exciting pleasure by beautiful, imaginative, or elevated thoughts.
<b>Drama</b>	: A composition in prose or verse presenting in dialogue or pantomime a story involving conflict or contrast of character, especially one intended to be acted on the stage; a play.
<b>Prostitution</b>	: The act or practice of engaging in sexual intercourse for money.
<b>Traditions</b>	: The handing down of statements, beliefs, legends, customs, information, etc., from generation to generation, especially by word of mouth or by practice.
<b>Sociopolitical</b>	: Pertaining to, or signifying the combination or interaction of social and political factors.
<b>Hypocrisy</b>	: A pretense of having a virtuous character, moral or religious beliefs or principles, etc., that one does not really possess.
<b>Intellectuals</b>	: A person possessing or showing intellect or mental capacity, especially to a high degree.
<b>Frustration</b>	: A feeling of dissatisfaction, often accompanied by anxiety or depression, resulting from unfulfilled needs or unresolved problems.

Notes

## 2.6 Review Questions

1. Define problem play.
2. Mention any two qualities of kitchen sink drama.
3. What is meant by angry young men?
4. Write short notes on the following terms:  
(a) Problem play                      (b) Kitchen sink drama                      (c) Angry young men
5. Write the two characters each of  
(a) Problem play                      (b) Kitchen sink drama                      (c) Angry young men
6. Explain the relation among the concepts of kitchen sink drama and family values.
7. What are the elements of problem play?
8. Give some examples of kitchen sink drama.
9. Illustrate that angry young men is a group of middle class playwrights.
10. Elaborate the role of kitchen sink drama in depicting the family values of British class.

### Answers: Self Assessment

- |                  |                       |                    |
|------------------|-----------------------|--------------------|
| 1. (a)           | 2. (b)                | 3. (c)             |
| 4. social issue  | 5. complex            | 6. realism         |
| 7. Boas' writing | 8. True               | 9. False           |
| 10. True         | 11. (a)               | 12. (b)            |
| 13. (c)          | 14. cultural movement | 15. social realism |
| 16. feminine     | 17. domestic life     | 18. True           |

Notes

- |             |                  |                       |
|-------------|------------------|-----------------------|
| 19. False   | 20. True         | 21. (a)               |
| 22. (b)     | 23. (c)          | 24. British novelists |
| 25. working | 26. John Osborne | 27. 1956              |
| 28. True    | 29. False        | 30. False             |

## 2.7 Further Readings



*Books*

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- Robert W. Corrigan. 2000. *Classical Tragedy – Greek and Roman: Eight Plays with Critical Essays*. Applause Books.



*Online links*

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- <http://neoenglishsystem.blogspot.com/2010/12/problem-play-in-english-literature.html>

## Unit 3: Literary Terms: Comedy of Manners, Absurd Theatre, and Existentialism

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### Objectives

After studying this unit, you will be able to:

- Elaborate the literary term comedy of manners;
- Explain the term absurd theatre;
- Understands the techniques, characters, language and plot in absurd theatre;



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- Enumerate the literary term existentialism, its concepts and themes used in it;
- Explain the origin and meaning of the literary terms comedy of manners, absurd theatre, and existentialisms.

## Introduction

During the Restoration period in English history, literature thrived as the monarchy patronised the literateurs. Restoration period is the reestablishment of the monarchy on the accession (1660) of Charles II after the collapse of the Commonwealth and the Protectorate. In English literature the Restoration period is commonly viewed as extending from 1660 to 1700. The writings of this period were lighter, defter, and more vivacious in tone. In the event of such circumstances, literary terms – comedy of manners, absurd theatre and existentialism are set in the world of the upper class.

Comedies of manners were usually written by sophisticated authors for members of their own social class, and they typically are concerned with social usage and the ability or inability of certain characters to meet social standards, which are often exacting but morally trivial. It involves the conventions or manners of artificial and sophisticated society. Its notable exponents include William Congreve, Oliver Goldsmith, Richard Brinsley Sheridan, Oscar Wilde, and Noel Coward.

The Theatre of the Absurd is 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 *Myth of Sisyphus* written by the French philosopher Albert Camus in 1942. He first defined the human situation as basically meaningless and absurd.

Existentialism has its roots in the writings of several nineteenth and twentieth century philosophers. The philosophy is by most standards a very loose conglomeration of perspectives, aesthetics, and approaches to dealing with the world and its inherent difficulties. There are therefore countless permutations and flavors of existentialism which cross disciplinary lines and modes of inquiry. In the most general sense, existentialism deals with the recurring problem of finding meaning within existence.

This unit deals with these terms in detail. More emphasis is given on the origin, concept, theories and critical analysis of these terms.

## 3.1 Comedy of Manners

The comedy of manners is a genre of comedy, play/television/film that flourished on the English stage during the Restoration period. Plays of this type are typically set in the world of the upper class, and ridicule the pretensions of those who consider themselves socially superior, deflating them with satire. With witty dialogue and cleverly constructed scenarios, comedies of manners comment on the standards and mores of society and explore the relationships of the sexes. Marriage is a frequent subject. Typically, there is little depth of characterization; instead, the playwrights used stock character types – the fool, the schemer, the hypocrite, the jealous husband, the interfering old parents – and constructed plots with rapid twists in events, often precipitated by miscommunications.

### **3.1.1 Origin of the Comedy of Manners**

The roots of the comedy of manners can be traced back to Moliere's seventeenth-century French comedies and to the "humours" comedy of Ben Jonson; indeed, certain characteristics can be found as far back in time as ancient Greek plays. The propounder of the comedy of manners in British literature were George Etherege (1635-1692), William Wycherley (1640-1716), John Vanbrugh (1664-1726), William Congreve (1670-1729), and George Farquhar (1678-1707). Etherege's *The Comical*

*Revenge; or, Love in a Tub* (1664) and *She Would If She Could* (1668) are often seen as inaugurating the genre of the comedy of manners, and his characters, including Sir Frederick Frollick and Sir Fopling Flutter, were favorites with audiences and became standard character types.

The Restoration period heralded an exciting and boisterous period in theatre after theatres were closed by the Puritans and Commonwealth government between 1642 and 1660 (due to Cromwell). Charles II was a fun loving, woman loving and theatre loving king and it was under his reign that drama flourished once more. Audiences were predominately from aristocratic backgrounds. The Restoration period was noted for its comedies although more serious drama was produced by writers such as John Dryden and Thomas Otway.

The comedy of manners can be witnessed in ancient form in the plays of Menander from the New Comedy of the Greek theatre in the fourth century BC and then in the work of Roman writers Plautus and Terence.

The English comedy of manners began with Shakespeare's *Much Ado About Nothing* and then can be seen at its best in Restoration comedy and in the work of Wilde, Shaw and Pinero. In more recent times, work by Coward, Orton and Rattigan encaptured the elements whilst in more modern day drama, Neil Simon and Edward Albee provide worthwhile examples.

### 3.1.2 Definition of the Comedy of Manners

The comedy of manners is a style of comedy that reflects the life, ideals and manners of upper class society in a way that is essentially true to its traditions and philosophy. The players must strive to maintain the mask of social artifice whilst revealing to the audience what lies behind such manners. In other words it is to make: *The real artificial and the artificial real*. It is characterised by a flamboyant display of witty, blunt sexual dialogue, boudoir intrigues, sensual innuendos, and rakish behaviour. The following conventions governed the comedy of manners in restoration period:

- Constancy in love (especially in marriage) was boring;
- Sex should be tempting;
- Love thrived on variety;
- Genuine sexual feelings had no place on stage;
- Characters clashed with each other in situations of conflicting love entanglements and intrigues
- Country life was considered boring;
- Clergy and professional men were treated with indifference or condescension.



*Did u know?* In modern day sit-coms The Comedy of Manners include the English shows, *Keeping up Appearance*, *Steptoe and Son*, *Fawlty Towers* (Sybil), *Birds of a Feather* (Dorian), *Men Behaving Badly*, *Ab Fab*. From the US notable shows include *The Odd Couple* and *Frasier*.

A *Comedy of Manners* is a play concerned with satirizing society's manners. A manner is the method in which everyday duties are performed, conditions of society, or a way of speaking. It implies a polite and well-bred behavior. Comedy of Manners is known as high comedy because it involves a sophisticated wit and talent in the writing of the script. In this sense it is both intellectual and very much the opposite of slapstick, which requires little skill with the script and is largely a physical form of comedy. In a Comedy of Manners however, there is often minimal physical action and the play may involve heavy use of dialogue.

A Comedy of Manners usually employs an equal amount of both satire and farce resulting in a hilarious send-up of a particular social group. Most plays of the genre were carefully constructed

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to satirize the very people watching them. This was usually the middle to upper classes in society, who were normally the only people wealthy enough in the first place to afford going to the theatre to see a comedy of manners. The playwrights knew this in advance and fully intended to create characters that were sending up the daily customs of those in the audience watching the play. The satire tended to focus on their materialistic nature, never-ending desire to gossip and hypocritical existence.

### 3.1.3 Development of the Comedy of Manners

Newell W. Sawyer has traced the development of the genre and relates it to the changes occurring in society at large. The comedy of manners was first developed in the new comedy of the Ancient Greek playwright Menander. His style, elaborate plots, and stock characters were imitated by the Roman playwrights Plautus and Terence, whose comedies were widely known and copied during the Renaissance. The best-known comedies of manners, however, may well be those of the French playwright Moliere, who satirized the hypocrisy and pretension of the ancient regime in such plays as *L'École des femmes* (*The School for Wives*, 1662), *Le Misanthrope* (*The Misanthrope*, 1666), and most famously *Tartuffe* (1664).

In England, William Shakespeare's *Much Ado about Nothing* might be considered the first comedy of manners, but the genre really flourished during the Restoration period. Restoration comedy, which was influenced by Ben Johnson's comedy of humours, made fun of affected wit and acquired follies of the time. The masterpieces of the genre were the plays of William Wycherley (*The Country Wife*, 1675) and William Congreve (*The Way of the World*, 1700). In the late 18th century Oliver Goldsmith (*She Stoops to Conquer*, 1773) and Richard Brinsley Sheridan (*The Rivals*, 1775; *The School for Scandal*, 1777) revived the form.

The tradition of elaborate, artificial plotting and epigrammatic dialogue was carried on by the Irish playwright Oscar Wilde in *Lady Windermere's Fan* (1892) and *The Importance of Being Earnest* (1895). In the 20th century, the comedy of manners reappeared in the plays of the British dramatists Noel Coward (*Hay Fever*, 1925) and Somerset Maugham and the novels of P.G. Wodehouse, as well as various British sitcoms.

Modern television sitcoms that use the mockumentary format, such as *The Office* and *Modern Family*, use slightly altered forms of the comedy of manners to represent the daily and work lives of the average people.



Notes The Carry On films are direct descendant of the comedy of manners style.

### 3.1.4 Examples of Comedy of Manners

1. Congreve is considered by many critics to have been the greatest wit of the dramatists writing in this vein; with his dialogue brilliant and his style perfect. The *Old Bachelour* (1693) was a great popular success, as was *Love for Love* (1695). His last comedy, *The Way of the World* (1700), is now considered his masterpiece but was not successful upon its premier. Although marriage is at its center, the preoccupation is with contracts and negotiation of terms, not passionate love.
2. Vanbrugh's *The Relapse: Or Virtue in Danger* (1696) has two plots, only slightly connected, and includes seduction, infidelity, impersonation, and the attempt to gain another's fortune.
3. Farquhar's comedies were written at the end of the Restoration period and serve as a transition to later comedies, noticeable in their greater sensitivity to characters as individuals rather than

types. *The Recruiting Officer* (1706) makes fun of some of the foibles of military heroes, while *The Beaux' Stratagem* (1707) includes a remarkably modern-style divorce, due to the couple failing to make each other happy.

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*Notes* Vanbrugh's masterwork, *The Provoked Wife* (1697), became notorious because it was given special attention by critic Jeremy Collier in his case against the immorality of the stage. In keeping with the plays of the time, the names of the characters often reflect their type: Heartfree, Sir John Brute, Constant, Lady Fanciful, and Colonel Bully.

4. Richard Brinsley Sheridan and Oliver Goldsmith while wrote in the latter portion of the eighteenth century, after the Restoration period, and after sentimental comedy had become the dominant comedic form, they composed plays that revived and renewed the comedy of manners genre. Sheridan's *The School for Scandal* (1777) and Goldsmith's *She Stoops to Conquer* (1773), in particular, received popular and critical acclaim when first produced, and have been continuously staged to the present day.

## Self Assessment

Multiple Choice Questions:

- The comedy of manners is a genre of comedy, play/television/film that flourished on the English stage during
  - Restoration period
  - industrial revolution
  - class transformation
  - 18th century.
- Plays of the type of comedy of manners are typically set in the world of the
  - lower middle class
  - upper middle class
  - high class
  - both lower middle and high class.
- The roots of the comedy of manners can be traced back to
  - ancient Greek plays
  - 16th century Shakespearean plays
  - Moliere's seventeenth-century French comedies
  - 19th century playwrights.

Fill in the blanks:

- With witty dialogue and cleverly ....., comedies of manners comment on the standards and mores of society.
- Congreve is considered by many critics to have been the greatest wit of the dramatists writing of .....
- Newell W. Sawyer has traced the ..... of the comedy of manners and relates it to the changes occurring in society at large.

Notes

7. In England, William Shakespeare's ..... might be considered the first comedy of manners.

State whether the following statements are true or false:

8. Marriage is a frequent subject in the plays of comedy of manners.  
9. In the 20th century, the comedy of manners reappeared in the plays of the British dramatists Noel Coward.  
10. A Comedy of Manners is a play concerned with satirizing society's manners.

## **3.2 Absurd Theatre**

### **3.2.1 Introduction and Definition**

The Theatre of the Absurd (French: Théâtre de l'Absurde) is a theatrical style originating in France in the late 1940's. It relies heavily on existential philosophy, and is a category for plays of absurdist fiction, written by a number of playwrights from the late 1940s to the 1960s, as well as the theatre which has evolved from their work. It expresses the belief that, in a godless universe, human existence has no meaning or purpose and therefore all communication breaks down. Logical construction and argument give way to irrational and illogical speech and as its ultimate conclusion, silence.

Often Absurdist works utilise theatrical conventions such as – but not limited to – Mime, Gibberish, Heightened Language, Codified Language and Vignette. The pieces generally lack conflict, and involve high levels of contrast, alienation, and irony, for example, a funeral scene performed by actors happily, or a birthday scene performed somberly.

A form of drama that emphasizes the absurdity of human existence by employing disjointed, repetitious, and meaningless dialogue, purposeless and confusing situations, and plots that lack realistic or logical development.

The Absurd Theatre is a designation for particular plays that expressed the belief that, in a godless universe, human existence has no meaning or purpose and therefore all communication breaks down. Logical construction and argument gives way to irrational and illogical speech and to its ultimate conclusion, silence.

### **3.2.2 Origin of the Absurd Theatre**

Martin Esslin coined the term "*Theatre of the Absurd*" in his 1960 essay and, later, book of the same name. He related these plays based on a broad theme of the Absurd, similar to the way Albert Camus uses the term in his 1942 essay, "*The Myth of Sisyphus*". The Absurd in these plays takes the form of man's reaction to a world apparently without meaning, and/or man as a puppet controlled or menaced by invisible outside forces. Though the term is applied to a wide range of plays, some characteristics coincide in many of the plays: broad comedy, often similar to Vaudeville, mixed with horrific or tragic images; characters caught in hopeless situations forced to do repetitive or meaningless actions; dialogue full of clichés, wordplay, and nonsense; plots that are cyclical or absurdly expansive; either a parody or dismissal of realism and the concept of the "well-made play".



*Notes* Playwrights commonly associated with the Theatre of the Absurd include Samuel Beckett, Eugene Ionesco, Jean Genet, Harold Pinter, Tom Stoppard, Friedrich Dürrenmatt, Fernando Arrabal, Edward Albee, Boris Vian, and Jean Tardieu.



*Did u know?* A British scholar Martin Esslin, in his critical study of Samuel Beckett and French playwrights Eugène Ionesco, Jean Genet and Arthur Adamov, first used the term “Theatre of the Absurd”.

Notes

### 3.2.3 Techniques in Absurd Theatre

As an experimental form of theatre, Theatre of the Absurd employs techniques borrowed from earlier innovators. Writers and techniques frequently mentioned in relation to the Theatre of the Absurd include the 19th-century nonsense poets, such as Lewis Carroll or Edward Lear; Polish playwright Stanislaw Ignacy Witkiewicz; the Russians Daniil Kharms, Nikolai Erdman, Mikhail Volokhov and others; Bertolt Brecht’s distancing techniques in his “Epic theatre”; and the “dream plays” of August Strindberg.

### 3.2.4 Theatrical Features in Absurd Theatre

Plays within this group are absurd in that they focus not on logical acts, realistic occurrences, or traditional character development; they, instead, focus on human beings trapped in an incomprehensible world subject to any occurrence, no matter how illogical. The theme of incomprehensibility is coupled with the inadequacy of language to form meaningful human connections. According to Martin Esslin, Absurdism is “the inevitable devaluation of ideals, purity, and purpose” Absurdist drama asks its viewer to “draw his own conclusions, make his own errors”. Though Theatre of the Absurd may be seen as nonsense, they have something to say and can be understood”. Esslin makes a distinction between the dictionary definition of absurd (“out of harmony” in the musical sense) and drama’s understanding of the Absurd: “Absurd is that which is devoid of purpose.... Cut off from his religious, metaphysical, and transcendental roots, man is lost; all his actions become senseless, absurd, and useless”.

#### Characters

The characters in Absurdist drama are lost and floating in an incomprehensible universe and they abandon rational devices and discursive thought because these approaches are inadequate. Characters are frequently stereotypical, archetypal, or flat character types as in *Commedia dell’arte*.

The more complex characters are in crisis because the world around them is incomprehensible. Many of Pinter’s plays, for example, feature characters trapped in an enclosed space menaced by some force the character can’t understand. Pinter’s first play was *The Room*—in which the main character, Rose, is menaced by Riley who invades her safe space though the actual source of menace remains a mystery—and this theme of characters in a safe space menaced by an outside force is repeated in many of his later works. In Friedrich Dürrenmatt’s *The Visit* the main character, Alfred, is menaced by Claire Zachanassian; Claire, richest woman in the world with a decaying body and multiple husbands throughout the play, has guaranteed a payout for anyone in the town willing to kill Alfred. Characters in Absurdist drama may also face the chaos of a world that science and logic have abandoned. Ionesco’s recurring character Berenger, for example, faces a killer without motivation in *The Killer*, and Berenger’s logical arguments fail to convince the killer that killing is wrong. In *Rhinoceros*, Berenger remains the only human on Earth who hasn’t turned into a rhinoceros and must decide whether or not to conform. Characters may find themselves trapped in a routine or, in a metafictional conceit, trapped in a story; the titular characters in Tom Stoppard’s *Rosencrantz & Guildenstern Are Dead*, for example, find themselves in a story (Hamlet) in which the outcome has already been written.

#### Language

Despite its reputation for nonsense language, much of the dialogue in Absurdist plays is naturalistic. The moments when characters resort to nonsense language or clichés—when words appear to have

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lost their denotative function, thus creating misunderstanding among the characters, making the Theatre of the Absurd distinctive. Language frequently gains a certain phonetic, rhythmical, almost musical quality, opening up a wide range of often comedic playfulness. Jean Tardieu, for example, in the series of short pieces *Theatre de Chambre* arranged the language as one arranges music. Distinctively Absurdist language will range from meaningless clichés to Vaudeville-style word play to meaningless nonsense. *The Bald Soprano*, for example, was inspired by a language book in which characters would exchange empty clichés that never ultimately amounted to true communication or true connection. Likewise, the characters in *The Bald Soprano*—like many other Absurdist characters—go through routine dialogue full of clichés without actually communicating anything substantive or making a human connection. In other cases, the dialogue is purposefully elliptical; the language of Absurdist Theater becomes secondary to the poetry of the concrete and objectified images of the stage. Many of Beckett’s plays devalue language for the sake of the striking tableau. Harold Pinter—famous for his “Pinter pause”—presents more subtly elliptical dialogue; often the primary things characters should address is replaced by ellipsis or dashes. Much of the dialogue in Absurdist drama reflects this kind of evasiveness and inability to make a connection. When language that is apparently nonsensical appears, it also demonstrates this disconnection.

## Plot

Plots can consist of the absurd repetition of cliché and routine, as in *Godot* or *The Bald Soprano*. Often there is a menacing outside force that remains a mystery.



Example: In *The Birthday Party*, Goldberg and McCann confront Stanley, torture him with absurd questions, and drag him off at the end, but it is never revealed why. In later Pinter plays, such as *The Caretaker* and *The Homecoming*, the menace is no longer entering from the outside but exists within the confined space.



Notes Traditional plot structures are rarely a consideration in the theatre of the absurd.

Absence, emptiness, nothingness, and unresolved mysteries are central features in many Absurdist plots: for example, in *The Chairs* an old couple welcomes a large number of guests to their home, but these guests are invisible so all we see is empty chairs, a representation of their absence. Likewise, the action of *Godot* is centered around the absence of a man named Godot, for whom the characters perpetually wait. In many of Beckett’s later plays, most features are stripped away and what’s left is a minimalistic tableau: a woman walking slowly back and forth in *Footfalls*, for example, or in *Breath* only a junk heap on stage and the sounds of breathing.

The plot may also revolve around an unexplained metamorphosis, a supernatural change, or a shift in the laws of natural science. For example, in Ionesco’s *Amedee*, or *How to Get Rid of It*, a couple must deal with a corpse that is steadily growing larger and larger; Ionesco never fully reveals the identity of the corpse, how this person died, or why it’s continually growing, but the corpse ultimately—and, again, without explanation—floats away. In Jean Tardieu’s “*The Keyhole*” a lover watches a woman through a keyhole as she removes her clothes and then her flesh.

Plots are frequently cyclical: for example, *Endgame* begins where the play ended—at the beginning of the play, Clov says, “Finished, it’s finished, nearly finished, it must be nearly finished”—and themes of cycle, routine, and repetition are explored throughout.

## Self Assessment

Notes

Multiple Choice Questions:

11. The Theatre of the Absurd is a theatrical style originating in
  - (a) France
  - (b) Italy
  - (c) Greeks
  - (d) Britains.
12. Often Absurdist works utilise theatrical conventions such as
  - (a) Mime, Gibberish
  - (b) Mime, Gibberish, Heightened Language, Codified Language and Vignette
  - (c) Codified Language and Vignette
  - (d) Gibberish, Heightened Language, .
13. Absurd theatre is a form of drama that emphasizes the absurdity of human existence by employing
  - (a) logical arguments
  - (b) illogical arguments
  - (c) disjointed, repetitious, and meaningless dialogue
  - (d) irrational and logical speech.

Fill in the blanks:

14. The Absurd Theatre is a designation for particular plays that expressed the belief that, in a godless universe, ..... has no meaning.
15. Theatre of the Absurd employs techniques borrowed from earlier .....
16. Absence, emptiness, nothingness, and ..... are central features in many Absurdist plots.
17. Absurdist drama reflects this kind of ..... and inability to make a connection.

State whether the following statements are true or false:

18. Martin Esslin coined the term Theatre of the Absurd in his 1960 essay.
19. Absurdist Plays are absurd in that they focus not on illogical acts, unrealistic occurrences, or traditional character development.
20. The characters in Absurdist drama are lost and floating.

## 3.3 Existentialism

### 3.3.1 Introduction and Definition

Existentialism is the philosophy that places emphasis on individual existence, freedom, and choice. It stresses the individuality of existence, and the problems that arise with said existence. Because there is so much diversity in the philosophy of existentialism, a concrete definition is hard to put



Notes

down. Certain themes are common to almost all existential writing, which helps mark the writing as such. The term itself suggests one major theme, the stress on concrete, individual existence, and on subjectivity, individual freedom and choice.



*Notes* The idea of the highest ethical good can be found in philosophy since the days of Socrates and Plato. It was generally held that this good was the same for everybody; as a person approached this moral perfection, she/he became morally like the next person approaching this moral perfection.



*Example:* Kierkegaard wrote that it was up to the individual to find his or her own moral perfection and his or her own way there. "I must find the truth that is the truth for me. . .the idea for which I can live or die." It means one must choose one's own way, make their own individual paths without the aid of universal ideas or guidance.

Subjectivity is also important to Existentialism. Passionate choices and actions are important. Personal experience and acting on one's own convictions are essential to arriving at personal truths. A better understanding of a situation is gained when one is in the middle then watching from the sidelines with a detached view.



*Caution* Systematic reasoning and acting is avoided at all costs in Existential thought.

Choice is also very important. One learns from making choices and committing to those choices. According to Existentialists, humanity's primary distinction is its freedom to choose. There is no fixed instinct that drives humanity to do what it does. Choice is inescapable; not making choices is choosing to not choose.



*Notes* Kierkegaard and Nietzsche are noted for their random, unsystematic way of exploring their ideas, using many different literary styles to express themselves.

Existentialism is the term applied to the work of a number of philosophers since the 19th century who, despite large differences in their positions, generally focused on the condition of human existence, and an individual's emotions, actions, responsibilities, and thoughts, or the meaning or purpose of life. Existential philosophers often focused more on what they believed was subjective, such as beliefs and religion, or human states, feelings, and emotions, such as freedom, pain, guilt, and regret, as opposed to analyzing objective knowledge, language, or science.

### Definition of Existentialism

Existentialism, a difficult term to define and an odd movement. Odd because most thinkers whom the intellectual world categorizes as existentialists are people who deny they are that. And, two of the people whom nearly everyone points to as important to the movement,



*Caution* Soren Kierkegaard and Fredrich Nietzsche, are both too early in time to be in the group of existentialists, thus are usually called "precursors," but studied and treated as members of the group.

However, certain characteristics that most existentialists seem to share may help understand this term. There are certain questions that everyone must deal with—death, the meaning of human existence, the place of God in human existence, the meaning of value, interpersonal relationship, the place of self-reflective conscious knowledge of one's self in existing. By and large existentialists believe that life is very difficult and that it doesn't have an "objective" or universally known value, but that the individual must create value by affirming it and living it, not by talking about it.

However, in general the Existentialists recognize that human knowledge is limited and fallible. One can be deeply committed to truth and investigation and simply fail to find adequate truth, or get it wrong. Further, unlike science, which can keep searching for generations for an answer and afford to just say: We don't know yet, in the everyday world, we often simply must do or not do. The moment of decision comes. For the Existentialist one faces these moments of decision with a sense of fallibility and seriousness of purpose, and then risks. Sartre is extremely harsh on this point. At one place he says: When I choose I choose for the whole world. What can this mean? Sartre may mean by it that first of all when I choose and act, I change the world in some iota. This note gets written or it doesn't. That has ramifications. It commits one to say what one is saying. It may change someone who may be affected by these remarks. Others can be too if they hear or read them. And so on. The ripples of actions are like ripples on the sea, they go on and on and on.

### 3.3.2 Origin of Existentialism

The term "existentialism" seems to have been coined by the French philosopher Gabriel Marcel in the mid-1940s and adopted by Jean-Paul Sartre who, on October 29, 1945, discussed his own existentialist position in a lecture to the Club Maintenant in Paris. The lecture was published as *L'existentialisme est un humanisme*, a short book which did much to popularize existentialist thought.

The label has been applied retrospectively to other philosophers for whom existence and, in particular, human existence were key philosophical topics. Martin Heidegger had made human existence (Dasein) the focus of his work since the 1920s, and Karl Jaspers had called his philosophy "Existenzphilosophie" in the 1930s. Both Heidegger and Jaspers had been influenced by Soren Kierkegaard. He was the first to explicitly make existential questions a primary focus in his philosophy. In retrospect, other writers have also implicitly discussed existentialist themes throughout the history of philosophy and literature. Due to the exposure of existentialist themes over the decades, when society was officially introduced to existentialism, the term became quite popular almost immediately.

### 3.3.3 History of Existentialism

The early 19th century Danish philosopher Soren Kierkegaard is regarded as the father of existentialism. He maintained that the individual is solely responsible for giving his or her own life meaning and for living that life passionately and sincerely, in spite of many existential obstacles and distractions including despair, angst, absurdity, alienation, and boredom. Another notable proponent of existentialism was Friedrich Nietzsche.

In the 20th century, the German philosopher Martin Heidegger influenced other existentialist philosophers such as Jean-Paul Sartre, Simone de Beauvoir and Albert Camus. Fyodor Dostoyevsky and Franz Kafka also described existentialist themes in their literary works. Although there are some common tendencies amongst "existentialist" thinkers, there are major differences and disagreements among them; not all of them accept the validity of the term as applied to their own work.

### 3.3.4 Concepts of Existentialism

#### Focus on Concrete Existence

Existentialist thinkers focus on the question of concrete human existence and the conditions of this existence rather than hypothesizing a human essence, stressing that the human essence is determined

## Notes

through life choices. However, even though the concrete individual existence must have priority in existentialism, certain conditions are commonly held to be “endemic” to human existence.

What these conditions are is better understood in light of the meaning of the word “existence,” which comes from the Latin “existere,” meaning “to stand out.” Humans exist in a state of distance from the world that they nonetheless remain in the midst of. This distance is what enables humans to project meaning into the disinterested world of in-itself. This projected meaning remains fragile, constantly facing breakdown for any reason – from a tragedy to a particularly insightful moment. In such a breakdown, humans are put face to face with the naked meaninglessness of the world, and the results can be devastating.



*Notes* In respect to the devastating awareness of meaninglessness, Albert Camus claimed that “there is only one truly serious philosophical problem, and that is suicide” in his *The Myth of Sisyphus*.

### Existence Precedes Essence

A central proposition of existentialism is that existence precedes essence, which means that the actual life of the individual is what constitutes what could be called his or her “essence” instead of there being a predetermined essence that defines what it is to be a human. Thus, the human being – through their own consciousness – creates their own values and determines a meaning to their life. Although it was Sartre who explicitly coined the phrase, similar notions can be found in the thought of many existentialist philosophers, from Mulla Sadra, to Kierkegaard, to Heidegger.

It is often claimed in this context that a person defines him or herself, which is often perceived as stating that they can “wish” to be something – anything, a bird, for instance – and then be it. According to most existentialist philosophers, however, this would constitute an inauthentic existence. Instead, the phrase should be taken to say that the person is (1) defined only insofar as he or she acts and (2) that he or she is responsible for his or her actions. For example, someone who acts cruelly towards other people is, by that act, defined as a cruel person. Furthermore, by this action of cruelty such persons are themselves responsible for their new identity (a cruel person). This is as opposed to their genes, or ‘human nature’, bearing the blame.

As Sartre puts it in his *Existentialism is Humanism*: “man first of all exists, encounters himself, surges up in the world – and defines himself afterwards.” Of course, the more positive, therapeutic aspect of this is also implied: A person can choose to act in a different way, and to be a good person instead of a cruel person. Here it is also clear that since humans can choose to be either cruel or good, they are, in fact, neither of these things essentially.

### 3.3.5 Themes in Existentialism

Some themes are found throughout the existentialism as mentioned below:

- (1) **Freedom:** The existentialist concept of freedom is often misunderstood as a sort of *liberum arbitrium* where almost anything is possible and where values are inconsequential to choice and action. This interpretation of the concept is often related to the insistence on the absurdity of the world and the assumption that there exist no relevant or absolutely good or bad values. However, that there are no values to be found in the world in-itself does not mean that there are no values: We are usually brought up with certain values, and even though we cannot justify them ultimately, they will be “our” values.



*Example:* In Kierkegaard’s *Judge Vilhelm’s* account in *Either/Or*, making choices without allowing one’s values to confer differing values to the alternatives, is, in fact, choosing not to

make a choice – to flip a coin, as it were, and to leave everything to chance. This is considered to be a refusal to live in the consequence of one’s freedom; an inauthentic existence.

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- (2) **Angst:** Also called as fear or dread, anxiety or even anguish is a term that is common to many existentialism thinkers. It is not directed at any specific object, it’s just there. Anguish is the dread of the nothingness of human existence, the meaningless of it. According to Kierkegaard, anguish is the underlying, all-pervasive, universal condition of man’s existence. It is generally held to be a negative feeling arising from the experience of human freedom and responsibility. The archetypal example is the experience one has when standing on a cliff where one not only fears falling off it, but also dreads the possibility of throwing oneself off. In this experience that “nothing is holding me back”, one senses the lack of anything that predetermines one to either throw oneself off or to stand still, and one experiences one’s own freedom.



Notes One of the most extensive treatments of the existentialist notion of Angst is found in Soren Kierkegaard’s monumental work *Begrebet Angest*.

- (3) **Absurdity:** “Granted I am my own existence, but this existence is absurd.” Everybody is here, everybody exists, but there is no reason as to why. We’re just here, that’s it, no excuses. The notion of the absurd contains the idea that there is no meaning to be found in the world beyond what meaning we give to it. This meaninglessness also encompasses the amorality or “unfairness” of the world. This contrasts with “karmic” ways of thinking in which “bad things don’t happen to good people”; to the world, metaphorically speaking, there is no such thing as a good person or a bad thing; what happens, and it may just as well happen to a “good” person as to a “bad” person.

Because of the world’s absurdity, at any point in time, anything can happen to anyone, and a tragic event could plummet someone into direct confrontation with the Absurd. The notion of the absurd has been prominent in literature throughout history.



Notes Soren Kierkegaard, Franz Kafka, Fyodor Dostoyevsky and many of the literary works of Jean-Paul Sartre and Albert Camus contain descriptions of people who encounter the absurdity of the world. Albert Camus studied the issue of “the absurd” in his essay *The Myth of Sisyphus*.

- (4) **Nothingness:** There is nothing that structures this world’s existence, man’s existence, or the existence of my computer. There is no essence that these things are drawn from, since existence precedes essence, then that means there is nothing.
- (5) **Death:** The theme of death follows along with the theme of nothingness. Death is always there, there is no escaping from it. To think of death, as everybody does sooner or later, causes anxiety. The only sure way to end anxiety once and for all is death.
- (6) **Facticity:** A concept defined by Sartre in *Being and Nothingness* as that “*in-itself*” of which humans are in the mode of not being. This can be more easily understood when considering it in relation to the temporal dimension of past: One’s past is what one is in the sense that it co-constitutes oneself. However, to say that one is only one’s past would be to ignore a large part of reality (the present and the future), while saying that one’s past is only what one was would entirely detach it from them now. A denial of one’s own concrete past constitutes an inauthentic lifestyle, and the same goes for all other kinds of facticity (having a body (e.g. one that doesn’t allow a person to run faster than the speed of sound), identity, values, etc.).

## Notes

Facticity is both a limitation and a condition of freedom. It is a limitation in that a large part of one's facticity consists of things one couldn't have chosen (birthplace, etc.), but a condition in the sense that one's values most likely will depend on it.



*Example:* Consider two men, one of whom has no memory of his past and the other remembers everything. They have both committed many crimes, but the first man, knowing nothing about this, leads a rather normal life while the second man, feeling trapped by his own past, continues a life of crime, blaming his own past for "trapping" him in this life. There is nothing essential about his committing crimes, but he ascribes this meaning to his past.

- (7) **Authenticity:** The theme of authentic existence is common to many existentialist thinkers. It is often taken to mean that one has to "find oneself" and then live in accordance with this self. A common misunderstanding is that the self is something one can find if one looks hard enough, that one's true self is substantial.

What is meant by authenticity is that in acting, one should act as oneself, not as One acts or as one's genes or any other essence require. The authentic act is one that is in accordance with one's freedom. Of course, as a condition of freedom is facticity, this includes one's facticity, but not to the degree that this facticity can in any way determine one's choices. The role of facticity in relation to authenticity involves letting one's actual values come into play when one makes a choice, so that one also takes responsibility for the act instead of choosing either-or without allowing the options to have different values.

- (8) **Inauthenticity:** The inauthentic is the denial to live in accordance with one's freedom. This can take many forms, from pretending choices are meaningless or random, through convincing oneself that some form of determinism is true, to a sort of "mimicry" where one acts as "One should." How "One" should act is often determined by an image one has of how one such as oneself acts. This image usually corresponds to some sort of social norm, but this does not mean that all acting in accordance with social norms is inauthentic: The main point is the attitude one takes to one's own freedom and responsibility, and the extent to which one acts in accordance with this freedom.

- (9) **Despair:** Commonly defined as a loss of hope, Despair in existentialism is more specifically related to the reaction to a breakdown in one or more of the defining qualities of one's self or identity. If a person is invested in being a particular thing, such as a bus driver or an upstanding citizen, and then finds their being-thing compromised, they would normally be found in state of despair – a hopeless state. For example, an athlete who loses his legs in an accident may despair if he has nothing else to fall back on, nothing on which to rely for his identity. He finds himself unable to be that which defined his being.

What sets the existentialist notion of despair is that existentialist despair is a state one is in even when they aren't overtly in despair. So long as a person's identity depends on qualities that can crumble, they are considered to be in perpetual despair. And as there is, in Sartrean terms, no human essence found in conventional reality on which to constitute the individual's sense of identity, despair is a universal human condition. As Kierkegaard defines it in his *Either/Or*: "Any life-view with a condition outside it is despair." In other words, it is possible to be in despair without despairing.

- (10) **Reason:** Emphasizing action, freedom, and decision as fundamental, existentialists oppose themselves to rationalism and positivism. That is, they argue against definitions of human beings as primarily rational. Rather, existentialists look at where people find meaning. Existentialism asserts that people actually make decisions based on the meaning to them rather than rationally. The rejection of reason as the source of meaning is a common theme of

existentialist thought, as is the focus on the feelings of anxiety and dread that we feel in the face of our own radical freedom and our awareness of death. Kierkegaard saw strong rationality as a mechanism humans use to counter their existential anxiety, their fear of being in the world: "If I can believe that I am rational and everyone else is rational then I have nothing to fear and no reason to feel anxious about being free." However, Kierkegaard advocated rationality as means to interact with the objective world (e.g. in the natural sciences), but when it comes to existential problems, reason is insufficient: "Human reason has boundaries".

Notes



*Notes* Existentialism is sometimes referred to as a continental philosophy, referring to the continental part of Europe, as opposed to that practiced in Britain at that time, which was called analytic philosophy, and mostly dealt with analyzing language.

## Self Assessment

Multiple Choice Questions:

21. Existentialism is the philosophy that places emphasis on
  - (a) individual existence, freedom, and choice
  - (b) individual existence and freedom
  - (c) freedom and choice
  - (d) individual existence and choice.
22. Which of the following is important to existentialism?
  - (a) Subjectivity and actions
  - (b) Subjectivity, passionate choice and actions
  - (c) Subjectivity and passionate choice
  - (d) Passionate choice and actions.
23. A central proposition of existentialism is that
  - (a) essence preceded existence
  - (b) existence precedes self
  - (c) existence precedes essence
  - (d) existence precedes both self and essence.

Fill in the blanks:

24. The theme of ..... is common to many existentialist thinkers.
25. Despair in ..... is more specifically related to the reaction to a breakdown in one or more of the defining qualities of one's self.
26. The inauthentic is the denial to live in accordance with one's.....
27. The theme of death follows along with the theme of .....

State whether the following statements are true or false:

28. Humans exist in a state of distance from the world that they nonetheless remain in the midst of.

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29. The theme of authentic existence is rare to many existentialist thinkers.
30. Anguish is the dread of the presence of human existence.

### 3.4 Summary

- The comedy of manners is a genre of comedy, play/television/film that flourished on the English stage during the Restoration period.
- Plays of comedy of manners are typically set in the world of the upper class, and ridicule the pretensions of those who consider themselves socially superior, deflating them with satire.
- The roots of the comedy of manners can be traced back to Moliere's seventeenth-century French comedies and to the "humours" comedy of Ben Johnson; indeed, certain characteristics can be found as far back in time as ancient Greek plays.
- The propounder of the comedy of manners in British literature were George Etherege (1635-1692), William Wycherley (1640-1716), John Vanbrugh (1664-1726), William Congreve (1670-1729), and George Farquhar (1678-1707).
- The Restoration period heralded an exciting and boisterous period in theatre after theatres were closed by the Puritans and Commonwealth government between 1642 and 1660.
- The comedy of manners can be witnessed in ancient form in the plays of Menander from the New Comedy of the Greek theatre in the fourth century BC and then in the work of Roman writers Plautus and Terence.
- The comedy of manners is a style of comedy that reflects the life, ideals and manners of upper class society in a way that is essentially true to its traditions and philosophy.
- Newell W. Sawyer has traced the development of the genre and relates it to the changes occurring in society at large. The comedy of manners was first developed in the new comedy of the Ancient Greek playwright Menander.
- The Theatre of the Absurd is a theatrical style originating in France in the late 1940's. It relies heavily on existential philosophy, and is a category for plays of absurdist fiction, written by a number of playwrights from the late 1940s to the 1960s, as well as the theatre which has evolved from their work.
- The Theatre of the Absurd expresses the belief that, in a godless universe, human existence has no meaning or purpose and therefore all communication breaks down.
- Often Absurdist works utilise theatrical conventions such as – but not limited to – Mime, Gibberish, Heightened Language, Codified Language and Vignette.
- Absurdist drama is a form of drama that emphasizes the absurdity of human existence by employing disjointed, repetitious, and meaningless dialogue, purposeless and confusing situations, and plots that lack realistic or logical development.
- The Absurd Theatre is a designation for particular plays that expressed the belief that, in a godless universe, human existence has no meaning or purpose and therefore all communication breaks down.
- Martin Esslin coined the term "*Theatre of the Absurd*" in his 1960 essay and, later, book of the same name.
- As an experimental form of theatre, Theatre of the Absurd employs techniques borrowed from earlier innovators. Writers and techniques frequently mentioned in relation to the Theatre of the Absurd include the 19th-century nonsense poets, such as Lewis Carroll or Edward Lear; Polish playwright Stanislaw Ignacy Witkiewicz; the Russians Daniil Kharms, Nikolai

Erdman, Mikhail Volokhov and others; Bertolt Brecht's distancing techniques in his "Epic theatre"; and the "dream plays" of August Strindberg.

- Existentialism is the philosophy that places emphasis on individual existence, freedom, and choice. It stresses the individuality of existence, and the problems that arise with said existence.
- Subjectivity is also important to Existentialism. Passionate choices and actions are important. Personal experience and acting on one's own convictions are essential to arriving at personal truths.
- Existentialism is the term applied to the work of a number of philosophers since the 19th century who, despite large differences in their positions, generally focused on the condition of human existence, and an individual's emotions, actions, responsibilities, and thoughts, or the meaning or purpose of life.
- Existentialism, a difficult term to define and an odd movement. Odd because most thinkers whom the intellectual world categorizes as existentialists are people who deny they are that. And, two of the people whom nearly everyone points to as important to the movement,
- The term "existentialism" seems to have been coined by the French philosopher Gabriel Marcel in the mid-1940s and adopted by Jean-Paul Sartre who, on October 29, 1945, discussed his own existentialist position in a lecture to the Club Maintenant in Paris.
- The early 19th century Danish philosopher Soren Kierkegaard is regarded as the father of existentialism.
- Existentialist thinkers focus on the question of concrete human existence and the conditions of this existence rather than hypothesizing a human essence, stressing that the human essence is determined through life choices.

### 3.5 Keywords

<i>Seduction</i>	: An act or instance of seducing, especially sexually.
<i>Infidelity</i>	: Lack of religious faith, especially Christian faith. Or a breach of trust or a disloyal act; transgression.
<i>Impersonation</i>	: To assume the character or appearance of; pretend to be. Or to mimic the voice, mannerisms, etc.
<i>Comedy</i>	: A play, movie, etc., of light and humorous character with a happy or cheerful ending; a dramatic work in which the central motif is the triumph over adverse circumstance, resulting in a successful or happy conclusion.
<i>Tragicomedy</i>	: A dramatic or other literary composition combining elements of both tragedy and comedy.
<i>Essence</i>	: The basic, real, and invariable nature of a thing or its significant individual feature or feature.
<i>Freedom</i>	: The state of being free or at liberty rather than in confinement or under physical restraint.
<i>Guilt</i>	: The fact or state of having committed an offense, crime, violation, or wrong, especially against moral or penal law; culpability.
<i>Despair</i>	: Someone or something that causes hopelessness.
<i>Alienation</i>	: The state of being withdrawn or isolated from the objective world, as through indifference or disaffection.



**Notes**                      **Reason**                      : A statement presented in justification or explanation of a belief or action. Or the mental powers concerned with forming conclusions, judgments, or inferences.

### **3.6 Review Questions**

1. Define comedy of manners.
2. Mention any two qualities of absurd theatre.
3. What is meant by Existentialism?
4. Write short notes on the following terms:  
(a) Comedy of manners      (b) Absurd theatre                      (c) Existentialism
5. Write the two characters each of  
(a) Nothingness                      (b) Death                      (c) Angst
6. Explain the themes in existentialism.
7. What are the theatrical features in Absurd theatre?
8. What are the characteristics of comedy of manners?
9. Illustrate the development of comedy of manners.
10. Elaborate origin of absurd theatre.

### **Answers: Self Assessment**

- |                                  |                      |                         |
|----------------------------------|----------------------|-------------------------|
| 1. (a)                           | 2. (b)               | 3. (c)                  |
| 4. constructed scenarios         | 5. comedy of manners | 6. development          |
| 7. <i>Much Ado about Nothing</i> | 8. True              | 9. True                 |
| 10. True                         | 11. (a)              | 12. (b)                 |
| 13. (c)                          | 14. human existence  | 15. innovators          |
| 16. unresolved mysteries         | 17. evasiveness      | 18. True                |
| 19. False                        | 20. True             | 21. (a)                 |
| 22. (b)                          | 23. (c)              | 24. authentic existence |
| 25. existentialism               | 26. freedom          | 27. nothingness         |
| 28. True                         | 29. False            | 30. False               |

### **3.7 Further Readings**



**Books**

- Crawford, J. 1984. *Acting in Person and in Style*. Dubuque, IA: Wm. C. Brown Publishers.
- Martin Esslin. 1965. *Introduction to Penguin Plays – Absurd Drama*. Penguin.
- M. Esslin. 1962. *The Theatre of the Absurd*.
- Bennett, Michael Y. 2011. *Reassessing the Theatre of the Absurd: Camus, Beckett, Ionesco, Genet, and Pinter*. Palgrave Macmillan, New York.
- Earnshaw, Steven. 2007. *Existentialism: A Guide for the Perplexed*. Continuum, UK.



Online links

<http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/362554/comedy-of-manners>

<http://dlibrary.acu.edu.au/staffhome/trsanders/units/comedy/comedyofmanners.html>

<http://www.samuel-beckett.net/AbsurdEsslin.html>

[http://www.wisedude.com/art\\_music/theatre\\_absurd.htm](http://www.wisedude.com/art_music/theatre_absurd.htm)

[http://classiclit.about.com/od/existentialism/Existentialism\\_Literary\\_Theory.htm](http://classiclit.about.com/od/existentialism/Existentialism_Literary_Theory.htm)

<http://www.webster.edu/~corbetre/philosophy/existentialism/whatis.html>

## Unit 4: Shakespeare: Macbeth – Introduction to the Author and the Text

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### Objectives

After studying this unit, you will be able to:

- Elaborate the fact that Shakespeare was a celebrated writer;
- Explain that Shakespeare was a successful actor;
- Understand the text of Macbeth;
- Enumerate the the sources of the text of Macbeth.

### Introduction

The *Tragedy of Macbeth* (commonly called Macbeth) is a play by William Shakespeare about a regicide and its aftermath. It is Shakespeare's shortest tragedy and is believed to have been written sometime between 1603 and 1607. The earliest account of a performance of what was probably Shakespeare's play is April 1611, when Simon Forman recorded seeing such a play at the Globe Theatre. It was first published in the Folio of 1623, possibly from a prompt book for a specific performance.

Shakespeare's source for the tragedy are the accounts of King Macbeth of Scotland, Macduff, and Duncan in Holinshed's *Chronicles* (1587), a history of England, Scotland and Ireland familiar to Shakespeare and his contemporaries. However, the story of Macbeth as told by Shakespeare bears

little relation to real events in Scottish history, as Macbeth was an admired and able monarch.

Notes

In the backstage world of theatre, some believe that the play is cursed, and will not mention its title aloud, referring to it instead as “the Scottish play”. Over the course of many centuries, the play has attracted some of the greatest actors in the roles of Macbeth and Lady Macbeth. It has been adapted to film, television, opera, novels, comic books, and other media.

Here in this unit a detail lifesketech of Shakespeare and brief introduction of the text of the Macbeth have been given. The literary works of Shakespeare and the sources of the text of Macbeth has also been dealt with in this unit.

## **4.1 Shakespeare: Introduction**

William Shakespeare scarcely needs an introduction. Born in 1564, he was an English playwright, poet, actor, favorite dramatist of queens and kings, inventor of words, master of drama, and arguably the most famous writer of all time. In his 36 plays and 154 sonnets, he left behind the evidence of a brilliant mind, a wicked sense of humor, a deep sensitivity to human emotions, and a rich classical education. We know all about his work. But what do we know about the man?

In the 400 or so years since Shakespeare died on his 52nd birthday in 1616, there have been plenty of rumors about the Bard and the personal experiences that may have inspired his works. Some of these explanations may well be true; others are pure falsehood. We don’t know much about Shakespeare’s inner world—he left behind no tell-all confessionals—but we know a lot about his outer world, and that is perhaps even more important to understanding his genius. Shakespeare came of age during the Renaissance, a flourishing of arts, culture, and thought that took place in the middle of the last millennium. All across Western Europe, ideas on everything from God to the nature of the universe were shifting. In England, it was a time of great literary and dramatic achievement, encouraged by Queen Elizabeth I and her successor James I. It was the perfect environment for a gifted dramatist to thrive.

Shakespeare changed the English language, inventing dozens of new words we still use today. His plays have been translated into more than 80 other tongues and performed in dozens of countries, where diverse audiences all still recognize the timeless elements of the human experience as depicted by a young Englishman 400 years ago. And if you are somehow one of the last two people in the literate world who know Shakespeare but still fail to see the Bard’s relevance? Well, then, a pox on both your houses.

Shakespeare lived during a time when the middle class was expanding in both size and wealth, allowing its members more freedoms and luxuries as well as a louder voice in local government. He took advantage of the change in times and in 1557 became a member of the Stratford Council. This event marked the beginning of his illustrious political career. By 1561, he was elected one of the town’s fourteen burgesses and subsequently served successively as constable, one of two chamberlains, and alderman. In these positions, he administered borough property and revenues. In 1567, he became bailiff—the highest elected office in Stratford and the equivalent of a modern-day mayor.

In the mid-sixteenth century, William Shakespeare’s father, John Shakespeare, moved to the idyllic town of Stratford-upon-Avon. There, he became a successful landowner, moneylender, glove-maker, and dealer of wool and agricultural goods.

### **4.1.1 Biography**

William Shakespeare was born in Stratford-upon-Avon to John and Mary Arden Shakespeare. The fourth of the Shakespeares’ eight children shares a birthday with St. George, the patron saint of England. Though April 23, 1564 is commonly accepted as Shakespeare’s birthday, it’s impossible to know the exact date he was born. It was 450 years ago, people. Just go with it.

## Notes

**Childhood**

Town records indicate that William Shakespeare was John and Mary's third child. His birth is unregistered, but legend pins it on April 23, 1564, possibly because it is known that April 23 is the day on which he died 52 years later. In any event, his baptism was registered with the town on April 26, 1564. Little is known about his childhood, although it is generally assumed that he attended the local grammar school, the King's New School. The school was staffed by Oxford-educated faculty who taught the students mathematics, natural sciences, logic, Christian ethics, and classical language and literature.



*Did u know?* Who begat whom, again?

**Father:** John Shakespeare (1530-1601)

**Mother:** Mary Arden Shakespeare (?-1608)

**Sister:** Joan Shakespeare (1558)

**Sister:** Margaret Shakespeare (1562-1563)

**Brother:** Gilbert Shakespeare (1556-1612)

**Sister:** Joan Shakespeare Hart (1569-1646)

**Sister:** Anne Shakespeare (1571-1579)

**Brother:** Richard Shakespeare (1574-1613)

**Brother:** Edmund Shakespeare (1580-1607)

**Wife:** Anne Hathaway (1556-1623)

**Daughter:** Susanna Shakespeare Hall (1583-1649)

**Son:** Hamnet Shakespeare (1585-1596)

**Daughter:** Judith Shakespeare Quiney (1585-1662)

**Education**

In 1569, Shakespeare enters King's New School, an excellent grammar school in Stratford attended by the sons of civil servants like his father. Boys typically enter the school around the age of five, but since no official records survive it's impossible to know exactly when Shakespeare starts his education. Other than the dates of his marriage and children's births, little is known about Shakespeare's life before 1592—a period known as the Lost Years.

Shakespeare did not attend university, which was not at all unusual for the time. University education was reserved for wealthy sons of the elite, mostly those who wanted to become clergymen. The numerous classical and literary references in Shakespeare's plays are a testament; however, to the excellent education he received in grammar school.



*Notes* The most impressive fact about Shakespeare is the wealth of general knowledge exhibited in his works rather than his formal education.

**Marriage**

In 1582, at the age of eighteen, William Shakespeare married the twenty-six-year-old Anne Hathaway. Their first daughter, Susanna, was baptized only six months later—a fact that has given rise to speculation concerning the circumstances surrounding their marriage. In 1585, Anne bore twins, baptized Hamnet and Judith Shakespeare. Hamnet died at the age of eleven, by which time Shakespeare was already a successful playwright.



*Did u know?* Around 1589, Shakespeare wrote his supposed first play, Henry VI, Part 1. Sometime between his marriage and writing this play, he moved to London, where he pursued a career as a playwright and actor.

## Death

## Notes

William Shakespeare lived until 1616. His wife Anna died in 1623 at the age of 67. He was buried in the chancel of his church at Stratford.

### 4.1.2 Work Experience

Although many records of Shakespeare's life as a citizen of Stratford—including marriage and birth certificates—have survived, very little information exists about his life as a young playwright. Legend characterizes Shakespeare as a roguish young man who was once forced to flee London under suspect circumstances perhaps having to do with his love life. But the little written information we have of his early years does not necessarily confirm this characterization.

In any case, young Will was not an immediate and universal success. The earliest written record of Shakespeare's life in London comes from a statement by the rival playwright Robert Greene. In his *Groatsworth of Witte* (1592), Greene calls Shakespeare an "upstart crow... [who] supposes he is as well able to bombast out a blank verse as the best of you." While this is hardly high praise, it does suggest that Shakespeare rattled the London theatrical hierarchy even at the beginning of his career. It is natural, in retrospect, to attribute Greene's complaint to jealousy of Shakespeare's ability, but of course we can't be sure.

### Playwright

In 1594, Shakespeare returned to the theater and became a charter member of the Lord Chamberlain's Men—a group of actors who changed their name to the King's Men when James I ascended to the throne. By 1598, he was the "principal comedian" for the troupe; by 1603, he was "principal tragedian." He remained associated with the organization until his death. Although acting and playwriting were not considered noble professions at the time, successful and prosperous actors were relatively well respected. Shakespeare's success left him with a fair amount of money, which he invested in Stratford real estate. In 1597, he purchased the second largest house in Stratford—the New Place—for his parents. In 1596, Shakespeare applied for a coat of arms for his family, in effect making himself a gentleman. Consequently, his daughters made "good matches," marrying wealthy men.

Shakespeare had been working as an actor and dramatist for a few years already when theaters and other public spaces were ordered closed in January 1593 due to an outbreak of the plague. Shakespeare used the break to compose two long poems, "*Venus and Adonis*," based on Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, and "*The Rape of Lucrece*," based on a Roman myth. The two poems were celebrated for their beauty and lyricism. Both were dedicated to Henry Wriothesley, the Third Earl of Southampton, whom Shakespeare was fortunate enough to have adopted as a patron. "The love I dedicate to your Lordship is without end," Shakespeare wrote in the dedication to "*The Rape of Lucrece*." "The warrant I have of your honorable disposition, not the worth of my untutored lines, makes it assured of acceptance. What I have done is yours; what I have to do is yours; being part in all I have, devoted yours."<sup>4</sup> Scholars also believe that Southampton is the "fair youth" mentioned in Shakespeare's sonnets, an unnamed male character of whom Shakespeare sometimes seems to speak erotically.

In 1594, the theaters reopened. Shakespeare joined the Lord Chamberlain's Men, a theater troupe sponsored by a baron named Henry Carey, a.k.a. Lord Chamberlain. Shakespeare also purchased shares in the company, making him a manager and co-owner. Over the next few years, with Shakespeare as chief dramatist, the Chamberlain's Men became one of the most popular theater companies in London and a favorite of Queen Elizabeth. We don't have a precise timeline for when Shakespeare wrote each of his plays; in most cases, the best evidence comes from outside references to the productions. In 1598, the critic Francis Meres penned a review in which he wrote that

## Notes

“Mellifluous and honey-tongued Shakespeare” was “the most excellent in both kinds [comedy and tragedy] for the stage.” The plays listed in Meres’s review – indicating that Shakespeare had already completed them – included *Romeo and Juliet*, *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, *The Merchant of Venice*, *Love’s Labors Lost*, *Richard II*, and *Titus Andronicus*. “I say that the Muses would speak with Shakespeare’s fine filed phrase,” Meres concluded, “if they would speak English.” In 1599, Shakespeare enjoyed what seems to have been an explosively productive year, with *Much Ado About Nothing*, *As You Like It*, *Julius Caesar*, and *The Merry Wives of Windsor* all likely penned in that one year.

## Globe Theatre

The Chamberlain’s Men performed for the queen in the royal court, but they also performed for the middle-class public. In 1599 the company finished construction on the Globe Theatre, a wooden, open-air playhouse designed with the stage in the center and the audience arranged in tiers that rose up from the polygon-shaped floor. Many of Shakespeare’s best-known plays premiered here, including *Hamlet*, *Othello*, *King Lear*, *Macbeth*, and *Twelfth Night*.

## Literary Works

With *Richard III*, *Henry VI*, *The Comedy of Errors*, and *Titus Andronicus* under his belt, Shakespeare was a popular playwright by 1590. The year 1593, however, marked a major leap forward in his career. By the end of that year, he secured a prominent patron in the Earl of Southampton and his *Venus and Adonis* was published. It remains one of the first of his known works to be printed and was a huge success. Next came *The Rape of Lucrece*. Shakespeare had also made his mark as a poet and most scholars agree that the majority of Shakespeare’s sonnets were probably written in the 1590s.

The same year that he joined the Lord Chamberlain’s Men, Shakespeare wrote *Romeo and Juliet*, along with *Love’s Labour’s Lost*, *The Taming of the Shrew*, and several other plays. Two of his greatest tragedies, *Hamlet* and *Julius Caesar*, followed around 1600. *Hamlet* is widely considered the first modern play for its multi-faceted main character and unprecedented depiction of his psyche.

The first decade of the seventeenth century witnessed the debut performances of many of Shakespeare’s most celebrated works, including many of his so-called history plays: *Othello* in 1604 or 1605, *Antony and Cleopatra* in 1606 or 1607, and *King Lear* in 1608. The last play of his to be performed was probably *King Henry VIII* in either 1612 or 1613.

## Tragedy

*Antony and Cleopatra*, *Coriolanus*, *Hamlet*, *Julius Caesar*, *King Lear*, *Macbeth*, *Othello*, *Romeo and Juliet*, *Timon of Athens*, *Titus Andronicus*.

## History

*Henry IV*, part 1, *Henry IV*, part 2, *Henry V*, *Henry VI*, part 1, *Henry VI*, part 2, *Henry VI*, part 3, *Henry VIII*, *King John*, *Richard II*, *Richard III*

## Comedy Tragedy

*A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, *All’s Well That Ends Well*, *As You Like It*, *Cymbeline*, *Loves Labours Lost*, *Measure for Measure*, *Much Ado About Nothing*, *Pericles*, *Prince of Tyre*, *The Comedy of Errors*, *The Merchant of Venice*, *The Merry Wives of Windsor*, *The Taming of the Shrew*, *The Tempest*, *Troilus and Cressida*, *Twelfth Night*, *Two Gentlemen of Verona*, *Winter’s Tale*

## Poem

*A Lover’s Complaint*, *Sonnets*, *The Passionate Pilgrim*, *The Phoenix and the Turtle*, *The Rape of Lucrece*, *Venus and Adonis*

## Self Assessment

Notes

Multiple Choice Questions:

1. William Shakespeare was born in
  - (a) Stratford-upon-Avon
  - (b) Hampshire
  - (c) Ireland
  - (d) New South Wales.
2. Which of the following was not a creation of Shakespeare?
  - (a) *Love's Labour's Lost*
  - (b) *The Roots*
  - (c) *Hamlet*
  - (d) *King Henry VIII.*
3. Which of the following play of Shakespeare was not performed at Globe Theatre?
  - (a) *King Lear*
  - (b) *Twelfth Night*
  - (c) *Romeo and Juliet*
  - (d) *Othello.*

Fill in the blanks:

4. The same year that he joined the Lord Chamberlain's Men, Shakespeare wrote .....
5. Venus and Adonis was one of the first of Shakespeare known works to be .....and was a huge success.
6. In 1569, Shakespeare enters King's New School, an excellent ..... in Stratford.
7. Shakespeare did not attend university because university education was reserved for ..... of the elite.

State whether the following statements are true or false:

8. Town records indicate that William Shakespeare was John and Mary's third child.
9. Shakespeare's first daughter, Susanna, was baptized only six months his marriage.
10. Shakespeare's life as a citizen of Stratford.

## 4.2 Macbeth: Introduction to the Text

### 4.2.1 Introduction

Legend says that Macbeth was written in 1605 or 1606 and performed at Hampton Court in 1606 for King James I and his brother-in-law, King Christian of Denmark. Whether it was first performed at the royal court or was premiered at the Globe theatre, there can be little doubt that the plays were intended to please the King, who had recently become the patron of Shakespeare's theatrical company. We note, for example, that the character of Banquo—the legendary root of the Stuart family tree—is depicted very favorably. Like Banquo, King James was a Stuart. The play is also



## Notes

quite short, perhaps because Shakespeare knew that James preferred short plays. And the play contains many supernatural elements that James, who himself published a book on the detection and practices of witchcraft, would have appreciated. Even something as minor as the Scottish defeat of the Danes may have been omitted to avoid offending King Christian.

#### 4.2.2 Sources of the Text

The material for *Macbeth* was drawn from Raphael Holinshed's *Chronicles of England, Scotland, and Ireland* (1587). Despite the play's historical source, however, the play is generally classified as tragedy rather than a history. This derives perhaps from the fact that the story contains many historical fabrications – including the entire character of Banquo, who was invented by a 16th-century Scottish historian in order to validate the Stuart family line. In addition to such fictionalization, Shakespeare took many liberties with the original story, manipulating the characters of Macbeth and Duncan to suit his purposes. In Holinshed's account, Macbeth is a ruthless and valiant leader who rules competently after killing Duncan, whereas Duncan is portrayed as a young and soft-willed man. Shakespeare draws out certain aspects of the two characters in order to create a stronger sense of polarity. Whereas Duncan is made out to be a venerable and kindly older king, Macbeth is transformed into an indecisive and troubled young man who cannot possibly rule well.

*Macbeth* is certainly not the only play with historical themes that is full of fabrications. Indeed, there are other reasons why the play is considered a tragedy rather than a history. One reason lies in the play's universality. Like *Hamlet*, *Macbeth* speaks soliloquies that articulate the emotional and intellectual anxieties with which many audiences identify easily. For all his lack of values and "vaulting ambition," Macbeth is a character who often seems infinitely real to audiences. This powerful grip on the audience is perhaps what has made *Macbeth* such a popular play for centuries of viewers.



*Caution* *Macbeth* is a play with historical themes but rather than illustrating a specific historical moment, it presents a human drama of ambition, desire, and guilt.

Given that *Macbeth* is one of Shakespeare's shortest plays, some scholars have suggested that scenes were excised from the Folio version and subsequently lost. There are some loose ends and non-sequiturs in the text of the play that would seem to support such a claim. If scenes were indeed cut out, however, these cuts were most masterfully done. After all, none of the story line is lost and the play remains incredibly powerful without them. In fact, the play's length gives it a compelling, almost brutal, force. The action flows from scene to scene, speech to speech, with a swiftness that draws the viewer into Macbeth's struggles. As Macbeth's world spins out of control, the play itself also begins to spiral towards its violent end.

*Macbeth* is a tragedy by William Shakespeare written around 1606. The only Shakespearean drama set in Scotland, *Macbeth* follows the story of a Scottish nobleman (Macbeth) who hears a prophecy that he will become king and is tempted to evil by the promise of power. Macbeth deals with the themes of evil in the individual and in the world more closely than any of Shakespeare's other works. Shakespeare draws on Holinshed's *Chronicles* as *Macbeth*'s historical source, but he makes some adjustments to Holinshed's depiction of the real-life Macbeth. Holinshed's Macbeth was a soldier, and not much more; he was capable, and not too thoughtful or self-doubting. In Shakespeare's *Macbeth*, it is the internal tension and crumbling of Macbeth, entirely Shakespeare's inventions, that give the play such literary traction.

*Macbeth* is also unique among Shakespeare's plays for dealing so explicitly with material that was relevant to England's contemporary political situation. The play is thought to have been written in the later part of 1606, three years after James I, the first Stuart king, took up the crown of England.

James I was the son of Mary, Queen of Scots (cousin to Elizabeth I) and this less-than-direct connection meant that James was eager to assert any legitimacy he could over his right to the English throne (even though he was a Scot).

Shakespeare's portrayal of Banquo as one of the play's few unsoiled characters (in Holinshed's Chronicles, Banquo helps Macbeth murder the King) is a nod to the Stuart political myth. King James traced his lineage to Banquo, who is thought to be the founder of the Stuart line. In Act I, scene iii, the witches predict that Banquo's heirs will rule Scotland and later, the witches conjure a vision of Banquo's descendants—a line of eight kings that culminates in a symbolic vision of King James, who was crowned King of Scotland and England (and also claimed to be king of France and Ireland).

Shakespeare, whose theater company (the Lord Chamberlain's Men) became the King's Men under James's rule, seems intent on flattering the King. Shakespeare also dramatizes one of the king's special interests: witchcraft. In *Macbeth* the three "weird sisters" feature centrally in the plot. They show Macbeth visions of the future and manipulate his murderous ambition in a play full of dark forces and black magic. Witchcraft was a hot topic in England at the time and James even published his own treatise on the subject in 1597, entitled *Daemonologie*. As James's court play-maker, Shakespeare would've known that inclusion of the dark arts would interest the King.

Beyond the abstract of evil, James was also the target of the Gunpowder Plot in 1605, where a group of rebel Catholics tried to blow up the King and Parliament (this is the historical version of Guy Fawkes, that guy in *V for Vendetta*). Macbeth's murder of King Duncan, then, would have struck a sensitive chord with the play's audience. There's also another allusion to the Gunpowder plot during the Porter's infamous comic routine in Act II, scene iii. The Porter refers to Catholic "equivocators," which is a reference to Jesuit Henry Garnet, a man who was tried and executed for his role in the Gunpowder Plot. Garnet wrote "Treatise on Equivocation," a document that encouraged Catholics to speak ambiguously or, "equivocate" when they were being questioned by Protestant inquisitors (so they wouldn't be persecuted for their religious beliefs).

Why Should I Care?

*Macbeth* is a story about power struggles among the elite. What makes *Macbeth* great is its incredible insights into what the lure of power can do, and how blind it can make a person to moral reason and common sense. By studying men (and one woman) of great power, we get a glimpse into their minds. As it turns out, they're not as infallible as we sometimes think they are. They suffer the same feelings that all regular people suffer.



Task

Discuss the extent to which *Macbeth* fits into the genre of "tragedy."

It isn't just power politics, but human emotion that *Macbeth* focuses on. These things still influence the world. For example, Angelina Jolie has the power inspire you to listen up about genocide or human rights. *Macbeth* is no less subject to sticky human emotions, especially as they apply to the realm of attraction – just check out *Macbeth*'s interaction with his wife as she inspires, or shames, him to action. Lady *Macbeth* constantly references his manhood, which is tied to his emotional state, but also plays out in his physical courage. Many critics contend that the seat of Lady *Macbeth*'s power is not only her sharp mind, but her sexual appeal. Just imagine Lady *Macbeth* as Angelina Jolie. She's giving the speech about how she'd dash out her child's brains while it suckled at her breast. You kind of see why *Macbeth* is so messed up, right?

Power is attractive, and you can't deal with *Macbeth* without getting into the individual psyche (mind) of a man. *Macbeth* is at first determined to not murder Duncan (the King), is convinced by his wife to kill the King, and then is so destroyed by the consequences that he seems to be numb when Lady *Macbeth* dies. Let's not beat around the bush – the man is whipped, but he's also just a man.

**Notes**

So read Macbeth. Once you crack the tough language, you'll get a glimpse into the raunchy, grotesque, beautiful human emotions that are timeless and universal.

**Self Assessment**

Multiple Choice Questions:

11. Macbeth was written in 1605 or 1606 and performed at
  - (a) Hampton Court
  - (b) Globe Theatre
  - (c) Lord Chamberlain's Men Theatre
  - (d) Earl of Southampton.
12. The material for Macbeth was drawn from
  - (a) Raphael Holinshed's Chronicles of England
  - (b) Raphael Holinshed's Chronicles of England, Scotland, and Ireland
  - (c) Raphael Holinshed's Chronicles of Scotland
  - (d) Raphael Holinshed's Chronicles of Ireland.
13. What proves that Macbeth is one of the shortest plays?
  - (a) characters are poor
  - (b) scenes were excised from the folio version
  - (c) scenes were lost
  - (d) action flows from scene to scene.

Fill in the blanks:

14. Despite the Macbeth's historical source, the play is generally classified as ..... rather than a history.
15. Macbeth was written performed at Hampton Court in 1606 for King James I and his brother-in-law,.....
16. Macbeth is certainly not the only play with .....that is full of fabrications.
17. Macbeth follows the story of a Scottish nobleman (Macbeth) who hears a .....

State whether the following statements are true or false:

18. Macbeth is also unique among Shakespeare's plays for dealing so explicitly with material that was relevant to England's contemporary political situation.
19. Shakespeare's portrayal of Banquo as one of the play's few unsoiled characters is a nod to the Stuart political myth.
20. Macbeth is a story about power struggles among the middle class.

**4.3 Summary**

- William Shakespeare born in 1564, was an English playwright, poet, actor, favorite dramatist of queens and kings, inventor of words, master of drama, and arguably the most famous writer of all time.
- In his 36 plays and 154 sonnets, he left behind the evidence of a brilliant mind, a wicked sense of humor, a deep sensitivity to human emotions, and a rich classical education.

- In the 400 or so years since Shakespeare died on his 52nd birthday in 1616, there have been plenty of rumors about the Bard and the personal experiences that may have inspired his works.
- Shakespeare changed the English language, inventing dozens of new words we still use today. His plays have been translated into more than 80 other tongues and performed in dozens of countries, where diverse audiences all still recognize the timeless elements of the human experience as depicted by a young Englishman 400 years ago.
- Shakespeare lived during a time when the middle class was expanding in both size and wealth, allowing its members more freedoms and luxuries as well as a louder voice in local government.
- William Shakespeare was born in Stratford-upon-Avon to John and Mary Arden Shakespeare. The fourth of the Shakespeares' eight children shares a birthday with St. George, the patron saint of England.
- Town records indicate that William Shakespeare was John and Mary's third child.
- In 1569, Shakespeare enters King's New School, an excellent grammar school in Stratford attended by the sons of civil servants like his father.
- In 1582, at the age of eighteen, William Shakespeare married the twenty-six-year-old Anne Hathaway.
- William Shakespeare lived until 1616. His wife Anna died in 1623 at the age of 67.
- Legend says that Macbeth was written in 1605 or 1606 and performed at Hampton Court in 1606 for King James I and his brother-in-law, King Christian of Denmark.
- The material for Macbeth was drawn from Raphael Holinshed's Chronicles of England, Scotland, and Ireland (1587).
- Despite the play's historical source, however, the play is generally classified as tragedy rather than a history. This derives perhaps from the fact that the story contains many historical fabrications – including the entire character of Banquo, who was invented by a 16th-century Scottish historian in order to validate the Stuart family line.
- Macbeth is certainly not the only play with historical themes that is full of fabrications. Indeed, there are other reasons why the play is considered a tragedy rather than a history. One reason lies in the play's universality.
- Given that Macbeth is one of Shakespeare's shortest plays, some scholars have suggested that scenes were excised from the Folio version and subsequently lost. There are some loose ends and non-sequiturs in the text of the play that would seem to support such a claim.
- Macbeth is also unique among Shakespeare's plays for dealing so explicitly with material that was relevant to England's contemporary political situation.

#### 4.4 Keywords

- Chamberlains* : An official charged with the management of the living quarters of a sovereign or member of the nobility.
- Alderman* : A member of a municipal legislative body, especially of a municipal council.
- Bailiff* : The highest elected office in Stratford and the equivalent of a modern day mayor.
- Banquo* : A character, the legendary root of the stuart family tree in the play Macbeth and is a historical fabrication.
- Baptism* : A ceremonial immersion in water, or application of water, as an initiatory rite or sacrament of the Christian church.
- Roguish young man* : Legend characterizes Shakespeare as a roguish young man who was once forced to flee London under suspect circumstances.

Notes

### 4.5 Review Questions

1. Where was Shakespeare born.
2. How many plays and sonnets did Shakespeare write?
3. Give a brief biosketch of Shakespeare?
4. Write short notes on the following:  
(a) Globe Theatre                      (b) Shakespeare's poems                      (c) Shakespeare's plays
5. Explain that Shakespeare was a celebrated writer.
6. Elaborate that Shakespeare was a successful actor.
7. Illustrate that Macbeth was shortest play.

### **Answers: Self Assessment**

- |                            |              |                    |
|----------------------------|--------------|--------------------|
| 1. (a)                     | 2. (b)       | 3. (c)             |
| 4. <i>Romeo and Juliet</i> | 5. printed   | 6. grammar school  |
| 7. wealthy sons            | 8. True      | 9. True            |
| 10. True                   | 11. (a)      | 12. (b)            |
| 13. (c)                    | 14. tragedy  | 15. King Christian |
| 16. historical themes      | 17. prophecy | 18. True           |
| 19. True                   | 20. False    |                    |

### 4.6 Further Readings



*Books*

James Shapiro. 2006. *A Year in the Life of William Shakespeare: 1599*. Harper Perennial, UK.

William Shakespeare (A), G. Blakemore Evans and J. J. M. Tobin (eds.). 1996. *The Riverside Shakespeare*, 2nd Edition. Houghton Mifflin Company, UK.

Coursen, H. R. 1997. *MACBETH A Guide to the Play*. Greenwood Press, Westport, CT, London.



*Online links*

[http://www.shakespeare-literature.com/l\\_biography.html](http://www.shakespeare-literature.com/l_biography.html)

<http://www.shmoop.com/macbeth/>

<http://www.shmoop.com/macbeth/questions.html>

<http://dramamacbeth/macbethplotact.shtml>

[http://www.bbc.co.uk/schools/gcsebitesize/english\\_literature](http://www.bbc.co.uk/schools/gcsebitesize/english_literature)

## Unit 5: Macbeth: Detailed Analysis of the Text

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### Objectives

After studying this unit, you will be able to:

- Analyse the various scenes in five acts of Macbeth;

Notes

- Illustrate the state of minds of various characters specially Macbeth and Lady Macbeth;
- Explain the moral of the story;
- Elaborate the fact that the course of fate can not be changed;
- Illustrate that the play ends as it began.

## **Introduction**

*Macbeth* was written in 1605 or 1606 and performed at Hampton Court in 1606 for King James I and his brother-in-law, King Christian of Denmark. Whether it was first performed at the royal court or was premiered at the Globe theatre, there can be little doubt that the play were intended to please the King, who had recently become the patron of Shakespeare's theatrical company. The play is quite short, perhaps because Shakespeare knew that James preferred short plays. The material for *Macbeth* was drawn from Raphael Holinshed's *Chronicles of England, Scotland, and Ireland* (1587). Despite the play's historical source, however, the play is generally classified as tragedy rather than a history. This derives perhaps from the fact that the story contains many historical fabrications – including the entire character of Banquo, who was invented by a 16th-century Scottish historian in order to validate the Stuart family line. The play is divided into 5 Acts. Here in this unit a detailed analysis of the text of all the acts in *Macbeth* has been given.

## **5.1 Act 1**

### **5.1.1 Scenes 1-7**

#### **Scene 1**

On a heath in Scotland, three witches, the Weird Sisters, wait to meet Macbeth amidst thunder and lightning. Their conversation is filled with paradox and equivocation: they say that they will meet Macbeth “when the battle's lost and won” and when “fair is foul and foul is fair”.

#### **Scene 2**

The Scottish army is at war with the Norwegian army. Duncan, king of Scotland, meets a captain returning from battle. The captain informs them of Macbeth and Banquo's bravery in battle. He also describes Macbeth's attack on the castle of the treacherous Macdonald, in which Macbeth triumphed and planted Macdonald's head on the battlements of the castle. The Thanes of Ross and Angus enter with the news that the Thane of Cawdor has sided with Norway. Duncan decides to execute the disloyal thane and give the title of Cawdor to Macbeth.

#### **Scene 3**

The Weird Sisters meet on the heath and wait for Macbeth. He arrives with Banquo, repeating the witches' paradoxical phrase by stating “So foul and fair a day I have not seen”. The witches hail him as “Thane of Glamis” (his present title), “Thane of Cawdor” (the title he will soon receive officially), and “king hereafter”. Their greeting startles and seems to frighten Macbeth. When Banquo questions the witches as to who they are, they greet him with the phrases “Lesser than Macbeth and greater,” “Not so happy, yet much happier,” and a man who “shall get kings, though [he] be none”.

When Macbeth questions them further, the witches vanish into thin air. Almost as soon as they disappear, Ross and Angus appear with the news that the king has granted Macbeth the title of Thane of Cawdor. Macbeth and Banquo step aside to discuss this news; Banquo is of the opinion that the title of Thane of Cawdor might “enkindle” Macbeth to seek the crown as well. Macbeth questions why such happy news causes his “seated heart [to] knock at [his] ribs/against the use of

nature," and his thoughts turn immediately and with terror to murdering the king in order to fulfill the witches' second prophesy. When Ross and Angus notice Macbeth's distraught state, Banquo dismisses it as Macbeth's unfamiliarity with his new title.

#### Scene 4

Duncan demands to know whether the former Thane of Cawdor has been executed. His son Malcolm assures him that he has witnessed the former Thane's becoming death. While Duncan muses about the fact that he placed "absolute trust" in the treacherous Thane, Macbeth enters. Duncan thanks Macbeth and Banquo for their loyalty and bravery. He consequently announces his decision to make his son Malcolm the heir to the throne of Scotland (something that would not have happened automatically, since his position was elected and not inherited). Duncan then states that he plans to visit Macbeth at his home in Inverness. Macbeth leaves to prepare his home for the royal visit, pondering the stumbling block of Malcolm that now hinders his ascension to the throne. The king follows with Banquo.

#### Scene 5

At Inverness, Lady Macbeth reads a letter from Macbeth that describes his meeting with the witches. She fears that his nature is not ruthless enough— he's "too full o' th' milk of human kindness" - to murder Duncan and assure the completion of the witches' prophesy. He has ambition enough, she claims, but lacks the gumption to act on it. She then implores him to hurry home so that she can "pour [her] spirits in [his] ear" - in other words, goad him on to the murder he must commit. When a messenger arrives with the news that Duncan is coming, Lady Macbeth calls on the heavenly powers to "unsex me here" and fill her with cruelty, taking from her all natural womanly compassion. When Macbeth arrives, she greets him as Glamis and Cawdor and urges him to "look like the innocent flower, / but be the serpent under't". She then says that she will make all the preparations for the king's visit and subsequent murder.

#### Scene 6

Duncan arrives at Inverness with Banquo and exchanges pleasantries with Lady Macbeth. The king inquires after Macbeth's whereabouts and she offers to bring him to where Macbeth awaits.

#### Scene 7

Alone on stage, Macbeth agonizes over whether to kill Duncan, recognizing the act of murdering the king as a terrible sin. He struggles in particular with the idea of murdering a man—a relative, no less—who trusts and loves him. He would like the king's murder to be over and regrets the fact that he possesses "vaulting ambition" without the ruthlessness to ensure the attainment of his goals.

As Lady Macbeth enters, Macbeth tells her that he "will proceed no further in this business". But Lady Macbeth taunts him for his fears and ambivalence, telling him he will only be a man when he carries out the murder. She states that she herself would go so far as to take her own nursing baby and dash its brains if necessary. She counsels him to "screw [his] courage to the sticking place" and details the way they will murder the king. They will wait until he falls asleep, she says, and thereafter intoxicate his bodyguards with drink. This will allow them to murder Duncan and lay the blame on the two drunken bodyguards. Macbeth is astonished by her cruelty but resigns to follow through with her plans.

### 5.1.2 Analysis

#### Fate, Prophecy, and Equivocation

The play figures equivocation as one of its most important themes, just as the Porter in Act 2 extemporizes about the sin of equivocation. Starting from the Weird Sisters' first words that open



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the play, audiences quickly ascertain that things are not what they seem. According to the Oxford English Dictionary, the word “equivocation” has two different meanings - both of which are applicable to this play.



*Example:* The using (a word) in more than one sense; ambiguity or uncertainty of meaning in words; also misapprehension arising from the ambiguity of terms.

This definition as simple verbal ambiguity is the one that audiences are most familiar with – and one that plays an important role in the play. The Porter’s speech on equivocation in Act 2, however, refers to a more active type of equivocation.

This kind of equivocation is similar to lying; it is intentionally designed to mislead and confuse. The intentional ambiguity of terms is what we see in the prophecies of the Weird Sisters. Their speech is full of paradox and confusion, starting with their first assertion that “fair is foul and foul is fair”. The witches’ prophecies are intentionally ambiguous. The alliteration and rhymed couplets in which they speak also contributes to the effect of instability and confusion in their words. For many readers, more than one reading is required to grasp a sense of what the witches mean. It is not surprising, therefore, that these “imperfect speakers” can easily bedazzle and confuse Macbeth throughout the course of the play.

Just as their words are confusing, it is unclear as to whether the witches merely predict or actually affect the future. Banquo fears, for example, that the witches’ words will “enkindle [Macbeth] unto the crown” – in other words, that they will awaken in Macbeth an ambition that is already latent in him. His fears seem well-founded: as soon as the witches mention the crown, Macbeth’s thoughts turn to murder. The witches’ power is thus one of prophecy, but prophecy through suggestion. For Macbeth, the witches can be understood as representing the final impetus that drives him to his pre-determined end. The prophecy is in this sense self-fulfilling.

The oracular sisters are in fact connected etymologically to the Fates of Greek mythology. The word “weird” derives from the Old English word “word,” meaning “fate.” And not all fate is self-fulfilling. In Banquo’s case, in contrast to Macbeth’s, the witches seem only to predict the future. For unlike Macbeth, Banquo does not act on the witches’ prediction that he will father kings – and yet the witches’ prophesy still comes true. The role of the weird sisters in the story, therefore, is difficult to define or determine. Are they agents of fate or a motivating force? And why do they suddenly disappear from the play in the third act?

The ambiguity of the Weird Sisters reflects a greater theme of doubling, mirrors, and schism between inner and outer worlds that permeates the work as a whole. Throughout the play, characters, scenes, and ideas are doubled.

The dramatic irony of Duncan’s trust is realized only later in the play. Similarly, the captain in Scene 2 makes a battle report that becomes in effect a prophecy.

The passage can be interpreted as follows: Macbeth “disdains fortune” by disregarding the natural course of action and becomes king through a “bloody execution” of Duncan; Macduff, who was born from a Caesarian section and who neither “ne’er shook hands nor bade farewell” decapitates Macbeth and hangs his head up in public.

As in all Shakespearean plays, mirroring among characters serves to heighten their differences. Thus Macbeth, the young, valiant, cruel traitor/king has a foil in Duncan, the old, venerable, peaceable, and trusting king. Lady Macbeth, who casts off her femininity and claims to feel no qualms about killing her own children, is doubled in Lady Macduff, who is a model of a good mother and wife. Banquo’s failures to act on the witches’ prophesy is mirrored in Macbeth’s drive to realize all that the witches foresee.

Similarly, much of the play is also concerned with the relation between contrasting inner and outer worlds. Beginning with the equivocal prophecies of the Weird Sisters, appearances seldom align with reality. Lady Macbeth, for example, tells her husband to “look like the innocent flower, / but

be the serpent under't". Macbeth appears to be a loyal Thane, but secretly plans revenge. Lady Macbeth appears to be a gentle woman but vows to be "unsexed" and swears on committing bloody deeds. Macbeth is also a play about the inner world of human psychology, as will be illustrated in later acts through nightmares and guilt-ridden hallucinations. Such contrast between "being" and "seeming" serves as another illustration of equivocation.

### The Macbeths and the Corruption of Nature

One of the most ambiguous aspects of the play is the character of Macbeth himself. Unlike other Shakespearean villains like Iago or Richard III, Macbeth is not entirely committed to his evil actions. When he swears to commit suicide, he must overcome an enormous resistance from his conscience. At the same time, he sees as his own biggest flaw not a lack of moral values but rather a lack of motivation to carry out his diabolical schemes. In this he resembles Hamlet, who soliloquizes numerous times about his inaction. But unlike Hamlet, Macbeth does not have a good reason to kill, nor is the man he kills evil - far from it. And finally, while Macbeth becomes increasingly devoted to murderous actions, his soliloquies are so full of eloquent speech and pathos that it is not difficult to sympathize with him. Thus at the heart of the play lies a tangle of uncertainty.

If Macbeth is indecisive, Lady Macbeth is just the opposite – a character with such a single vision and drive for advancement that she brings about her own demise. And yet her very ruthlessness brings about another form of ambiguity, for in swearing to help Macbeth realize the Weird Sisters' prophecy, she must cast off her femininity. In a speech at the beginning of Scene 5, she calls on the spirits of the air to take away her womanhood.

Lady Macbeth sees "remorse" as one of the names for feminine compassion – of which she must rid herself. Thus she must be "unsexed." This does not mean, however, that in rejecting her femininity she becomes manly. Instead, she becomes a woman devoid of the sexual characteristics and sentimentality that make her a woman. She becomes entirely unnatural and inhuman. Like the supernatural Weird Sisters with their beards, Lady Macbeth becomes something that does not fit into the natural world.

The corruption of nature is a theme that surfaces and resurfaces in the same act. When Duncan greets Macbeth, for example, he states that he has "begun to plant thee and will labor / to make thee full of growing". Following the metaphor of the future as lying in the "seeds of time," Macbeth is compared to a plant that Duncan will look after. By murdering Duncan, then, Macbeth perverts nature by severing himself effectively from the very "root" that feeds him. For this reason, perhaps, the thought of murdering Duncan causes Macbeth's heart to "knock at [his] ribs / against the use of nature". Just as the Weird Sisters pervert the normal course of nature by telling their prophecy, Macbeth upsets the course of nature by his regicide.

Reflecting the disruption of nature, the dialogue between Macbeth and Lady in the scene following the murder becomes heavy, graceless, and almost syncopated.

The repetition of the phrase "thou wouldst," in all its permutations, confounds the flow of speech. The speech is clotted with accents, tangling meter and scansion, and the alliteration is almost tongue – twisting, slowing the rhythm of the words. Just as Macbeth and Lady Macbeth have corrupted nature, the language Shakespeare uses in these scenes disrupts the flow of his usually smoothly iambic meter.

Yet another part of the theme of corruption of nature lies in the compression of time that occurs throughout the act. When Lady Macbeth reads Macbeth's letter, she states: These letters have transported me beyond / this ignorant present, and I feel now / the future in the instant". By telling the future to Macbeth and Banquo, the Weird Sisters upset the natural course of time and bring the future to the present. Thus when Macbeth vacillates over whether or not to kill Duncan, he wants to leap into the future: "If it were done when 'tis done, then 'twere well / It were done quickly". He wants the murder to be over quickly – indeed so quickly that it is over before the audience even

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registers it. Just as equivocation twists the meaning of words, Macbeth's murderous desires twist the meaning of time.



*Notes* Thus beginning with the Weird Sisters, equivocation in all its permutations is threaded throughout the fabric of the first act. Over the course of the play, the breach between the worlds of reality and illusion that is the core of equivocation grows ever wider.

## 5.2 Act 2

### 5.2.1 Scenes

#### Scene 1

Banquo, who has come to Inverness with Duncan, wrestles with the witches' prophecy. He must restrain himself the "cursed thoughts" that tempt him in his dreams. When Banquo raises the topic of the prophecy as Macbeth enters the scene, Macbeth pretends that he has given little thought to the witches' prophesy. After Banquo and his son Fleance leave the scene, Macbeth imagines that he sees a bloody dagger pointing toward Duncan's chamber. Frightened by the apparition of a "dagger of the mind," he prays that the earth will "hear not [his] steps" as he completes his bloody plan. The bell rings—a signal from Lady Macbeth—and he sets off toward Duncan's room.

#### Scene 2

Lady Macbeth waits fitfully for Macbeth to return from killing Duncan. Upon hearing a noise within, she worries that the bodyguards have awakened before Macbeth has had a chance to plant the evidence on them.

Macbeth enters, still carrying the bloody daggers with which he killed Duncan. He is deeply shaken: as he entered Duncan's chamber, he heard the bodyguards praying and could not say "Amen" when they finished their prayers. Lady Macbeth's counsels to think "after these ways" as "it will make [them] mad". Nonetheless, Macbeth also tells her that he also thought he heard a voice saying, "sleep no more, / Macbeth does murder sleep. . . Glamis hath murdered sleep, and therefore Cawdor / Shall sleep no more, Macbeth shall sleep no more". Lady Macbeth again warns him not to think of such "brain-sickly of things" and tells him to wash the blood from his hands. Seeing the daggers he carries, she chastises him for bringing them in and tells him to plant them on the bodyguards according to the plan. When Macbeth, still horrified by the crime he has just committed, refuses to reenter Duncan's chamber, Lady Macbeth herself brings the daggers back in.

While she is gone, Macbeth hears a knocking and imagines that he sees hands plucking at his eyes. He is guilt-stricken and mourns: "Will all great Neptune's ocean wash this blood / clean from my hand?"? When Lady Macbeth hears his words upon reentering, she states that her hands are of the same color but her heart remains shamelessly unstained. "A little water," she continues, "will clear [them] of th[e] deed". As the knocking persists, the two retire to put on their nightgowns so as not to arouse suspicion when others arrive.

#### Scene 3

In a scene of comic relief, the Porter hears knocking at the gate and imagines that he is the porter at the door to Hell. He imagines admitting a farmer who has committed suicide after a bad harvest, an "equivocator" who has committed a sin by swearing to half-truths, and an English tailor who stole cloth to make fashionable clothes and visited brothels. Since it is "too cold for hell" at the gate, he opens the door instead of continuing with a longer catalogue of sinners. Outside stand Macduff and

Lennox, who scold him for taking so long to respond to their knocking. The Porter claims that he was tired after drinking until late and delivers a short sermon on the ills of drink.

Macbeth enters and Macduff asks him whether the king is awake yet. On hearing that the king is still asleep, Macduff leaves to wake him. While he is gone, Lennox tells Macbeth that the weather by night was full of strange events: chimneys were blown down, birds screeched all night, the earth shook, and ghostly voices were heard prophesying ominously. A stunned Macduff returns with the news that the king is dead. He tells them to go see for themselves and calls to the servants to ring the alarm bell.

Lady Macbeth and Banquo enter and Macduff informs them of the king's death. Macbeth and Lennox return and Macbeth laments the king's death, proclaiming that he wishes he were dead instead of the king. When Malcolm and Donalbain arrive, Lennox blames the regicide on the guards by pointing to the incriminating bloody evidence. Macbeth states that he has already killed the bodyguards in a grief-stricken rage. At this point, Lady Macbeth feigns shock and faints. Aside, Malcolm and Donalbain confer and decide that their lives may be at risk and that they should flee Scotland. As Lady Macbeth is being helped off-stage, Banquo counsels the others to convene and discuss the murder at hand. Left behind on stage, Malcolm decides that he will flee to England while Donalbain will go to Ireland.

#### Scene 4

Ross and an old man discuss the unnatural events that have taken place recently: days are as dark as nights, owls hunt falcons, and Duncan's horses have gone mad and eaten each other. When Macduff enters, Ross asks whether the culprit has been discovered. Macduff tells him that the bodyguards killed the king. The hasty flight on the part of Malcolm and Donalbain, however, has also cast suspicion on the two sons as well. Ross comments that Macbeth will surely be named the next king, to which Macduff responds that he has already been named and has gone to Scone to be crowned. Ross leaves for Scone to see the coronation while Macduff heads home to Fife.

### 5.2.2 Analysis

Macbeth's famous soliloquy at the beginning of this act introduces an important theme: visions and hallucinations caused by guilt. The "dagger of the mind" that Macbeth sees is not "ghostly" or supernatural so much as a manifestation of the inner struggle that Macbeth feels as he contemplates the regicide. It "marshall[s] [him] the way [he] was going," leading him toward the bloody deed he has resolved to commit, haunting and perhaps also taunting him. The same can be said for the ghostly voice that Macbeth hears after he kills Duncan, as well as the ghost of Banquo that appears in Act 3. Indeed, almost all the supernatural elements in this play could be – and often are – read as psychological rather than ghostly occurrences.



*Notes* But if this is the case, one also wonders about the witches: are they, too, products of Macbeth's fevered mind? The fact that merely gives voice to the Macbeth's dormant ambitions would seem to confirm this idea, but this is countered by the fact that Banquo also sees the same witches and hears them speak.

The "dagger of the mind" is only one of many psychological manifestations in the play. As the bodyguards mutter "God bless us" in their drunken stupor, Macbeth finds that he is unable to utter the prayer word "Amen." A psychological literary analyst may perceive this as a physical inability to speak, caused by Macbeth's paralyzing doubt about the correctness of the murder. The inner world of the psyche thus imposes itself on the physical world. The same can be said for the voice that Macbeth hears crying "Macbeth shall sleep no more". An overwhelming sense of guilt will

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prevent “innocent sleep” from giving Macbeth respite from his tormented conscience. While he has consigned Duncan to eternal rest, he himself lives now in eternal anxiety.

In addition to his troubled existence, Macbeth’s perturbed sleep can also be read as a metaphor for the troubled state of the country. In *Macbeth*—as with many other Shakespearean plays—there is a close and mirrored relationship between king and the country. In scene 4, for example, Ross reports that “by the clock ‘tis day, / And yet dark night strangles the traveling lamp”. This image of the darkness strangling the light of day is a meteorological manifestation of the murder of Duncan; the light of nature is suffocated just as Duncan’s life is extinguished. Victorian writer John Ruskin called such mirroring of a character’s psychological state in inanimate natural objects “pathetic fallacy.” In animate natural objects too, a similar mirroring occurs. The old man describes Duncan’s noble horses eating each other and an owl eating a falcon—events that echo the slaughter of Duncan by Macbeth. Thus the unnatural death of Duncan plunges the country into both physical and spiritual turmoil.

The image of an owl hunting a falcon is part of a greater framework of symbolism surrounding birds in the play. When Duncan approaches Inverness in Act 1, for example, he comments on the martlets that he sees nesting on the castle walls. He takes this as a good sign—martlets are lucky birds. Lady Macbeth, on the other hand, mentions earlier in this scene that there are ravens croaking on the battlements. She takes this as a harbinger of Duncan’s death. Duncan, the trusting optimist, sees lucky birds, whereas Lady Macbeth sees ominous ones. One sign does not exclude the other: for Duncan, “fair” becomes “foul” as the lucky martlets metamorphose into the deadly ravens.

In Act 2, characters discuss or see birds in almost every scene. While Lady Macbeth is waiting for Macbeth to finish killing Duncan, for example, she hears an owl hooting and calls the owl a “fatal bellman”—a bird whose call is like a bell tolling for Duncan’s death. The owl could also be “fatal” as an instrument of Fate, just as Macbeth is in some ways an instrument of Fate through the intervention of the Weird Sisters (keeping in mind that “wyrd” derives from the Old English word for “fate”). In this respect, one observes a mirroring between Macbeth and the owl: both hunt at night; the owl is observed killing a falcon, just as Macbeth kills Duncan.

Over the course of *Macbeth*, dreams, symbols, fantasy, and visions impinge upon the “real world.” The witches’ fantastic prophecy is realized. The “dagger of the mind” points the way to a murder committed with a real dagger. And in the Porter scene, the Porter imagining that he guards the gate to Hell ironically creates a gate of “real” hell caused by regicide. When the Porter opens the gate for the thanes, he mentions that he and his friends were out “carousing till the second cock”. This statement calls to mind the cock that crows in the New Testament after Peter betrays Jesus by denying knowledge of him. In *Macbeth*, the betrayal occurs in a more active form as Macbeth murders Duncan after the crows of the cock.

## **5.3 Act 3**

### **5.3.1 Scenes 1-6**

#### **Scene 1**

Alone at Macbeth’s court, Banquo voices his suspicions that Macbeth has killed Duncan in order to fulfill the witches’ prophecies. He muses that perhaps the witches’ vision for his own future will also be realized, but pushes the thought from his mind. Macbeth and Lady Macbeth enter to the fanfare of trumpets, along with Lennox and Ross. Macbeth announces that he will hold a banquet in the evening and that Banquo will be honored as chief guest. Banquo states that he must ride in the afternoon but will return for the banquet. Macbeth tells him that Malcolm and Donalbain will not confess to killing their father. After confirming that Fleance will accompany Banquo on his trip, Macbeth wishes Banquo a safe ride.

Left alone, Macbeth summons the two murderers he has hired. While he waits for them, he voices his greatest worry of the moment—that the witches’ prophecy will also come true for Banquo, making

his children kings. He will put an end to such worries by hiring two men to kill Banquo and Fleance. The men are not professional assassins, but rather poor men who are willing to work as mercenaries. Macbeth has already blamed their current state of poverty on Banquo. He now tells them that while Banquo is his own enemy as much as theirs, loyal friends of Banquo's prevent him from killing Banquo himself. Macbeth proceeds to detail the particulars of the murder: they must attack him as he returns from his ride – at a certain distance from the palace – and they must also kill Fleance at the same time.

## Scene 2

Alone on stage, Lady Macbeth expresses her unhappiness: there seems to be no end to her desire for power and she feels insecure and anxious. Macbeth enters looking upset and she counsels him to stop mulling over the crimes they have committed. But Macbeth declares that their job is not done: he still spends every waking moment in fear and every night embroiled in nightmares. He even envies Duncan, who now sleeps peacefully in his grave. Lady Macbeth warns him to act cheerful in front of their dinner guests. She also tries to comfort him by reminding him that Banquo and Fleance are by no means immortal. Macbeth responds by telling her that "a deed of dreadful note" will be done in the night, though he will not divulge the details.

## Scene 3

The two murderers are joined by a third, who says that he has also been hired by Macbeth. Horses are heard approaching and Banquo and Fleance enter. The murderers attack Banquo but Fleance manages to escape. The murderers leave to report back to Macbeth.

## Scene 4

At the banquet, a murderer arrives and reports to Macbeth just as the dinner guests begin to arrive. He informs Macbeth that Banquo is dead but Fleance has escaped. Shaken, Macbeth thanks him for what he has done and arranges another meeting on the following day. The murderer leaves and Macbeth returns to the feast.

Looking over the table, Macbeth declares that the banquet would be perfect if only Banquo were present. At this point Banquo's ghost appears unobserved and takes Macbeth's seat. The guests urge Macbeth to sit and eat with them but Macbeth says that the table is full. When Lennox points to Macbeth's empty seat, Macbeth is shocked to see Banquo's ghost. He addresses the ghost, saying, "Thou canst not say I did it. Never shake / Thy gory locks at me". The guests, confused by his behavior, think that he is ill. Lady Macbeth reassures them, however, by saying that he has had similar fits since youth and that he will soon be well. She draws Macbeth aside and attempts to calm him by asserting that the vision is merely a "painting of [his] fear" – just like the dagger he saw earlier. Ignoring her, Macbeth charges the ghost to speak but it disappears. After Lady Macbeth scolds him for being "unmanned in folly", Macbeth returns to his guests and claims that he has "a strange infirmity," which they should ignore.

Just as the party resumes and Macbeth is offering a toast to Banquo, the ghost reappears. As Macbeth once again bursts out in a speech directed at the ghost, Lady Macbeth tries to smooth things over with the guests. In response to Macbeth's exclamation that he sees sights that make his cheeks "blanched with fear," Ross asks what sights Macbeth means. Lady Macbeth asks the guests to leave, since Macbeth's "illness" seems to be deteriorating. Alone with Lady Macbeth, Macbeth expresses his deep anxieties and vows to return to the Weird Sisters.

## Scene 5

On the heath, the witches meet Hecate, queen of witches, who chastises them for meddling in Macbeth's affairs without involving her or showing him any fancy magic spectacles. She tells them that Macbeth will visit them tomorrow and that they must put on a more dramatic show for him.

## Notes

**Scene 6**

Lennox and another lord discuss politics. Lennox comments sarcastically on the recent deaths of Duncan and Banquo. He suggests that it seems implausible for Malcolm and Donalbain to be inhuman enough to kill their father. Moreover, Macbeth's slaying of the bodyguards seemed very convenient, since they probably would have denied killing Duncan. Lennox proposes that if Malcolm, Donalbain, and Fleance were in Macbeth's prison, they would also probably be dead now. He also reveals that since Macduff did not attend Macbeth's feast, he has been denounced. The lord with whom Lennox speaks comments that Macduff has joined Malcolm at the English court. The two men have apparently asked Siward to lead an army against Macbeth. Lennox and the lord send their prayers to Macduff and Malcolm.

**5.3.2 Analysis**

The "is a man" theme recurs in Macbeth's address to the murderers. When Macbeth demands whether the murderers have the courage to kill Banquo, they answer "we are men, my liege". But their answer does not satisfy Macbeth, who berates them as less-than-exemplary examples of men. Macbeth thus uses very much the same goading tactics his wife used in compelling him to kill Duncan. But what does it mean, exactly, to "be a man"? Both Macbeth and his Lady seem to have a clear idea of properly masculine actions. In Act 1, Lady Macbeth suggests that masculinity is largely a question of ruthlessness: one must be willing to "das[h] the brains out" of one's own baby. She claims that she herself is less "full o' th' milk of human kindness" than Macbeth—that is, more capable of casting away the last shreds of compassion, tenderness, loyalty, and guilt.

Lady Macbeth is not the only character that values ruthlessness as a masculine trait. Duncan, too, evaluates heroic action on a rather gory scale. When the captain describes how Macbeth "unseamed [Macdonald] from the nave to th' chops" with "his brandished steet/Which smoked of bloody execution," Duncan responds with high praise: "O valiant cousin, worthy gentleman"! A "real man" in Macbeth, then, is one who is capable of copious bloodshed without remorse. The catch, of course, is that the bloodshed must be justified. Whereas Macbeth needs no reason to slay Macdonald in battle per se, the two murderers require the justification that Banquo is an evil man.

As for the terms of murder, Macbeth warns the murderers to kill Fleance and thus "leave no rubs nor botches in the work". Macbeth "require[s] a clearness" — that is, a clearance from suspicion but also a mental and physical cleanliness. The theme of stains and washing runs throughout the play. From Macbeth's cry about all "great Neptune's ocean" in Act 2, to his instructions to the murderers in Act 3, to Lady Macbeth's famous "Out, damned spot" speech in Act 5, the Macbeths are haunted by the idea that they will be forever stained. Even when Macbeth has Banquo killed at a safe distance from himself, the spilled blood still returns to haunt Macbeth. When the murderer shows up to report his success, Macbeth observes: "There's blood upon thy face". The blood itself serves a sign and reminder of the Macbeths' culpability—ultimately driving Lady Macbeth mad.

Banquo's murder itself makes use of a common theme in Shakespeare's plays: the contrast between light and dark. While the murderers wait for Banquo and Fleance to approach, one of them observes that the sun is setting. This is no coincidence: Banquo serves as a bright contrast to the dark night that accompanies Macbeth's rise to power. He is a man who does not allow his ambitions to eclipse his conscience. At the moment that he dies, therefore, it is appropriate for the last remnant of sunlight to fade away. Such symbolism is reinforced by the fact that Banquo and Fleance approach the murderers carrying a torch. The torchlight is the first thing that the murderers see: "a light, a light" notes the second murderer. And after the deed is finished, the third murderer asks: "who did strike out the light?". At the same moment that the good and kind Banquo dies, the light is extinguished.

Another aspect of Banquo's murder has intrigued generations of scholars: who is the third murderer? Some believe that it is Lady Macbeth, who expressed curiosity about Macbeth's plans in Scene 2.

Others believe that it is Macbeth himself, who could not trust the murderers fully. The third murderers could even be the three witches in disguise. In any case, introducing a third murderer rounds out the number of murderers so that they balance the three witches. There is power in the number three: Macbeth meets three witches, commits three separate murders, and sees three apparitions. The number three recurs throughout the play, adding to its mysterious and magic atmosphere.

Finally, one of the most compelling scenes in Macbeth takes place at the banquet haunted by Banquo's ghost. Once again, the boundaries between reality and the supernatural are blurred as Banquo's ghost appears twice – both at exactly the moment Macbeth mentions him. It seems that the vision of Banquo accompanies the idea of Banquo in Macbeth's mind. The ghost thus seems more like the manifestation of an idea – a figment of the imagination – rather than a "real" ghost. Lady Macbeth says as much when she pulls Macbeth aside: "This is the very painting of your fear; / This is the air-drawn dagger which you said/ Led you to Duncan". Just like the dagger, Banquo's ghost appears to be a realization of Macbeth's guilt. Even if the occurrence is supernatural, the event is very real for Macbeth.

## Self Assessment

Multiple Choice Questions:

1. The play Macbeth figures which of the following important themes?
  - (a) Fate, prophecy, and equivocation
  - (b) Fate
  - (c) Prophecy
  - (d) Equivocation.
2. Macbeth's famous soliloquy at the beginning of Act 2 introduces an important theme
  - (a) dagger of the mind
  - (b) visions and hallucinations caused by guilt
  - (c) Supernatural manifestations
  - (d) inner struggle contemplating the regicide.
3. The 'is a man' theme recurs in
  - (a) Act 1
  - (b) Act 2
  - (c) Act 3
  - (d) all the acts 1-3.

Fill in the blanks:

4. The play figures equivocation as one of its most important .....
5. The oracular sisters are in fact connected..... to the Fates of Greek mythology.
6. Lady Macbeth is not the only character that values ruthlessness as a .....
7. Banquo's murder makes use of contrast between light and dark ..... in Shakespeare's plays.

State whether the following statements are true or false:

8. This kind of equivocation is similar to lying; it is intentionally designed to mislead and confuse.



Notes

9. Macbeth's famous soliloquy at the beginning of Act 2 introduces an important theme—prophecy by guilt.
10. One of the most compelling scenes in Macbeth takes place at the banquet haunted by Banquo's ghost.

## **5.4 Act 4**

### **5.4.1 Scenes**

#### **Scene 1**

The witches circle a cauldron, mixing in a variety of grotesque ingredients while chanting "double, double toil and trouble;/Fire burn, and cauldron bubble". Hecate appears, they sing all together, and Hecate leaves. Macbeth then enters, demanding answers to his pressing questions about the future. The witches complete their magic spell and summon forth a series of apparitions. The first is an armed head that warns Macbeth to beware the Thane of Fife (Macduff). The second apparition is a bloody child, who tells him that "none of woman born/Shall harm Macbeth". This news bolsters Macbeth spirits. The third apparition is a crowned child with a tree in its hand, who says that "Macbeth shall never vanquished be until/Great Birnam Wood to high Dunsinane Hill/Shall come against him". This cheers Macbeth even more, since he knows that nothing can move a forest. Macbeth proceeds to ask his last question: will Banquo's children ever rule Scotland?

The cauldron sinks and a strange sound is heard. The witches now show Macbeth a procession of kings, the eighth of whom holds a mirror in his hand, followed by Banquo. As Banquo points at this line of kings, Macbeth realizes that they are indeed his family line. After the witches dance and disappear, Lennox enters with the news that Macduff has fled to England. Macbeth resolves that he will henceforth act immediately on his ambitions: the first step will be to seize Fife and kill Macduff's wife and children.

#### **Scene 2**

At Fife, Ross visits Lady Macduff, who is frightened for her own safety now that her husband has fled. He reassures her by telling her that her husband did only what was right and necessary. After he leaves, Lady Macduff engages her son in a conversation about his missing father. The little boy demonstrates wisdom well beyond his years. A messenger interrupts them with a warning to flee the house immediately. But before Lady Macduff can escape, murderers attack the house and kill everyone including Lady Macduff and her son.

#### **Scene 3**

Macduff arrives at the English court and meets with Malcolm. Malcolm, remembering his father's misplaced trust in Macbeth, decides to test Macduff: he confesses that he is a greedy, lustful, and sinful man who makes Macbeth look like an angel in comparison. Macduff despairs and says that he will leave Scotland forever if this is the case, since there seems to be no man fit to rule it. Upon hearing this, Malcolm is convinced of Macduff's goodness and reveals that he was merely testing him; he has none of these faults to which he has just confessed. In fact, he claims, the first lie he has ever told was this false confession to Macduff. He then announces that Siward has assembled an army of ten thousand men and is prepared to march on Scotland.

A messenger appears and tells the men that the king of England is approaching, attended by a crowd of sick and despairing people who wish the king to cure them. The king, according to Malcolm, has a gift for healing people simply by laying his hands on them.

Ross arrives from Scotland and reports that the country is in a shambles. When Macduff asks how his wife and children are faring, Ross first responds that they are "well at peace". When pressed

further, he relates the story of their death. Macduff is stunned speechless and Malcolm urges him to cure his grief by exacting revenge on Macbeth. Macduff is overcome with guilt and sorrow from the murders that occurred while he was absent. Again Malcolm urges him to put his grief to good use and seek revenge. All three men leave to prepare for battle.

### 5.4.2 Analysis

As the act opens, the witches carry on the theme of doubling and equivocation that threads throughout the play. As they throw ingredients into their cauldron, they chant “double, double, toil and trouble” – a reminder that their speech is full of double meanings, paradox, and equivocation. The apparitions that the witches summon give equivocal messages to Macbeth, and they appear to know quite consciously that he will only understand one half of their words. Although Macbeth himself has previously acknowledged that “stones have been known to move and trees to speak”, the apparitions give Macbeth a false sense of security. He takes the apparitions’ words at face value, forgetting to examine how their predictions could potentially come true.



*Example:* The theme of doubling is amplified when the witches summon the “show of kings.” Each king who appears looks “too like the spirit of Banquo,” frightens Macbeth with their resemblance. For Macbeth, it is as if the ghosts of Banquo have returned to haunt him several times over. In the procession of kings, Macbeth also notes that some carry “twofold balls and treble scepters” – as if even the signs of their power have been doubled.

On a historical note, it is generally thought the eighth king holds up a mirror in order to pander to James I. This last king – the eighth-generation descendant of Banquo – is none other than a figure of James I himself. He thus carries a mirror to signal as much to the real James I, who sits at the forefront of the audience. A similar moment of pandering occurs when Malcolm notes that the king of England has a special power to heal people affected by “the evil”. In various subtle ways, Shakespeare complimented King James I – a legendary descendant of Banquo and author of a book on witchcraft.

James I is not the only character who is doubled in Macbeth. Throughout the play, characters balance and complement each other in a carefully constructed harmony. As a man who also receives a prophecy but refuses to act actively upon it, Banquo serves as sort of inverse mirror image of Macbeth. Although he has troubled dreams like Macbeth, his arise from the suppression of ambitions whereas Macbeth’s arise from the fulfillment thereof. Other major characters, including Malcolm, Macduff, and Lady Macbeth, can also be seen as foils or doubles for Macbeth. Particularly interesting is the case of Lady Macbeth, who in some sense “switches roles” with Macbeth as the play progresses. Whereas she first advises Macbeth to forget all remorse and guilt, Lady Macbeth becomes increasingly troubled by her own guilt as Macbeth begins to heed her advice.

Another form of doubling or equivocation is found in the theme of costumes, masks, and disguises. While planning Duncan’s murder, Lady Macbeth counsels Macbeth to “look like the innocent flower, / But be the serpent under’t” – to “beguile the time” by disguising his motives behind a mask of loyalty. After the murder, Lady Macbeth paints the bodyguards’ faces with a mask of blood to implicate them. Similarly, while preparing to kill Banquo, Macbeth comments that men must “make [their] faces visors to [their] hearts, / Disguising what they are”. Thus when Malcolm tests Macduff’s loyalty, he begins appropriately by saying that “all things foul would wear the brows of grace” (IV iii 23). Even the most foul of men – perhaps like Macbeth and the murderers – are able to disguise themselves. Just as the witches’ equivocation covers up the true harm within their alluring words, disguises and masks hide the inner world from the outer.

Finally, during the scene in which the murders occur, Lady Macduff reflects the bird symbolism that began in Act 1. When Lady Macduff complains to Ross about the abrupt departure of Macduff, she states: “the poor wren / the most diminutive of birds, will fight, / her young ones in her nest,

**Notes**

against the owl". Her metaphor comes to life when she and her son are attacked by Macbeth's men. Macbeth, as earlier established, is identified with the owl; so Lady Macduff, trying to protect her son, becomes the wren in a realization of her own figure of speech. It is with particular pathos that the audience sees Macduff's precocious son fall prey to the swords of Macbeth's ruthless murderers.

## **5.5 Act 5**

### **5.5.1 Scenes**

#### **Scene 1**

At the Scottish royal home of Dunsinane, a gentlewoman has summoned a doctor to observe Lady Macbeth's sleepwalking. The doctor reports that he has watched her for two nights now and has yet to see anything strange. The gentlewoman describes how she has seen Lady Macbeth rise, dress, leave her room, write something on a piece of paper, read it, seal it, and return to bed – all without waking up. The gentlewoman dares not repeat what Lady Macbeth says while thus sleepwalking.

The two are interrupted by a sleepwalking Lady Macbeth, who enters carrying a candle. The gentlewoman reports that Lady Macbeth asks to have a light by her all night. The doctor and the gentlewoman watch as Lady Macbeth rubs her hands as if washing them and says "Yet here's a spot. . . Out, damned spot; out I say". As she continues to "wash" her hands, her words betray her guilt to the two onlookers. Lady Macbeth seems to be reliving the events on the night of Duncan's death. She cannot get the stain or smell of blood off her hand: "What, will these hands ne'er be clean. All the perfumes of Arabia will not sweeten this little hand". As the sleepwalking Lady Macbeth imagines she hears knocking at the gate and returns to her chamber, the doctor concludes that Lady Macbeth needs a priest's help and not a physician's. He takes his leave, asserting that he and the gentlewoman had better not reveal what they have seen or heard.

#### **Scene 2**

The thanes Menteith, Caithness, Angus, and Lennox march with a company of soldiers toward Birnam Wood, where they will join Malcolm and the English army. They claim that they will "purge" the country of Macbeth's sickening influence.

#### **Scene 3**

At Dunsinane, Macbeth tires of hearing reports of nobles who have defected to join the English forces. He feels consoled; however, by the witches' prophecy that he has nothing to fear until Birnam Wood comes to Dunsinane, or until he counters a man not born of woman. Since both of the events seem impossible, Macbeth feels invincible.

A servant enters with the news that the enemy has rallied a thousand men but Macbeth sends him away, scolding him for cowardice. After calling for his servant Seyton to help him put on his armor, Macbeth demands the doctor's prognosis about Lady Macbeth. The doctor replies that she is "not so sick" but troubled with visions. In some way or other, she must cure herself of these visions – an answer that displeases Macbeth. As attendants put on his armor, he declares that he would applaud the doctor if he could analyze the country's urine and therein derive a medicine for Lady Macbeth. Abruptly, Macbeth leaves the room, professing once again that he will not fear "death and bane" until Birnam Wood comes to Dunsinane. Aside, the doctor confesses that he would like to be as far away from Dunsinane as possible.

#### **Scene 4**

Malcolm, Siward, Young Siward, Macduff, Menteith, Caithness, and Angus march toward Birnam Wood. As they approach the forest, Malcolm instructs the soldiers to cut off branches and hold

them up in order to disguise their numbers. Siward informs Malcolm that Macbeth confidently holds Dunsinane, waiting for their arrival. Malcolm comments that almost all of Macbeth's men have deserted him. The army marches on.

### Scene 5

Macbeth orders his men to hang his banners on the outer walls of the castle, claiming that it will hold until the attackers die of famine. If only the other side were not reinforced with men who deserted him, he claims, he would not think twice about rushing out to meet the English army head-on. Upon hearing the cry of a woman within, Macbeth comments that he has almost forgotten the taste of fears. Seyton returns and announces the death of Lady Macbeth. Seemingly unfazed, Macbeth comments that she should have died later, at a more appropriate time.

A messenger enters and reports that he has seen something unbelievable: as he looked out toward Birnam Wood, it appeared that the forest began to move toward the castle. Macbeth is stunned and begins to fear that the witch's words may come true after all. He instructs his men to ring the alarm.

### Scene 6

Malcolm tells his soldiers that they are near enough to the castle now to throw down the branches they carry. He announces that Siward and Young Siward will lead the first battle. He and Macduff will follow behind. The trumpeters sound a charge.

### Scene 7

Macbeth waits on the battlefield to defend his castle. He feels like a bear that has been tied to a stake for dogs to attack. Young Siward enters and demands his name. Macbeth responds that he will be afraid to hear it. Macbeth kills Young Siward in the ensuing duel, commenting that Young Siward must have been "born of woman".

### Scene 8

Macduff enters alone and shouts a challenge to Macbeth, swearing to avenge the death of his wife and children. As he exists, he asks Fortune to help him find Macbeth.

### Scene 9

Malcolm and Siward enter and charge the castle.

### Scene 10

Macbeth enters, asserting that he should not "play the Roman fool" and commit suicide. Macduff finds him and challenges him. Macbeth replies that he has thus far avoided Macduff but that he is now ready to fight. As they fight, Macbeth tells him that he "bears a charmed life": he will only fall to a man who is not born of woman. Macduff replies that the time has come for Macbeth to despair: "let the angel whom thou still hast served / Tell thee Macduff was from his mother's womb / Untimely ripped" – Macduff was born through the equivalent of a caesarian section. Hearing this, Macbeth quails and says that he will not fight. Macduff replies by commanding him to yield and become the laughing stock of Scotland under Malcolm's rule. This enrages Macbeth, who swears he will never yield to swear allegiance to Malcolm. They fight on and thus exit.

### Scene 11

Malcolm, Siward, and the other thanes enter. Although they have won the battle, Malcolm notes that Macduff and Young Siward are missing. Ross reports that Young Siward is dead and eulogizes

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him by stating that “he only lived but till he was a man,/the which no sooner had his prowess confirmed / in the unshrinking station where he fought,/But like a man he died”. After confirming that his son’s wounds were on his front – in other words, that the Young Siward died bravely in battle – Siward declares that he not wish for a better death for his son.

Macduff enters, carrying Macbeth’s severed head and shouting “Hail, King of Scotland!” The men echo this shout and the trumpets flourish as Malcolm accepts the kingship. Malcolm announces that he will rename the current thanes as earls. He will call back all the men whom Macbeth has exiled and will attempt to heal the scarred country. All exit towards Scone, where Malcolm will be crowned as King of Scotland.

### 5.5.2 Analysis

Until Act 5, Macbeth has been tormented with visions and nightmares while Lady Macbeth has derided him for his weakness. Now the audience witnesses the way in which the murders have also preyed on Lady Macbeth. In her sleepwalking, Lady Macbeth plays out the theme of washing and cleansing that runs throughout the play. After killing Duncan, she flippantly tells Macbeth that “a little water clears us of this deed”. But the deed now returns to haunt Lady Macbeth in her sleep. Lady Macbeth’s stained hands are reminiscent of the biblical mark of Cain – the mark that God placed on Cain for murdering his brother Abel. But Cain’s mark is a sign from God that protects Cain from the revenge of others. Lady Macbeth’s mark does not protect her from death, as she dies only a few scenes later.



*Notes* The doctor’s behavior in Act 5 Scene 3 resembles that of a psychoanalyst. Like a Freudian psychoanalyst, the doctor observes Lady Macbeth’s dreams and uses her words to infer the cause of her distress. Lady Macbeth’s language in this scene betrays her troubled mind in many ways. Her speech in previous acts has been eloquent and smooth.

In this speech, Lady Macbeth makes use of metaphor (Duncan’s honor is “deep and broad”), metonymy (he honors “our house,” meaning the Macbeths themselves), and hyperbole (“in every point twice done and then done double”). Her syntax is complex but the rhythm of her speech remains smooth and flowing, in the iambic pentameter used by noble characters in Shakespearean plays. What a contrast it is, therefore, when she talks in her sleep in Act 5!

Out, damned spot, out, I say! One. Two. Why then, ’tis time to don’t. Hell is murky. Fie, my lord, fie, a soldier and afeard? What need we fear who knows it, when none can call our power to account? Yet who would have thought the old man to have had so much blood in him. . . The Thane of Fife had a wife. Where is she now? What, will these hands ne’er be clean? No more o’ that, my lord, no more o’ that. You mar all with this starting.

In this speech, Lady Macbeth’s language is choppy, jumping from idea to idea as her state of mind changes. Her sentences are short and unpolished, reflecting a mind too disturbed to speak eloquently. Although she spoke in iambic pentameter before, she now speaks in prose – thus falling from the noble to the prosaic.

Lady Macbeth’s dissolution is swift. As Macbeth’s power grows, indeed, Lady Macbeth’s has decreased. She began the play as a remorseless, influential voice capable of sweet-talking Duncan and of making Macbeth do her bidding. In the third act Macbeth leaves her out of his plans to kill Banquo, refusing to reveal his intentions to her. Now in the last act, she has dwindled to a mumbling sleepwalker, capable only of a mad and rambling speech. Whereas even the relatively unimportant Lady Macduff has a stirring death scene, Lady Macbeth dies offstage. When her death is reported to Macbeth, his response is shocking in its cold apathy.

## Notes

As the play nears its bloody conclusion, Macbeth's tragic flaw comes to the forefront: like Duncan before him, his character is too trusting. He takes the witches' prophecies at face value, never realizing that things are seldom what they seem – an ironic flaw, given his own treachery. He thus foolishly fortifies his castle with the few men who remain, banking on the fact that the events that the apparitions foretold could not come true. But in fact the English army does bring Birnam Wood to Dunsinane. And Macduff, who has indeed been "untimely ripped" from his mother's womb, advances to kill Macbeth. The witches have equivocated; they told him a double truth, concealing the complex reality within a framework that seems simple.

It is fitting that the play ends as it began – with a victorious battle in which a valiant hero kills a traitor and holds high the severed head. The first we hear of Macbeth in Act 1 is the story of his bravery in battle, wherein he decapitated Macdonwald's and displayed it on the castle battlements. At the end of the tragedy, Macbeth – himself a traitor to Duncan and his family – is treated in exactly the same manner. After killing Macbeth, Macduff enters with Macbeth's severed head and exclaims "behold where stands / Th'usurper's cursed head" the play thus ends with the completion of a parallel structure.

One moral of the story is that the course of fate cannot be changed. The events that the Weird Sisters predicted and set in motion at the beginning of the play happen exactly as predicted, no matter what the characters do to change them. Macbeth tries his hardest to force fate to work to his bidding, but to no avail. Banquo still becomes the father of kings and Macbeth still falls to a man not born of woman. The man who triumphs in the end is the one who did nothing to change the fate prescribed for him. The prophecy is self-fulfilling.



Task

Illustrate that fate can not be changed in context of the play Macbeth.

The river of time thus flows on, despite the struggles of man. Although Macbeth's reign of terror has made "the frame of things disjoint," by the end of the play the tide of time has smoothed over Scotland. The unnatural uprising of Macbeth now in the past, Macduff comments that "the time is free". And Macbeth's life proves to be indeed a "tale/Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, signifying nothing". Time washes over his meaningless, bloody history: Banquo's family will give rise to the line of Stuart kings and Malcolm will regain the throne his father left him – all exactly as if Macbeth had never dared to kill Duncan.

## Self Assessment

Multiple Choice Questions:

11. As the act 4 opens, the witches carry on the theme
  - (a) doubling and equivocation
  - (b) prophecy
  - (c) doubling
  - (d) equivocation.
  
12. In her sleepwalking, Lady Macbeth plays out which of the following theme that runs throughout the play?
  - (a) Prophecy and equivocation
  - (b) Washing and cleansing
  - (c) Wickedness
  - (d) Cleansing and wickedness.

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13. Which of the following statements about Lady Macbeth is not correct?
- (a) Lady Macbeth's dissolution is swift
  - (b) Lady Macbeth's language is choppy
  - (c) As Macbeth's power grows, Lady Macbeth's has also grows
  - (d) Her state of mind changes.

Fill in the blanks:

14. As the act 4 opens, the witches carry on the theme of ..... and equivocation.
15. Another form of doubling or equivocation is found in the theme of ..... , masks, and disguises.
16. Until Act 5, Macbeth has been tormented with visions and ..... while Lady Macbeth has derided him for his weakness.
17. In her sleepwalking, Lady Macbeth plays out the theme of ..... and cleansing.

State whether the following statements are true or false:

18. On a historical note, it is generally thought the eighth king holds up a mirror in order to pander to James I.
19. While planning Duncan's murder, Lady Macbeth counsels Macbeth to look like the innocent flower.
20. One moral of the story is that the course of fate can be changed.

## 5.6 Summary

- On a heath in Scotland, three witches, the Weird Sisters, wait to meet Macbeth amidst thunder and lightning.
- The conversation of three witches is filled with paradox and equivocation: they say that they will meet Macbeth "when the battle's lost and won" and when "fair is foul and foul is fair".
- The Scottish army is at war with the Norwegian army. Duncan, king of Scotland, meets a captain returning from battle.
- The Weird Sisters meet on the heath and wait for Macbeth. He arrives with Banquo, repeating the witches' paradoxical phrase by stating "So foul and fair a day I have not seen".
- Duncan demands to know whether the former Thane of Cawdor has been executed. His son Malcolm assures him that he has witnessed the former Thane's becoming death.
- At Inverness, Lady Macbeth reads a letter from Macbeth that describes his meeting with the witches. She fears that his nature is not ruthless enough— he's "too full o' th' milk of human kindness" - to murder Duncan and assure the completion of the witches' prophesy.
- Duncan arrives at Inverness with Banquo and exchanges pleasantries with Lady Macbeth.
- Alone on stage, Macbeth agonizes over whether to kill Duncan, recognizing the act of murdering the king as a terrible sin.
- The play figures equivocation as one of its most important themes, just as the Porter in Act 2 extemporizes about the sin of equivocation.
- This kind of equivocation is similar to lying; it is intentionally designed to mislead and confuse. The intentional ambiguity of terms is what we see in the prophesies of the Weird Sisters. Just as their words are confusing, it is unclear as to whether the witches merely predict or actually affect the future.

- The ambiguity of the Weird Sisters reflects a greater theme of doubling, mirrors, and schism between inner and outer worlds that permeates the work as a whole.
- Throughout the play, characters, scenes, and ideas are doubled.
- The corruption of nature is a theme that surfaces and resurfaces in the same act.
- The witches circle a cauldron, mixing in a variety of grotesque ingredients while chanting “double, double toil and trouble;/Fire burn, and cauldron bubble”.
- As the act 4 opens, the witches carry on the theme of doubling and equivocation that threads throughout the play.
- On a historical note, it is generally thought the eighth king holds up a mirror in order to pander to James I.
- Another form of doubling or equivocation is found in the theme of costumes, masks, and disguises.
- At the Scottish royal home of Dunsinane, a gentlewoman has summoned a doctor to observe Lady Macbeth’s sleepwalking.
- The two are interrupted by a sleepwalking Lady Macbeth, who enters carrying a candle.
- Until Act 5, Macbeth has been tormented with visions and nightmares while Lady Macbeth has derided him for his weakness. Now the audience witnesses the way in which the murders have also preyed on Lady Macbeth.
- As the play nears its bloody conclusion, Macbeth’s tragic flaw comes to the forefront: like Duncan before him, his character is too trusting.
- One moral of the story is that the course of fate cannot be changed. The events that the Weird Sisters predicted and set in motion at the beginning of the play happen exactly as predicted, no matter what the characters do to change them.

## 5.7 Keywords

<i>Witch</i>	: A person, now especially a woman, who professes or is supposed to practice magic, especially black magic or the black art; sorceress.
<i>Fate</i>	: The universal principle or ultimate agency by which the order of things is presumably prescribed; the decreed cause of events; time.
<i>Prophecy</i>	: Something that is declared by a prophet, especially a divinely inspired prediction, instruction, or exhortation.
<i>Equivocation</i>	: The use of equivocal or ambiguous expressions, especially in order to mislead or hedge; prevarication.
<i>Remorse</i>	: Deep and painful regret for wrongdoing; compunction.
<i>Regicide</i>	: A person who kills a king or is responsible for his death, especially one of the judges who condemned Charles I of England to death.
<i>Equivocator</i>	: To use ambiguous or unclear expressions, usually to avoid commitment or in order to mislead; prevaricate or hedge.
<i>Fife</i>	: A high-pitched transverse flute used commonly in military and marching musical groups.
<i>Amen</i>	: A prayer word in the play Macbeth.
<i>Pathetic Fallacy</i>	: The endowment of nature, inanimate objects, etc., with human traits and feelings.
<i>Weird</i>	: Involving or suggesting the supernatural; unearthly or uncanny.
<i>Cauldron</i>	: A large pot used for boiling, esp one with handles.



Notes

### 5.8 Review Questions

1. Critically analyse the act 1 and act 2.
2. Mention any two themes used in act 2 and act 3.
3. What is meant by equivocation?
4. Write short notes on the events of the following Acts:  
 (a) Act 1                                      (b) Act 2                                      (c) Act 3
5. Write the two important scenes of  
 (a) Act 4                                      (b) Act 5
6. Explain that the course of fate can not be changed.
7. Until Act 5, Macbeth has been tormented with visions and nightmares, illustrate this statement.
8. Illustrate the statement that the river of time flows on, despite the struggles of man in context of the play Macbeth.

### **Answers: Self Assessment**

- |                |                   |                    |
|----------------|-------------------|--------------------|
| 1. (a)         | 2. (b)            | 3. (c)             |
| 4. themes      | 5. etymologically | 6. masculine trait |
| 7. theme       | 8. True           | 9. False           |
| 10. True       | 11. (a)           | 12. (b)            |
| 13. (c)        | 14. doubling      | 15. costumes       |
| 16. nightmares | 17. washing       | 18. True           |
| 19. True       | 20. False         |                    |

### 5.9 Further Readings



*Books*

James Shapiro. 2006. *A Year in the Life of William Shakespeare: 1599*. Harper Perennial, UK.

William Shakespeare (A), G. Blakemore Evans and J. J. M. Tobin (eds.). 1996. *The Riverside Shakespeare*, 2nd Edition. Houghton Mifflin Company, UK.

Coursen, H. R. 1997. *Macbeth A Guide to the Play*. Greenwood Press, Westport, CT, London.



*Online links*

<http://www.shmoop.com/macbeth/>

<http://www.shmoop.com/macbeth/questions.html>

<http://dramamacbeth/macbethplotact.shtml>

[http://www.bbc.co.uk/schools/gcsebiteize/english\\_literature](http://www.bbc.co.uk/schools/gcsebiteize/english_literature)

## **Unit 6: Macbeth – Concept of Tragedy of Aristotle and its Application on Macbeth, Poetic Tragedy and Motifs**

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### **Objectives**

After studying this unit, you will be able to:

- Apply the Aristotle's tragedy on Macbeth;
- Explain the tragedy of character in Macbeth;
- Elaborate the tragedy of moral order;
- Illustrate the poetic tragedy in Macbeth;
- Enumerate the motifs in Macbeth.

### **Introduction**

According to Aristotle, tragedies had certain recognizable sections which most of our surviving plays follow. A prologue, spoken by one or two characters, introduces the play's setting and major action. The parodos brings the chorus into the orchestra to become an audience and respondent to the characters. The body of the play alternates between episodes involving the principle actors and choral odes sung and danced by the chorus, to allow for the actors to change costumes and indicate the passage of time. The exodos concludes the play with all performers leaving the stage. Plays were written entirely in verse, although lyric passages and dramatic dialogue differed considerably in style. Choral odes exhibit a wide variety of meters, nearly impossible to convey in translation, which indicate changes in mood and subject, whether religious, solemn, excited, etc. Actors spoke

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verse sounding more like common speech but using heightened rhetoric for specific purposes: rhesis, monody, agon, stychomythia are the major forms. These make up the formal elements of tragedy.

Here in this unit details of Aristotle's tragedy and its application on Macbeth has been given. Poetic tragedy and motifs have also been described in this unit.

## 6.1 Aristotle's Concept of Tragedy and its Application on Macbeth

*Macbeth* is an anomaly among Shakespeare's tragedies in certain critical ways. It is short: more than a thousand lines shorter than *Othello* and *King Lear*, and only slightly more than half as long as *Hamlet*. This brevity has suggested to many critics that the received version is based on a heavily cut source, perhaps a prompt-book for a particular performance. That brevity has also been connected to other unusual features: the fast pace of the first act, which has seemed to be "stripped for action"; the comparative flatness of the characters other than Macbeth; the oddness of Macbeth himself compared with other Shakespearean tragic heroes.

### 6.1.1 Tragedy of Character

At least since the days of Alexander Pope and Samuel Johnson, analysis of the play has centred on the question of Macbeth's ambition, commonly seen as so dominant a trait that it defines the character. Johnson asserted that Macbeth, though esteemed for his military bravery, is wholly reviled. This opinion recurs in critical literature, and, according to Caroline Spurgeon, is supported by Shakespeare himself, who apparently intended to degrade his hero by vesting him with clothes unsuited to him and to make Macbeth look ridiculous by several nimisms he applies: His garments seem either too big or too small for him—as his ambition is too big and his character too small for his new and unrightful role as king. When he feels as if "dressed in borrowed clothes", after his new title as Thane of Cawdor, prophesied by the witches, has been confirmed by Rosse, Banquo comments: "New honours come upon him,/Like our strange garments, cleave not to their mould,/But with the aid of use." And, at the end, when the tyrant is at bay at Dunsinane, Caithness sees him as a man trying in vain to fasten a large garment on him with too small a belt: "He cannot buckle his distemper'd cause/Within the belt of rule," while Angus, in a similar nimism, sums up what everybody thinks ever since Macbeth's accession to power: "now does he feel his title/Hang loose about him, like a giant's robe/upon a dwarfish thief."

Like Richard III, but without that character's perversely appealing exuberance, Macbeth wades through blood until his inevitable fall. As Kenneth Muir writes, "Macbeth has not a predisposition to murder; he has merely an inordinate ambition that makes murder itself seem to be a lesser evil than failure to achieve the crown." Some critics, such as E. E. Stoll, explain this characterisation as a holdover from Senecan or medieval tradition. Shakespeare's audience, in this view, expected villains to be wholly bad, and Senecan style, far from prohibiting a villainous protagonist, all but demanded it.

Yet for other critics, it has not been so easy to resolve the question of Macbeth's motivation. Robert Bridges, for instance, perceived a paradox: a character able to express such convincing horror before Duncan's murder would likely be incapable of committing the crime.



*Notes* For many critics, Macbeth's motivations in the first act appear vague and insufficient. John Dover Wilson hypothesised that Shakespeare's original text had an extra scene or scenes where husband and wife discussed their plans. This interpretation is not fully provable; however, the motivating role of ambition for Macbeth is universally recognised. The evil actions motivated by his ambition seem to trap him in a cycle of increasing evil, as Macbeth himself recognises: "I am in blood/Stepp'd in so far that, should I wade no more,/Returning were as tedious as go o'er."

## 6.1.2 Tragedy of Moral Order

Notes

The disastrous consequences of Macbeth's ambition are not limited to him. Almost from the moment of the murder, the play depicts Scotland as a land shaken by inversions of the natural order. Shakespeare may have intended a reference to the great chain of being, although the play's images of disorder are mostly not specific enough to support detailed intellectual readings. He may also have intended an elaborate compliment to James's belief in the divine right of kings, although this hypothesis, outlined at greatest length by Henry N. Paul, is not universally accepted. As in *Julius Caesar*, though, perturbations in the political sphere are echoed and even amplified by events in the material world. Among the most often depicted of the inversions of the natural order is sleep. Macbeth's announcement that he has "murdered sleep" is figuratively mirrored in Lady Macbeth's sleepwalking.

Macbeth's generally accepted indebtedness to medieval tragedy is often seen as significant in the play's treatment of moral order. Glynne Wickham connects the play, through the Porter, to a mystery play on the harrowing of hell. Howard Felperin argues that the play has a more complex attitude toward "orthodox Christian tragedy" than is often admitted; he sees a kinship between the play and the tyrant plays within the medieval liturgical drama.

The theme of androgyny is often seen as a special aspect of the theme of disorder. Inversion of normative gender roles is most famously associated with the witches and with Lady Macbeth as she appears in the first act. Whatever Shakespeare's degree of sympathy with such inversions, the play ends with a thorough return to normative gender values. Some feminist psychoanalytic critics, such as Janet Adelman, have connected the play's treatment of gender roles to its larger theme of inverted natural order. In this light, Macbeth is punished for his violation of the moral order by being removed from the cycles of nature (which are figured as female); nature itself (as embodied in the movement of Birnam Wood) is part of the restoration of moral order.

## 6.1.3 Poetic Tragedy

Critics in the early twentieth century reacted against what they saw as an excessive dependence on the study of character in criticism of the play. This dependence, though most closely associated with Andrew Cecil Bradley, is clear as early as the time of Mary Cowden Clarke, who offered precise, if fanciful, accounts of the predramatic lives of Shakespeare's female leads. She suggested, for instance, that the child Lady Macbeth refers to in the first act died during a foolish military action.

### Witchcraft and Evil

In the play, the Three Witches represent darkness, chaos, and conflict, while their role is as agents and witnesses. Their presence communicates treason and impending doom. During Shakespeare's day, witches were seen as worse than rebels, "the most notorious traitor and rebell that can be." They were not only political traitors, but spiritual traitors as well. Much of the confusion that springs from them comes from their ability to straddle the play's borders between reality and the supernatural. They are so deeply entrenched in both worlds that it is unclear whether they control fate, or whether they are merely its agents. They defy logic, not being subject to the rules of the real world. The witches' lines in the first act: "Fair is foul, and foul is fair: Hover through the fog and filthy air" are often said to set the tone for the rest of the play by establishing a sense of confusion. Indeed, the play is filled with situations where evil is depicted as good, while good is rendered evil.



*Did u know?* The line "Double, double toil and trouble," often sensationalized to a point that it loses meaning, communicates the witches' intent clearly: they seek only trouble for the mortals around them.

## Notes

While the witches do not tell Macbeth directly to kill King Duncan, they use a subtle form of temptation when they tell Macbeth that he is destined to be king. By placing this thought in his mind, they effectively guide him on the path to his own destruction. This follows the pattern of temptation many believed the Devil used at the time of Shakespeare. First, they argued, a thought is put in a man's mind, then the person may either indulge in the thought or reject it. Macbeth indulges in it, while Banquo rejects.

According to J. A. Bryant Jr., Macbeth also makes use of Biblical parallels, notably between King Duncan's murder and the murder of Christ.



*Example:* No matter how one looks at it, whether as history or as tragedy, Macbeth is distinctively Christian. One may simply count the Biblical allusions as Richmond Noble has done; one may go further and study the parallels between Shakespeare's story and the Old Testament stories of Saul and Jezebel as Miss Jane H. Jack has done; or one may examine with W. C. Curry the progressive degeneration of Macbeth from the point of view of medieval theology.

### 6.1.4 Motifs

A motif is a recurring element, event, idea, or theme in a story. Shakespeare, when writing *Macbeth*, included many different motifs that added depth to this magnificent work.

#### Blood

Blood is often used to symbolize guilt, or the lack of it. For example, Macbeth has just murdered King Duncan and feels horribly guilty for his deed. Duncan had thought rather fondly of Macbeth, and had trusted him after his previous Thane of Cawdor had betrayed him.

This means that he feels extremely guilty, and does not believe that he will ever be able to overcome it. Not even Neptune, the god of the sea, could wash all of the blood away. In fact, it would turn the ocean red with blood.

Macbeth describes Duncan as having had "golden blood," which contrasts with his own. Duncan had no guilt and had done nothing to anger Macbeth, or to make him worthy of being murdered. In spite of this fact, Macbeth still murdered King Duncan and contaminated his blood in the process.

Another example of the blood motif occurs in Act V. Macduff has come and challenged Macbeth to a sword fight to which Macbeth refused. This happened because Macbeth didn't want to shed anymore blood (kill people) than he already has and because more bloodshed is more guilt. Macbeth is already suffering from his guilt and more guilt would just cause more problems for him.

#### Manipulation

Another motif in *Macbeth* is manipulation. Many people throughout the play attempt to manipulate others in order to fit their own needs and desires.

A prime example of this is with Lady Macbeth. She uses her influence with her husband to convince to murder King Duncan. Previously, Macbeth had written her a letter telling her of the events that had occurred, including his new title. He had just become the Thane of Cawdor and, based on the witches' prophecy, was in line to become a king. This made him mention his thoughts of killing King Duncan, which brought out the desire for power in his wife. When he arrived at his own castle, he decides to go along with her new plan to poison and stab the King. However, he starts expressing doubt later in the night after considering the King's trust in him. At this point, Lady Macbeth continues using manipulation to try to convince him to go along with it.

A second, and major, example of manipulation in *Macbeth* is with the three witches. They give the prophecy to Macbeth, knowing that he and his wife will plan to murder King Duncan in order to fulfill it.

The witches yet manipulate Macbeths yet again near the end when they show him various confusing apparitions. Hecate commands them to confuse Macbeth and give him a sense of security that will lead to his downfall. The first apparition, an armed head, warns Macbeth of Macduff. Macbeth then decides to have Macduff's family murdered. Macduff ends up killing Macbeth as revenge, showing how the witches manipulated Macbeth into his downfall.

The second apparition, a bloody child, tells Macbeth that none born of a woman can harm him. When Macbeth finally meets Macduff, Macbeth tells him this prophecy, but Macduff tells him that he was prematurely born through surgery. Once again, the witches succeeded in manipulating Macbeth by providing him with a false sense of security.

The third apparition, a crowned child with a tree in his hand, tells him that no one will harm him until the forest of Great Birnam Wood comes against him on Dunsinane Hill. The opposing forces take branches from the forest's tress and use them to hide themselves from Macbeth's forces.

### Reversal of Nature

One of the most common motifs in Macbeth is reversal of nature. This is prominent in role reversal between characters, unnatural weather, masculinity and femininity reversal, and unusual events.

We are first presented in Macbeth with the three witches, who show characteristics of their male counterparts such as a beard.

The second example of "reversal of nature" is with Lady Macbeth and her masculine characteristics when compared to the norm at the time and her husband's femininity. After she reads her husband's letter, she asks for the gods to "unsex" her and therefore, remove all feminine feeling from her mind. She takes charge over Macbeth, which was unusual for the time. Macbeth meanwhile falters under her manipulation. The weather also shows evidence of the reversal of the natural order.

### Hallucinations

Hallucination is an important motif for character development because it shows how the two main characters, Macbeth and Lady Macbeth, slowly go insane. Their decreasing mental state is easily told by their various fits of hallucinations and visions.

Some of the first examples of this occur around Duncan's death. Macbeth believes that people are calling out in the night.



*Notes* After Macbeth commands the killing of Banquo, he sees Banquo's ghost sitting in his seat. This, like with the dagger, shows his regret in killing others. He ends up embarrassing himself in front of a group of lords whom he had invited to dinner. His wife tries to calm him, but in the end the lords are made to leave early.

### Self Assessment

Multiple Choice Questions:

1. Which of the following is true about Macbeth?
  - (a) It is tragedy
  - (b) The Othello and King Lear are shorter than it
  - (c) It is a comedy of manners
  - (d) It is a comedy for class power struggle.

Notes

2. Macbeth is a tragedy of character as proved by
  - (a) his character of high ambition
  - (b) his ambition too big and his character too small for his new role as king
  - (c) his character of a coward
  - (d) his motivation to kill the others.
3. Which of the following motifs is not used in Macbeth?
  - (a) Blood, manipulation, reversal of nature, and hallucination
  - (b) Thinking, Blood, and manipulation
  - (c) Killing, blood, and manipulation
  - (d) Thinking, killing, and blood.

Fill in the blanks:

4. A motif is a recurring element, event, idea, or theme in a .....
5. In the play, the Three Witches represent darkness, ....., and conflict.
6. The disastrous consequences of Macbeth's ..... are not limited to him.
7. Macbeth's generally accepted indebtedness to medieval tragedy is often seen as significant in the play's treatment of .....

State whether the following statements are true or false:

8. Blood is often used to symbolize guilt, or the lack of it.
9. Many people throughout the play attempt to manipulate others in order to fit their own needs and desires.
10. One of the most common motifs in Macbeth is killing.

## 6.2 Summary

- *Macbeth* is an anomaly among Shakespeare's tragedies in certain critical ways.
- It is short: more than a thousand lines shorter than *Othello* and *King Lear*, and only slightly more than half as long as *Hamlet*. This brevity has suggested to many critics that the received version is based on a heavily cut source, perhaps a prompt-book for a particular performance.
- At least since the days of Alexander Pope and Samuel Johnson, analysis of the play has centred on the question of Macbeth's ambition, commonly seen as so dominant a trait that it defines the character.
- Johnson asserted that Macbeth, though esteemed for his military bravery, is wholly reviled. This opinion recurs in critical literature, and, according to Caroline Spurgeon, is supported by Shakespeare himself, who apparently intended to degrade his hero by vesting him with clothes unsuited to him and to make Macbeth look ridiculous by several nimisms he applies: His garments seem either too big or too small for him—as his ambition is too big and his character too small for his new and unrightful role as king.
- The disastrous consequences of Macbeth's ambition are not limited to him. Almost from the moment of the murder, the play depicts Scotland as a land shaken by inversions of the natural order.
- Macbeth's generally accepted indebtedness to medieval tragedy is often seen as significant in the play's treatment of moral order.

- The theme of androgyny is often seen as a special aspect of the theme of disorder.
- Inversion of normative gender roles is most famously associated with the witches and with Lady Macbeth as she appears in the first act.
- In the play, the Three Witches represent darkness, chaos, and conflict, while their role is as agents and witnesses. Their presence communicates treason and impending doom.
- While the witches do not tell Macbeth directly to kill King Duncan, they use a subtle form of temptation when they tell Macbeth that he is destined to be king. By placing this thought in his mind, they effectively guide him on the path to his own destruction.
- A motif is a recurring element, event, idea, or theme in a story. Shakespeare, when writing Macbeth, included many different motifs that added depth to this magnificent work.
- Blood is often used to symbolize guilt, or the lack of it.
- Many people throughout the play attempt to manipulate others in order to fit their own needs and desires.
- One of the most common motifs in Macbeth is reversal of nature. This is prominent in role reversal between characters, unnatural weather, masculinity and femininity reversal, and unusual events.
- Hallucination is an important motif for character development because it shows how the two main characters, Macbeth and Lady Macbeth, slowly go insane.

### 6.3 Keywords

- Senecan* : A member of the largest tribe of the iroquois Confederacy of North American Indians, formerly inhabiting western New York and being conspicuous in the wars south and west of Lake Erie.
- Moral order* : This is the idea of a continuous cycle of life and death for one's soul.
- Mystery play* : A medieval dramatic form based on a Biblical story, usually dealing with the life, death, and resurrection of Christ.
- Liturgical drama* : Medieval drama, based on incidents in the Bible and performed in churches on holy days, usually in Latin and often chanted.
- Androgyny* : Being both male and female; hermaphroditic.
- Witchcraft* : The art or practices of a witch; sorcery; magic.
- Treason* : The offense of acting to overthrow one's government or to harm or kill its sovereign.

### 6.4 Review Questions

1. Define Aristotle tragedy.
2. Mention any two applications of Aristotle's tragedy to Macbeth.
3. What is meant by Poetic Tragedy?
4. Write short notes on the following terms:  
(a) Hallucinations                      (b) Reversal of nature                      (c) Blood
5. Write the two characters each of  
(a) Tragic character                      (b) Moral order                      (c) Motifs
6. Explain the application of the motifs blood, hallucination, and manipulations to Macbeth.



Notes

7. Explain tragedy of a character in context of Macbeth?
8. Elaborate the tragedy of moral order in Macbeth?

**Answers: Self Assessment**

- |                |          |             |
|----------------|----------|-------------|
| 1. (b)         | 2. (b)   | 3. (c)      |
| 4. story       | 5. chaos | 6. ambition |
| 7. moral order | 8. True  | 9. True     |
| 10. False      |          |             |

**6.5 Further Readings**



*Books*

James Shapiro. 2006. *A Year in the Life of William Shakespeare: 1599*. Harper Perennial, UK.

William Shakespeare (A), G. Blakemore Evans and J. J. M. Tobin (eds.). 1996. *The Riverside Shakespeare*, 2nd Edition. Houghton Mifflin Company, UK.

Coursen, H. R. 1997. *MACBETH A Guide to the Play*. Greenwood Press, Westport, CT, London.



*Online links*

<http://macbethmotif.wikispaces.com/Hallucinations+Motif>

<http://www.shmoop.com/macbeth/questions.html>

<http://dramamacbeth/macbethplotact.shtml>

[http://www.bbc.co.uk/schools/gcsebitesize/english\\_literature](http://www.bbc.co.uk/schools/gcsebitesize/english_literature)

## Unit 7: Macbeth: Characterization and Superstition

Notes

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### Objectives

After studying this unit, you will be able to:

- Elaborate the virtues of various characters in Macbeth;
- Explain the the weakness of Macbeth character, his vaulting ambition and the influence of Lady Macbeth on him;
- Illustrate the appearance of incidental characters in the play;
- Understands the superstition associated with Macbeth.

### Introduction

The *Tragedy of Macbeth* is a play by William Shakespeare about a regicide and its aftermath and revolves round a character Macbeth. Though the sources of this tragedy are accounts of King Macbeth of Scotland, Macduff, and Duncan in Holinshed's *Chronicles* (1587), a history of England, Scotland and Ireland familiar to Shakespeare and his contemporaries, the story bears little relation to real events in Scottish history, as Macbeth was an admired and able monarch. The characterization of the play is so remarkably generated that it seems a real happenings in the history. For example, at the beginning of the play Macbeth is the "bravest" soldier and the honorable Thane of Glamis. His rank and nobility are of great value, and he seems to be fit for his status. But his encounter with the witches awakens in him a deep impatient ambition. Immediately after the first prophecy of being Thane of Cawdor becomes true the "horrid image" of the murder of King Duncan in order to become king himself crosses his mind. He is not totally cold and solely ambitious as shown by his terror of

**Notes**

the murder image, which thoroughly defies his loyalty. There is love in Macbeth as shown by his letter to Lady Macbeth in which he calls her his “dearest partner of greatness.” Macbeth is already thinking about being king but he is undecided about whether it is better to succumb to the temptation presented by the witches or to wait for Fate to crown him. Banquo warns him that at times evil forces “tell us truths . . . to betray’s in deepest consequence.” Other characters also suit to their actions. For the strong character appeal the play has attracted some of the greatest actors in the roles of Macbeth and Lady Macbeth. It has been adapted to film, television, opera, novels, comic books, and other media.

Here in this unit detail characterization of the play has been given. Detailed analysis of Macbeth and superstitions of various characters have also been dealt with in this unit.

## **7.1 Characterization**

### **Duncan, King of Scotland**

A kindly and trusting older man, Duncan’s unsuspecting nature leaves him open to Macbeth’s betrayal. Both before and after the regicide, it is Duncan’s particularly virtuous nature that enhances Macbeth’s sense of guilt. The historic Duncan, incidentally, was a young man when he was betrayed by his general Macbeth.

### **Malcolm and Donalbain, Duncan’s Sons**

Although Malcolm and Donalbain seem to have inherited Duncan’s fairness, both display a cunning that far surpasses their father. After Duncan’s death, they fear for their lives rightly and both flee Scotland. Malcolm also tests Macduff’s loyalty whilst abroad by putting on dishonorable and corrupt airs. Such cunning, or shrewdness, allows for their successful return to the crown of Scotland.

### **Macbeth, Thane of Glamis**

Macbeth is a general in the king’s army and originally the Thane of Glamis. As a reward for his valiant fighting, described in the opening scene, Macbeth is also named the Thane of Cawdor. Appropriately, the former Thane of Cawdor was a traitor to the crown who appeared loyal. At heart, Macbeth does not deserve the adjective “evil.” To be sure, he commits regicide and eventually orders the death of women and children alike.



*Notes* Unlike Iago of *Othello* or Edmund of *King Lear*, Macbeth is not an explicitly malicious villain. His initial crime is a product of opportunistic prophecies, a weakness of character, his “vaulting ambition,” and certainly the influence of Lady Macbeth. Thereafter, he is compelled to commit further crimes in an attempt to cover his tracks and defy the three witches’ prophecy. After Duncan’s death and the flight of Malcolm and Donalbain, Macbeth reigns as king of Scotland until his death.

### **Lady Macbeth, Macbeth’s Wife**

What Macbeth lacks in decisiveness, Lady Macbeth makes up for in bloodthirsty lust for power and wealth. Swearing off her femininity at the beginning of the play, Lady Macbeth manipulates her husband powerfully to follow through with his plans to kill Duncan. After the act of regicide, it is Lady Macbeth who has the soundness of mind to plant the incriminating evidence on Duncan’s guards. And yet, her firmness disintegrates gradually as the play progresses, leading to nightmares that haunt her and ultimately drive her to suicide. In this regard, Lady Macbeth appears to switch

characters with Macbeth midway through the play. Although most famous for her cruelty and lines such as “unsex me here,” the decline of Lady Macbeth is also of great interest and certainly a mysterious aspect of Macbeth.

Notes



*Task* Illucidate that Lady Macbeth has bloodthirsty lust for power and wealth while Macbeth lacks in decisiveness.

### **Seyton, Macbeth’s Servant**

Macbeth’s servant

### **Banquo, Thane of Lochaber**

A general in Duncan’s army along with Macbeth, Banquo is also the subject of one of the witches’ prophecies. Unlike Macbeth, however, Banquo does not act to fulfill these prophecies. He instead relies on his better judgement and morals. And true to the witches’ words, his son Fleance escapes Macbeth’s murderers to become a future king. Banquo is also important in that his ghost returns to haunt Macbeth, thus instilling a strong sense of uneasiness among Macbeth’s servants.

### **Fleance, Banquo’s Son**

Fleance is Banquo’s son. He alone escapes from the ambush set by Macbeth for him and his father.

### **Macduff, Thane of Fife**

A Scottish nobleman who questions Macbeth’s tyrannical rule and refuses to recognize him as king. Macduff follows Malcolm to England, where he demonstrates his true faithfulness to Scotland. When the English army marches on Dunsinane, it is Macduff who slays Macbeth in a duel. For even though Macbeth is said to be invincible against any man born of a woman, Macduff was born by the equivalent of a Caesarean section.

### **Lady Macduff, Macduff’s Wife**

A kind and motherly foil for Lady Macbeth’s lack of feminine sympathies, she is killed along with her children after Macduff flees Scotland.

### **Lennox, a Scottish Noble**

A Scottish noble who gradually questions Macbeth’s tyrannical rule.

### **Ross, Macbeth’s Cousin**

Macbeth’s cousin, Ross is a Scottish noble who eventually turns on Macbeth, choosing to side with Malcolm and the English forces.

### **Siward, Earl of Northumberland**

As Duncan’s brother, he leads the English army against Macbeth. His army disguises itself with branches from Birnam Wood, thereby fulfilling the witches’ prophecy that Macbeth will fall only when “Birnam Wood remove to Dunsinane.” Siward is also a proud father, declaring his approval when his son dies bravely in battle.

Notes

**Three Witches, the Weird Sisters**

The witches foresee Macbeth's ascent to power and his defeat, as well as the succession of Banquo's line. Apparently without any real motive, their speech is full of paradox and equivocation. Although the witches do not have much character *per se*, they are in many ways central to the plot and themes of the play.

**Hecate, Queen of the Witches**

Some critics believe that her character was added to the play by a later playwright.

**Self Assessment**

Multiple Choice Questions:

1. Duncan's unsuspecting nature leaves him open to
  - (a) Macbeth's betrayal
  - (b) Macbeth's loyalty
  - (c) Macbeth's guilt
  - (d) betrayal by his army.
2. Which of the following statements about Macbeth is incorrect?
  - (a) Macbeth is a general in the Duncan's army
  - (b) Macbeth do deserve the adjective evil
  - (c) Macbeth is also named the Thane of Cawdor
  - (d) Macbeth is originally the Thane of Glamis.
3. Which of the following makes a difference between Macbeth and Banquo?
  - (a) Macbeth is a general in the army of Duncan while Banquo is not
  - (b) Macbeth is subject of one of the witches' prophesies while Banquo is not
  - (c) Both are subject of one of the witches' prophesies but Banquo does not act to fulfill these prophesies
  - (d) Macbeth betrays the king while Banquo does not.

Fill in the blanks:

4. Duncan's unsuspecting nature leaves him open to Macbeth's .....
5. After Duncan's death, both malcom and Donalbain, Duncan's sons fear for their lives rightly and both ..... Scotland.
6. Macduff is a Scottish nobleman who questions Macbeth's ..... and refuses to recognize him as king.
7. Siward, Duncan's brother, leads the English army against .....

State whether the following statements are true or false:

8. The witches foresee Macbeth's ascent to power and the killing of Banquo.
9. Some critics believe that the character of hecate was added to the play by a later playwright.
10. Both before and after the regicide, it is Duncan's particularly virtuous nature that enhances Macbeth's sense of guilt.

## 7.2 Character of Macbeth

Notes

The first thought of acceding to the throne is suggested, and success in the attempt is promised, to Macbeth by the witches; he is therefore represented as a man whose natural temper would have deterred him from such a design if he had not been immediately tempted and strongly impelled to it.

A distinction between Richard III and Macbeth is made in the article of courage, though both are possessed of it even to an eminent degree; but in Richard it is intrepidity, and in Macbeth no more than resolution: in him it proceeds from exertion, not from nature; in enterprise he betrays a degree of fear, though he is able, when occasion requires, to stifle and subdue it. When he and his wife are concerting the murder, his doubt, 'If we should fail,' is a difficulty raised by apprehension; and as soon as that is removed by the contrivance of Lady Macbeth, he runs with violence into the other extreme of confidence. His question: 'Will it not be received,' and proceeds from that extravagance with which a delivery from apprehension and doubt is always accompanied. Then summoning all his fortitude, he proceeds to the bloody business without any further recoils. But a certain degree of restlessness and anxiety still continues, such as is constantly felt by a man not naturally very bold, worked up to a momentous achievement. His imagination dwells entirely on the circumstances of horror which surround him; the vision of the dagger; the darkness and the stillness of the night, etc... A resolution thus forced cannot hold longer than the immediate occasion for it: the moment after that is accomplished for which it was necessary, his thoughts take the contrary turn, and he cries out in agony and despair. He refuses to return to the chamber and complete his work. His disordered senses deceive him; he owns that 'every noise appals him.' He listens when nothing stirs; he mistakes the sounds he does hear; he is so confused, as not to distinguish whence the knocking proceeds. She, who is more calm, knows that it is at the south entry; she gives clear and distinct answers to all his incoherent questions, but he returns none to that which she puts to him. All his answers to the trivial questions of Lenox and Macduff are evidently given by a man thinking of something else; and by taking a tincture from the subject of his attention, they become equivocal.

Macbeth commits subsequent murders with less agitation than that of Duncan; but this is no inconsistency in his character; on the contrary, it confirms the principles upon which it is formed; for, besides his being hardened to the deeds of death, he is impelled by other motives than those which instigated him to assassinate his sovereign. In the one he sought to gratify his ambition; the rest are for his security; and he gets rid of fear by guilt, which, to a mind so constituted, may be the less uneasy sensation of the two. The anxiety which prompts him to the destruction of Banquo arises entirely from apprehension. For though one principle reason of his jealousy was the prophecy of the witches in favour of Banquo's issue, yet here starts forth another quite consistent with a temper not quite free from timidity. He is afraid of him personally; that fear is founded on the superior courage of the other, and he feels himself under an awe before him; a situation which a dauntless spirit can never get into. So great are these terrors that he betrays them to the murderers. As the murder is for his own security, the same apprehension which checked him in his designs upon Duncan, impel him to this upon Banquo.



*Task* "Macbeth commits subsequent murders with less agitation than that of Duncan."

Illustrate this statement keeping in view the ambition of Macbeth.

Macbeth is always shaken upon great, and frequently alarmed upon trivial, occasions. Upon meeting the Witches, he is agitated much more than Banquo, who speaks to them first, and, the moment he sees them, asks them several particular and pertinent questions. But Macbeth, though he has had time to recollect himself, only repeats the same inquiry shortly, and bids them 'Speak, if you can: —

## Notes

What are you?' Which parts may appear to be injudiciously distributed; Macbeth being the principal personage in the play, and most immediately concerned in this particular scene, and it being to him that the Witches first address themselves. But the difference in their character accounts for such a distribution. Banquo's contemptuous defiance of the Witches seemed so bold to Macbeth, that he long after mentions it as an instance of his dauntless spirit, when he recollects that he 'chid the sisters.'

Macbeth has an acquired, though not a constitutional, courage, which is equal to all ordinary occasions; and if it fails him upon those which are extraordinary, it is however so well formed, as to be easily resumed as soon as the shock is over. But his idea never rises above manliness of character, and he continually asserts his right to that character; which he would not do if he did not take to himself a merit in supporting it. Upon the first appearance of Banquo's ghost, Lady Macbeth endeavors to recover him from his terror by summoning this consideration to his view: 'Are you a man,' 'Aye, and a bold one.' He puts in the same claim again, upon the ghost's rising again, and says, 'What man dare, I dare,' and on its disappearing finally, he says, 'I am a man again.' And even at the last, when he finds that the prophecy in which he had confided has deceived him by its equivocation, he says that 'it hath cow'd my better part of man.' In all which passages he is apparently shaken out of that character to which he had formed himself, but for which he relied only on exertion of courage, without supposing insensibility to fear.

Macbeth wants no disguise of his natural disposition, for it is not bad; he does not affect more piety than he has: on the contrary, a part of his distress arises from a real sense of religion: which makes him regret that he could not join the chamberlains in prayer for God's blessing, and bewail that he has 'given his eternal jewel to the common enemy of man.' He continually reproaches himself for his deeds; no use can harden him: confidence cannot silence, and even despair cannot stifle, the cries of his conscience. By the first murder he put 'rancours in the vessel of his peace;' and of the last he owns to Macduff, 'My soul is too much charged with blood of thine already.'

Against Banquo he acts with more determination, for the reasons which have been given: and yet he most unnecessarily acquaints the murderers with the reasons of his conduct; and even informs them of the behaviour he proposes to observe afterwards, which particularly and explanation to men who did not desire it; the confidence he places in those who could only abuse it; and the very needless caution of secrecy implied in this speech, are so many symptoms of a feeble mind; which again appears, when, after they had undertaken the business, he bids them 'resolve themselves apart;' and thereby leaves them an opportunity to retract, if they had not been more determined than he is, who supposes time to be requisite for settling such resolutions. His sending a third murderer to join the others, just at the moment of action, and without notice, is a further proof of the same imbecility.

Besides the proofs which have been given of these weaknesses in his character, through the whole conduct of his designs against Duncan and Banquo, another may be drawn from his attempt upon Macduff, whom he first sends for without acquainting Lady Macbeth of his intention, then betrays the secret, by asking her after the company have risen from the banquet, 'How say'st thou, that Macduff denies his person At our great bidding?' 'Did you send to him, sir?' 'I hear it by the way: but I will send.' The time of making this enquiry when it has no relation to what has just passed otherwise than as his apprehension might connect it; the addressing of the question to her, who, as appears from what she says, knew nothing of the matter – and his awkward attempt then to disguise it, are strong evidence of the disorder of his mind.

## **7.3 Superstition on Various Characters of Macbeth**

### **7.3.1 Few Examples**

While many today would say that any misfortune surrounding a production is mere coincidence, actors and other theatre people often consider it bad luck to mention Macbeth by name while inside

a theatre, and sometimes refer to it indirectly, for example as “the Scottish play”, or “MacBee”, or when referring to the character and not the play, “Mr. and Mrs. M”, or “The Scottish King.”

This is because Shakespeare is said to have used the spells of real witches in his text, purportedly angering the witches and causing them to curse the play. Thus, to say the name of the play inside a theatre is believed to doom the production to failure, and perhaps cause physical injury or death to cast members. There are stories of accidents, misfortunes and even deaths taking place during runs of Macbeth (or by actors who had uttered the name).

One particular incident that lent itself to the superstition was the Astor Place Riot. Because the cause of these riots was based on a conflict over two performances of Macbeth, this is often thought of as having been caused by the curse.

### 7.3.2 Methods to Dispel the Curse

Several methods exist to dispel the curse, depending on the actor. One, attributed to Michael York, is to immediately leave the building the stage is in with the person who uttered the name, walk around it three times, spit over their left shoulders, say an obscenity then wait to be invited back into the building. A related practice is to spin around three times as fast as possible on the spot, sometimes accompanied by spitting over their shoulder, and uttering an obscenity. Another popular “ritual” is to leave the room, knock three times, be invited in, and then quote a line from Hamlet. Yet another is to recite lines from *The Merchant of Venice*, thought to be a lucky play.

### Self Assessment

Multiple Choice Questions:

11. The anxiety which prompts Macbeth to the destruction of Banquo arises entirely from
  - (a) apprehension
  - (b) fear
  - (c) prophesy
  - (d) superstition.
12. Which of the following is not a method to dispel the curse?
  - (a) Spin around three times
  - (b) Uttering an ill-will
  - (c) Knock three times
  - (d) Spit over the left shoulder.
13. Macbeth has an acquired, though not a constitutional, courage, which is equal to
  - (a) all special occasions
  - (b) only special occasions
  - (c) all ordinary occasions
  - (d) only ritual occasions.

Fill in the blanks:

14. The first thought of acceding to the throne is suggested, and success in the attempt is promised, to Macbeth by the .....
15. Macbeth commits murders with less agitation than that of .....



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16. Macbeth wants no disguise of his ..... disposition.
17. Macbeth is always shaken upon great, and frequently ..... upon trivial, occasions.

State whether the following statements are true or false:

18. A distinction between Richard III and Macbeth is made in the article of courage.
19. There are stories of accidents, misfortunes and even deaths taking place during runs of Macbeth.
20. Only a few methods exist to dispel the curse, depending on the actor.

## 7.4 Summary

- The *Tragedy of Macbeth* is a play by William Shakespeare about a regicide and its aftermath and revolves round a character Macbeth.
- Though the sources of this tragedy are accounts of King Macbeth of Scotland, Macduff, and Duncan in Holinshed's *Chronicles* (1587), a history of England, Scotland and Ireland familiar to Shakespeare and his contemporaries, the story bears little relation to real events in Scottish history, as Macbeth was an admired and able monarch.
- The characterization of the play is so remarkably generated that it seems a real happenings in the history.
- Macbeth is not totally cold and solely ambitious as shown by his terror of the murder image, which thoroughly defies his loyalty. There is love in Macbeth as shown by his letter to Lady Macbeth in which he calls her his "dearest partner of greatness."
- Duncan, King of Scotland is a kindly and trusting older man, Duncan's unsuspecting nature leaves him open to Macbeth's betrayal.
- Malcolm and Donalbain seem to have inherited Duncan's fairness, both display a cunning that far surpasses their father.
- What Macbeth lacks in decisiveness, Lady Macbeth makes up for in bloodthirsty lust for power and wealth. Swearing off her femininity at the beginning of the play, Lady Macbeth manipulates her husband powerfully to follow through with his plans to kill Duncan.
- Banquo, a general in Duncan's army along with Macbeth, Banquo is also the subject of one of the witches' prophesies. Unlike Macbeth, however, Banquo does not act to fulfill these prophesies.
- Macduff, a Scottish nobleman who questions Macbeth's tyrannical rule and refuses to recognize him as king. Macduff follows Malcolm to England, where he demonstrates his true faithfulness to Scotland.
- The witches foresee Macbeth's ascent to power and his defeat, as well as the succession of Banquo's line.
- The first thought of acceding to the throne is suggested, and success in the attempt is promised, to Macbeth by the witches
- A distinction between Richard III and Macbeth is made in the article of courage, though both are possessed of it even to an eminent degree; but in Richard it is intrepidity, and in Macbeth no more than resolution
- Macbeth commits subsequent murders with less agitation than that of Duncan; but this is no inconsistency in his character; on the contrary, it confirms the principles upon which it is formed.

- Besides his being hardened to the deeds of death, Macbeth is impelled by other motives than those which instigated him to assassinate his sovereign.
- Macbeth is always shaken upon great, and frequently alarmed upon trivial, occasions. Upon meeting the Witches, he is agitated much more than Banquo, who speaks to them first, and, the moment he sees them, asks them several particular and pertinent questions.
- Macbeth has an acquired, though not a constitutional, courage, which is equal to all ordinary occasions; and if it fails him upon those which are extraordinary, it is however so well formed, as to be easily resumed as soon as the shock is over.
- Macbeth wants no disguise of his natural disposition, for it is not bad; he does not affect more piety than he has: on the contrary, a part of his distress arises from a real sense of religion: which makes him regret that he could not join the chamberlains in prayer for God's blessing, and bewail that he has 'given his eternal jewel to the common enemy of man.'
- While many today would say that any misfortune surrounding a production is mere coincidence, actors and other theatre people often consider it bad luck to mention Macbeth by name while inside a theatre, and sometimes refer to it indirectly.
- The above is pertinent to the fact that Shakespeare is said to have used the spells of real witches in his text, purportedly angering the witches and causing them to curse the play.
- One particular incident that lent itself to the superstition was the Astor Place Riot.
- Several methods exist to dispel the curse, depending on the actor.

## 7.5 Keywords

- Virtuous nature* : Conforming to moral and ethical principles; morally excellent; upright nature.
- Betrayal* : To deliver or expose to an enemy by treachery or disloyalty.
- Shrewdness* : Astute or sharp in practical matters.
- Regicide* : A person who kills a king or is responsible for his death, especially one of the judges who condemned Charles I of England to death.
- Prophecies* : Something that is declared by a prophet, especially a divinely inspired prediction, instruction, or exhortation.
- Contrivance* : Something contrived; a device, especially a mechanical one.
- Timidity* : Lacking in self-assurance, courage, or bravery; easily alarmed; timorous; shy.
- Imbecility* : An instance or point of weakness; feebleness; incapability.
- Superstition* : A belief or notion, not based on reason or knowledge, in or of the ominous significance of a particular thing, circumstance, occurrence, proceeding, or the like.
- Obscenity* : The character or quality of being obscene; indecency; lewdness.

## 7.6 Review Questions

1. Explain superstitions as mentioned in the play Macbeth.
2. Mention any two qualities of Lady Macbeth's character.
3. Explain that Duncan's unsuspecting nature leaves him open to Macbeth's betrayal.
4. Write short notes on the following:
  - (a) Superstition
  - (b) Methods to dispel the curse

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5. Write the two characters each of  
 (a) Duncan                                      (b) Banquo                                      (c) Malcolm
6. Cite a few examples illustrating the weaknesses of Macbeth's character.
7. Illustrate that apparently without any real motive, the speech of three witches is full of paradox and equivocation.
8. Give a brief description of the characterization of Macbeth?

**Answers: Self Assessment**

- |             |             |                    |
|-------------|-------------|--------------------|
| 1. (a)      | 2. (b)      | 3. (c)             |
| 4. betrayal | 5. flee     | 6. tyrannical rule |
| 7. Macbeth  | 8. False    | 9. True            |
| 10. True    | 11. (a)     | 12. (b)            |
| 13. (c)     | 14. witches | 15. Duncan         |
| 16. natural | 17. alarmed | 18. True           |
| 19. True    | 20. False   |                    |

**7.7 Further Readings**



*Books*

William Shakespeare (A), G. Blakemore Evans and J. J. M. Tobin (eds.). 1996. *The Riverside Shakespeare*, 2nd Edition. Houghton Mifflin Company, UK.

Coursen, H. R. 1997. *MACBETH A Guide to the Play*. Greenwood Press, Westport, CT, London.



*Online links*

<http://www.sparknotes.com/shakespeare/macbeth/characters.html>

<http://www.playshakespeare.com/macbeth/characters>

<http://www.angelfire.com/tx3/chrissandy1/camacbeth.htm>

## Unit 8: Macbeth: Plot Construction and Themes

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### Objectives

After studying this unit, you will be able to:

- Illustrate the plot construction in various scenes in Macbeth;
- Explain that the plot of Macbeth is set in motion ostensibly by the prophecy of the three witches;
- Elaborate the various themes that play key factor in the motion of the drama.

### Introduction

The play begins with the brief appearance of a trio of witches and then moves to a military camp, where the Scottish King Duncan hears the news that his generals, Macbeth and Banquo, have defeated two separate invading armies – one from Ireland, led by the rebel Macdonwald, and one from Norway. Following their pitched battle with these enemy forces, Macbeth and Banquo encounter the witches as they cross a moor. The witches prophesy that Macbeth will be made thane of Cawdor

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and eventually King of Scotland. Thus prophecy sets *Macbeth's* plot in motion – namely, the witches' prophecy that Macbeth will become first thane of Cawdor and then king. The weird sisters make a number of other prophecies: they tell us that Banquo's heirs will be kings, that Macbeth should beware Macduff, that Macbeth is safe till Birnam Wood comes to Dunsinane, and that no man born of woman can harm Macbeth. Save for the prophecy about Banquo's heirs, all of these predictions are fulfilled within the course of the play.

Themes are the fundamental and often universal ideas explored in a literary work. The main theme of *Macbeth* – the destruction wrought when ambition goes unchecked by moral constraints – finds its most powerful expression in the play's two main characters. Macbeth is a courageous Scottish general who is not naturally inclined to commit evil deeds, yet he deeply desires power and advancement. He kills Duncan against his better judgment and afterward stewes in guilt and paranoia. Toward the end of the play he descends into a kind of frantic, boastful madness. Visions and hallucinations recur throughout the play and serve as reminders of Macbeth and Lady Macbeth's joint culpability for the growing body count. *Macbeth* is a famously violent play. Interestingly, most of the killings take place offstage, but throughout the play the characters provide the audience with gory descriptions of the carnage, from the opening scene where the captain describes Macbeth and Banquo wading in blood on the battlefield, to the endless references to the bloodstained hands of Macbeth and his wife.

Here in this unit details of plot construction and the themes explored in the play have been described.

## 8.1 Plot Construction

The first act of the play opens amidst thunder and lightning with the Three Witches deciding that their next meeting shall be with Macbeth. In the following scene, a wounded sergeant reports to King Duncan of Scotland that his generals – Macbeth, who is the Thane of Glamis, and Banquo – have just defeated the allied forces of Norway and Ireland, who were led by the traitor Macdonwald. Macbeth, the King's kinsman, is praised for his bravery and fighting prowess.

The scene changes. Macbeth and Banquo enter, discussing the weather and their victory. As they wander onto a heath, the Three Witches enter, who have waited to greet them with prophecies. Even though Banquo challenges them first, they address Macbeth. The first witch hails Macbeth as "Thane of Glamis," the second as "Thane of Cawdor," and the third proclaims that he shall "be King hereafter." Macbeth appears to be stunned to silence, so again Banquo challenges them. The witches inform Banquo that he will father a line of kings, though he himself will not be one. While the two men wonder at these pronouncements, the witches vanish, and another thane, Ross, a messenger from the King, arrives and informs Macbeth of his newly bestowed title: Thane of Cawdor. The first prophecy is thus fulfilled. Immediately, Macbeth begins to harbour ambitions of becoming king.



*Notes* Macbeth writes to his wife about the witches' prophecies. When Duncan decides to stay at the Macbeths' castle at Inverness, Lady Macbeth hatches a plan to murder him and secure the throne for her husband. Although Macbeth raises concerns about the regicide, Lady Macbeth eventually persuades him, by challenging his manhood, to follow her plan.

On the night of the king's visit, Macbeth hallucinates before entering Duncan's quarters, believing he sees a bloody dagger. Macbeth later reunites with his wife, having done the deed. He is so shaken that Lady Macbeth has to take charge. In accordance with her plan, she frames Duncan's sleeping servants for the murder by placing bloody daggers on them. Early the next morning, Lennox, a Scottish nobleman, and Macduff, the loyal Thane of Fife, arrive. A porter opens the gate and Macbeth leads them to the king's chamber, where Macduff discovers Duncan's corpse. In a feigned fit of

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anger, Macbeth murders the guards before they can protest their innocence. Macduff is immediately suspicious of Macbeth, but does not reveal his suspicions publicly. Fearing for their lives, Duncan's sons flee Malcolm to England and Donalbain to Ireland. The rightful heirs' flight makes them suspects and Macbeth assumes the throne as the new King of Scotland as a kinsman of the dead king. Banquo reveals this to the audience with his sceptical words of the new King Macbeth.

Despite his success, Macbeth remains uneasy about the prophecy about Banquo, so Macbeth invites him to a royal banquet where he discovers that Banquo and his young son, Fleance, will be riding out that night. He hires two men to kill them; a third murderer appears in the park before the murder. The assassins kill Banquo, but Fleance escapes. At the banquet, Macbeth invites his lords and Lady Macbeth to a night of drinking and merriment. Banquo's ghost enters and sits in Macbeth's place. Macbeth sees the spectre - he is the only person who can - and refuses to sit. As he grows furious, the rest panic at the sight of Macbeth raging at an empty chair, until a desperate Lady Macbeth tells them that her husband is merely afflicted with a familiar and harmless malady. The ghost departs and returns once more, causing the same riotous anger in Macbeth. This time, the lords flee.



*Task* "Despite his success, Macbeth remains uneasy about the prophecy about Banquo." Illustrate this statement keeping in view the fear Macbeth has for the prospects of his kingship.

Macbeth, disturbed, visits the Three Witches once more. They conjure up three spirits with three further warnings and prophecies: an armed head tells him to, "beware Macduff," a bloody child, that warns, "none of woman born shall harm Macbeth," and a crowned child holding a tree, stating Macbeth will "never vanquish'd be until Great Birnam Wood to high Dunsinane Hill shall come against him". Since Macduff is in exile in England, Macbeth assumes that he is safe; so he puts to death everyone in Macduff's castle, including Macduff's wife and their young son.



*Notes* Lady Macbeth becomes wracked with guilt from the crimes she and her husband have committed. She sleepwalks and tries to wash imaginary bloodstains from her hands, all the while speaking of the terrible things she knows she pressed her husband to do.

In England, Macduff is informed by Ross that his "castle is surprised; [his] wife and babes/savagely slaughter'd." Macbeth, now viewed as a tyrant, sees many of his thanes defecting. Malcolm leads an army, along with Macduff and Englishmen Siward, the Earl of Northumberland, against Dunsinane Castle. While encamped in Birnam Wood, the soldiers are ordered to cut down and carry tree limbs to camouflage their numbers, thus fulfilling the witches' third prophecy. Meanwhile, Macbeth delivers a soliloquy upon his learning of Lady Macbeth's death.

A battle culminates in the slaying of the young Siward and Macduff's confrontation with Macbeth. Macbeth boasts that he has no reason to fear Macduff, for he cannot be killed by any man born of woman. Macduff declares that he was "from his mother's womb/Untimely ripp'd" (i.e., born by Caesarean section) and was not "of woman born" (an example of a literary quibble). Macbeth realises too late that he has misinterpreted the witches' words. Macduff beheads Macbeth offstage and thereby fulfills the last of the prophecies.

Although Malcolm, and not Fleance, is placed on the throne, the witches' prophecy concerning Banquo ("Thou shalt get kings") was known to the audience of Shakespeare's time to be true: James VI of Scotland (later also James I of England) was supposedly a descendant of Banquo.

## Self Assessment

Multiple Choice Questions:

1. The first witch hails Macbeth as
  - (a) Thane of Glamis
  - (b) Thane of Cawdor
  - (c) the king of Scotland
  - (d) the king of Ireland.
2. What does the three witches inform Banquo?
  - (a) That he will be the Thane of Cawdor
  - (b) That he will father a line of kings
  - (c) That he will be the Thane of Glamis
  - (d) That he will be the king of Scotland.
3. What for the Macbeth remains uneasy despite his success as the king of Scotland?
  - (a) For the ghost of Banquo
  - (b) For the killing of Banquo and his son Fleance
  - (c) About the prophecy about Banquo
  - (d) For the manly behaviour of Lady Macbeth.

Fill in the blanks:

4. The first scene changes when Macbeth and Banquo enter, discussing the weather and their .....
5. The witches inform ..... that he will father a line of kings.
6. On the night of the king's visit, Macbeth ..... before entering Duncan's quarters, believing he sees a bloody dagger.
7. Seeing the murder of King Duncan, in a feigned fit of anger, Macbeth murders the ..... before they can protest their innocence.

State whether the following statements are true or false:

8. Macbeth, the Thane of Glamis, and Banquo both defeated the allied forces of Norway and Ireland.
9. Lady Macbeth frames Duncan's sleeping servants for the murder by placing bloody daggers on them.
10. Macbeth, disturbed for the prophesy of Banquo's kingship, visits the Three Witches twice.

## 8.2 Themes in Macbeth

### 8.2.1 Prophecy

The plot of Macbeth is set in motion ostensibly by the prophecy of the three witches. The prophecy fans the flames of ambition within Macbeth and Lady Macbeth, serving as the primary impetus for the couple to plot the death of Duncan—and subsequently Banquo. But one also wonders: Would Macbeth have committed such heinous crimes if not for the prophecy? What if he had ignored the witches' statements? Such speculation, however interesting, ultimately appears futile, since the prophecy itself is self-fulfilling. The witches know Macbeth's tragic flaw: given the irresistible

temptation to become King, he will choose to commit murder even though he could simply discard their words. As it turns out, the prophecies are not only fated but fatal, as Macbeth's confidence in the witches leads him to fight a rash battle in the final act.



*Task* Macbeth's confidence in the witches leads him to fight a rash battle that he may avoid by discarding the witches' words. Analyse this statement.

### 8.2.2 Guilt and Remorse

Some of the most famous and poetic lines from Macbeth are expressions of remorse. "Will all great Neptune's ocean wash this blood/Clean from my hand?" exclaims Macbeth after he stabs Duncan. Similarly, Lady Macbeth is plagued by a "spot" that she cannot remove from her hand: "Out, damned spot! Out, I say. . . What, will these hands ne'er be clean?". At first physical reminders of a regrettable crime, the royal blood leaves permanent marks on the psyche of the couple, forever staining them with guilt and remorse. The different ways in which the Macbeths cope with their crimes show how their characters develop: whereas Lady Macbeth is initially the one without scruples, urging Macbeth to take action, it is an overpowering sense of guilt and remorse that drives the Lady to her untimely death. Macbeth, on the other hand, seems to overcome the guilt that plagues him early on in the play.

### 8.2.3 Ghosts and Visions

Just as an overwhelming guilty conscience drives Lady Macbeth mad, so too does Macbeth's "heat-oppressed" brain project the vision of a dagger before he murders Duncan. In what concerns ghosts and visions, the relation of the natural to the supernatural in Macbeth is unclear. The three apparitions that the witches summon, for example, are usually taken to be "real" – even if only as supernatural occurrences. But the matter is less clear when it comes to Banquo's ghost. Macbeth is the only one who sees the ghost in a crowded room; is this yet another projection of his feverish mind? Or is it really, so to speak, a supernatural occurrence? Such ambiguities contribute to the eerie mood and sense of uncanniness that pervade the play, from the very opening scene with the three bearded witches.

### 8.2.4 The Natural/Supernatural

If the witches' prophecy is understood to be imposing a supernatural order on the natural order of things, the natural order can also be understood as responding with tempestuous signs. Following Duncan's death, Lennox describes the "unruly" night in some detail. Similarly, Ross notes that "the heavens, as troubled with man's act/Threatens his bloody stage". In the same scene, the Old Man and Ross both agree that they saw horses eat each other. Even the events leading to the conclusion of the play can be understood as a negotiation of the natural and supernatural. Whereas Macbeth believes that he will live the "lease of nature" – since Birnam Wood cannot possibly come to Dunsinane Hill – the forest is literally uprooted by the English army in accordance with the prophecy. The dichotomy between the natural and the supernatural forms a backdrop that suggests the epic proportions of the struggle over the Scottish crown.

### 8.2.5 Dichotomy and Equivocation

"Fair is foul, and foul is fair/Hover through the fog and filthy air." The first scene of the first act ends with these words of the witches, which Macbeth echoes in his first line: "So foul and fair a day I have not seen.". In a similar fashion, many scenes conclude with lines of dichotomy or equivocation: "Hear it not, Duncan; for it is a knell/That summons thee to heaven or hell;" "God's benison go with you, and with those/That would make good of bad, and friends of foes." Such lines evoke an



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air of deep uncertainty: while polarities are reversed and established values are overturned, it is entirely unclear as to whether the dichotomous clarity of “heaven or hell” trumps the equivocal fog of “fair is foul, and foul is fair.” Thus, for Macbeth, this translates into an uncertainty as to whether the prophecies are believable. It seems that Birnam Wood will either come to Dunsinane Hill (a supernatural event) or it will not (a natural event); but the actual event turns out to be neither here nor there, as the Wood figuratively comes to Dunsinane.

### 8.2.6 Ambition and Temptation

Ambition and temptation both play a key factor in Macbeth and Lady Macbeth’s decision to kill Duncan. Macbeth possesses enough self-awareness to realize the dangers of overzealous ambition: “I have no spur/To prick the sides of my intent, but only/Vaulting ambition which o’erleaps itself /And falls on th’other.” And yet, the temptation to carry out the witches’ prophecy is ultimately too strong for Macbeth to curb his ambition. In Lady Macbeth’s lexicon, incidentally, “hope” is also another word for “ambition” and perhaps “temptation.” As Macbeth expresses his doubts about killing Duncan, she demands: “Was the hope drunk/Wherein you dressed yourself”? Ironically, Lady Macbeth must herself rely on intoxicants to “make [her] bold” before executing her ambitious and murderous plans. Once the intoxication wears off, Lady Macbeth finds that she is unable to cope with the consequences of her own “hope.” Ultimately, ambition and temptation prove fatal for both the Macbeths.

### 8.2.7 Salvation and Damnation

As a morality tale of sorts, Macbeth has as its near contemporary Christopher Marlowe’s *Dr Faustus*. Like *Dr Faustus*, Macbeth recognizes the damning consequences of his crime:

Besides, this Duncan  
Hath borne his faculties so meek, hath been  
So clear in his great office, that his virtues  
Will plead like angels, trumpet-tongued against  
The deep damnation of his taking-off”

And yet Macbeth carries out the crime, thus precipitating his own descent into hell. Later in the play, appropriately, Macduff calls Macbeth by the name of “hell-hound”. Indeed, the story of Macbeth is that of a man who acquiesces in his damnation – in part because he cannot utter words that may attenuate his crime. As Duncan’s guards pray “God bless us” on their deathbed, Macbeth cannot say one “Amen”. His fate is thus sealed entirely by his own hands.

## Self Assessment

Multiple Choice Questions:

11. The plot of *Macbeth* is set in motion ostensibly by
  - (a) the prophesy of three witches
  - (b) murder of king Duncan
  - (c) murder of Banquo
  - (d) speculation of Macbeth to be the king.
  
12. Which of the following is not an expression of remorse in the play *Macbeth*?
  - (a) Macbeth’s exclamation that the Neptune’s ocean wash the blood from his hand
  - (b) The murder of Banquo
  - (c) The untimely death of Lady Macbeth
  - (d) Macbeth saying “I say. . . What, will these hands ne’er be clean.”

13. Which of the following is true about themes in Macbeth?

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- (a) The most famous and poetic lines from Macbeth are expressions of remorse
- (b) The natural order can also be understood as responding with tempestuous signs
- (c) The relation of the natural to the supernatural in Macbeth is clear
- (d) There is an air of deep uncertainty.

Fill in the blanks:

- 14. The prophecy of three witches fans the flames of ..... within Macbeth and Lady Macbeth.
- 15. Ambition and ..... both play a key factor in Macbeth and Lady Macbeth's decision to kill Duncan.
- 16. As a morality tale of sorts, Macbeth has as its near contemporary .....
- 17. An overwhelming guilty conscience drives ..... mad.

State whether the following statements are true or false:

- 18. The prophecy of three witches fans the flames of ambition within Macbeth and Lady Macbeth and serve as the primary impetus for the couple to plot the death of Duncan.
- 19. The most famous and poetic lines from Macbeth are expressions of guilt.
- 20. Macbeth overcomes the guilt that plagues him early on in the play while Lady Macbeth could not.

### **8.3 Summary**

- The first act of the play opens amidst thunder and lightning with the Three Witches deciding that their next meeting shall be with Macbeth.
- The scene changes as the Three Witches enter, who have waited to greet them with prophecies. Even though Banquo challenges them first, they address Macbeth.
- The first witch hails Macbeth as "Thane of Glamis," the second as "Thane of Cawdor," and the third proclaims that he shall "be King hereafter." Macbeth appears to be stunned to silence, so again Banquo challenges them.
- The witches inform Banquo that he will father a line of kings, though he himself will not be one. While the two men wonder at these pronouncements, the witches vanish.
- Macbeth writes to his wife about the witches' prophecies. When Duncan decides to stay at the Macbeths' castle at Inverness, Lady Macbeth hatches a plan to murder him and secure the throne for her husband.
- On the night of the king's visit, Macbeth hallucinates before entering Duncan's quarters, believing he sees a bloody dagger.
- In accordance with her plan, Lady Macbeth frames Duncan's sleeping servants for the murder by placing bloody daggers on them.
- Fearing for their lives, Duncan's sons flee Malcolm to England and Donalbain to Ireland. The rightful heirs' flight makes them suspects and Macbeth assumes the throne as the new King of Scotland as a kinsman of the dead king.
- Despite his success, Macbeth remains uneasy about the prophecy about Banquo and he plotted to get ride of them.

Notes

- Lady Macbeth becomes wracked with guilt from the crimes she and her husband have committed. She sleepwalks and tries to wash imaginary bloodstains from her hands, all the while speaking of the terrible things she knows she pressed her husband to do.
- The plot of Macbeth is set in motion ostensibly by the prophecy of the three witches.
- The prophecy fans the flames of ambition within Macbeth and Lady Macbeth, serving as the primary impetus for the couple to plot the death of Duncan – and subsequently Banquo.
- The witches know Macbeth’s tragic flaw: given the irresistible temptation to become King, he will choose to commit murder even though he could simply discard their words.
- The prophecies are not only fated but fatal, as Macbeth’s confidence in the witches leads him to fight a rash battle in the final act.
- In what concerns ghosts and visions, the relation of the natural to the supernatural in Macbeth is unclear. The three apparitions that the witches summon, for example, are usually taken to be real. But the matter is less clear when it comes to Banquo’s ghost.
- Macbeth is the only one who sees the ghost in a crowded room; is this yet another projection of his feverish mind?
- If the witches’ prophecy is understood to be imposing a supernatural order on the natural order of things, the natural order can also be understood as responding with tempestuous signs.
- Ambition and temptation both play a key factor in Macbeth and Lady Macbeth’s decision to kill Duncan. Macbeth possesses enough self-awareness to realize the dangers of overzealous ambition. At the end, ambition and temptation prove fatal for both the Macbeths.
- Macbeth carries out the crime, precipitating his own descent into hell. Later in the play, appropriately, Macduff calls Macbeth by the name of “hell-hound”. Indeed, the story of Macbeth is that of a man who acquiesces in his damnation – in part because he cannot utter words that may attenuate his crime. His fate is thus sealed entirely by his own hands.

### 8.4 Keywords

- Traitor* : A person who betrays another, a cause, or any trust. Or a person who commits treason by betraying his or her country.
- Kinsman* : A person of the same nationality or ethnic group.
- Prophecy* : Something that is declared by a prophet, especially a divinely inspired prediction, instruction, or exhortation.
- Merriment* : Cheerful or joyful gaiety; mirth; hilarity; laughter.
- Malady* : Any disorder or disease of the body, especially one that is chronic or deep seated.
- Guilt* : The fact or state of having committed an offense, crime, violation, or wrong, especially against moral or penal law; culpability. Or a feeling of responsibility or remorse for some offense, crime, wrong, etc., whether real or imagined.
- Remorse* : Deep and painful regret for wrongdoing; compunction.
- Supernatural* : Pertaining to, or being above or beyond what is natural; unexplainable by natural law or phenomena; abnormal. Or of, pertaining to, characteristic of, or attributed to God or deity.
- Dichotomy* : Division into two parts, kinds, etc.; subdivision into halves or pairs.
- Equivocation* : The use of equivocal or ambiguous expressions, especially in order to mislead or hedge; prevarication.

- Ambition** : An earnest desire for some type of achievement or distinction, as power, honor, fame, or wealth, and the willingness to strive for its attainment.
- Temptation** : The act of tempting; enticement or allurement.
- Salvation** : The act of saving or protecting from harm, risk, loss, destruction, etc.

Notes

### 8.5 Review Questions

1. Explain that the play Macbeth is a story of plots.
2. Mention any two expressions of line showing construction of plots in Macbeth.
3. What are the various themes used in Macbeth?
4. Write short notes on the following terms:
 

(a) Prophecy	(b) Remorse	(c) Ambition
--------------	-------------	--------------
5. From the play Macbeth, write the two events each of
 

(a) Salvation	(b) Temptation	(c) Equivocation
---------------	----------------	------------------
6. Explain the relation among the concepts natural and supernatural.

### Answers: Self Assessment

- |                |                  |                 |
|----------------|------------------|-----------------|
| 1. (a)         | 2. (b)           | 3. (c)          |
| 4. victory     | 5. Banquo        | 6. hallucinates |
| 7. guards      | 8. True          | 9. True         |
| 10. False      | 11. (a)          | 12. (b)         |
| 13. (c)        | 14. ambition     | 15. temptation  |
| 16. Dr Faustus | 17. Lady Macbeth | 18. True        |
| 19. False      | 20. True         |                 |

### 8.6 Further Readings



Books

James Shapiro. 2006. *A Year in the Life of William Shakespeare: 1599*. Harper Perennial, UK.

Coursen, H. R. 1997. *Macbeth A Guide to the Play*. Greenwood Press, Westport, CT, London.



Online links

<http://www.sparknotes.com/shakespeare/macbeth/themes.html>

<http://www.sparknotes.com/shakespeare/macbeth/summary.html>

<http://dramamacbeth/macbethplotact.shtml>

## **Unit 9: Macbeth: History and its Impact on 18th and 19th Century**

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9.2 Summary

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### **Objectives**

After studying this unit, you will be able to:

- Illustrate the history of Macbeth;
- Elaborate the transformations, the Macbeth underwent ever since its first stage display;
- Enumerate the stage history of Macbeth;
- Explain the impact of Macbeth history on 18th and 19th century.

### **Introduction**

The play Macbeth has immense historic interest, its incidents dating back to the days of Edward the Confessor. There were sufficient materials for the drama in Holinshed's *Chronicles of Englande, Scotlande, and Ireland*, the first edition of which was issued in 1577, and the second in 1586-87. The extracts from Holinshed in the notes will show that the main incidents are taken from his account of two separate events—the murder of Duncan by Macbeth, and that of King Duffe, the great-grandfather of Lady Macbeth, by Donwald. It will be seen, too, that Shakespeare has deviated in other respects from the chronicle, especially in the character of Banquo. The following historical description substantiate the historical impact of Macbeth during 18th and 19th century.

Duncan, by his mother Beatrice a grandson of Malcolm II, succeeded to the throne on his grandfather's death, in 1033: he reigned only six years. Macbeth, his near relation, also a grandchild of Malcolm II, though by the mother's side, was stirred up by ambition to contest the throne with the possessor. The Lady of Macbeth also, whose real name was Graoch, had deadly injuries to avenge on the reigning prince. She was the granddaughter of Kenneth IV, killed 1003, fighting against Malcolm II, and other causes for revenge animated the mind of her who has been since painted as the sternest of women. The old annalists add some instigations of a supernatural kind to the influence of a vindictive woman over an ambitious husband. Three women, of more than human stature and beauty, appeared

to Macbeth in a dream or vision, and hailed him successively by the titles of Thane of Cromarty, Thane of Moray, which the king afterwards bestowed on him, and finally by that of King of Scots; this dream, it is said, inspired him with the seductive hopes so well expressed in the drama.

Here in this unit a detail of Macbeth history and its impact on 18th and 19th century have been given.

## 9.1 History of Macbeth

The story is taken from Holinshed, who copied it from the History of Scotland, by Hector Boece or Boyce, in seventeen volumes (1527). The history, written in Latin, was translated by John Bellenden (1531-1535). Macbeth was first printed in the folio of 1623, where it occupies pages 131 to 151 inclusive, in the division of "Tragedies." It was registered in the books of the Stationers' Company, on the 8th of November, 1623, by Blount and Jaggard, the publishers of the folio, as one of the plays "not formerly entered to other men." It was written between 1604 and 1610; the former limit being fixed by the allusion to the union of England and Scotland under James I, and the latter by the MS Diary of Dr Simon Forman, who saw the play performed "at the Globe, 1610, the 20th of April, Saturday." It may then have been a new play, but it is more probable, as nearly all critics agree, that it was written in 1605 or 1606. The accession of James made Scottish subjects popular in England, and the tale of Macbeth and Banquo would be one of the first to be brought forward, as Banquo was held to be an ancestor of the new king. A Latin "interlude" on this subject was performed at Oxford in 1605, on the occasion of the king's visit to the city; but there is no reason for supposing that Shakespeare got the hint of his tragedy from that source.



*Did u know?* Macbeth was first printed in the folio of 1623, where it occupies pages 131 to 151 inclusive, in the division of "Tragedies."

It is barely possible that there was an earlier play on the subject of Macbeth. Collier finds in the Registers of the Stationers' Company, under the date of August 27, 1596, the entry of a Ballad of Makdobeth, which he gives plausible reasons for supposing to have been a drama, and not a "ballad" properly so called. There appears to be a reference to the same piece in Kemp's Nine Days' Wonder, printed in 1600, where it is called a "miserable stolen story," and said to be the work of "a penny Poet."

George Steevens maintained that Shakespeare was indebted, in the supernatural parts of Macbeth, to The Witch, a play by Thomas Middleton, which was discovered in manuscript towards the end of the eighteenth century. Malone at first took the same view of the subject, but finally came to the conclusion that Middleton's play was the later production, and that he must therefore be the plagiarist. The Clarendon Press editors take the ground that there are portions of Macbeth which Shakespeare did not write; that these were interpolated after the poet's death, or at least after he had ceased to be connected with the theatre; and that "the interpolator was, not improbably, Thomas Middleton."

These views have found little favour with other Shakespearian critics. A more satisfactory explanation of the imperfections of the play ascribes them to the haste with which it was written. Richard Grant White, who refers its composition to "the period between October, 1604, and August, 1605," remarks: "I am the more inclined to this opinion from the indications which the play itself affords that it was produced upon an emergency. It exhibits throughout the hasty execution of a grand and clearly conceived design. But the haste is that of a master of his art, who, with conscious command of its resources, and in the frenzy of a grand inspiration, works out his composition to its minutest detail of essential form, leaving the work of surface finish for the occupation of cooler leisure. What the Sistine Madonna was to Raphael, it seems that Macbeth was to Shakespeare—a magnificent

## Notes

impromptu; that kind of impromptu which results from the application of well-disciplined powers and rich stores of thought to subject suggested by occasion. I am inclined to regard Macbeth as, for the most part, a specimen of Shakespeare's unelaborated, if not unfinished, writing, in the maturity and highest vitality of his genius. It abounds in instances of extremest compression and most daring ellipsis, while it exhibits in every scene a union of supreme dramatic and poetic power, and in almost every line an imperially irresponsible control of language. Hence, I think, its lack of completeness of versification in certain passages, and also some of the imperfection of the text, the thought in which the compositors were not always able to follow and apprehend."

### 9.1.1 The Stage History of Macbeth

Evidence suggests that Macbeth was written by command as one of the plays to be given before King James I and the King of Denmark during the latter's notable visit to England in the summer of 1606. Shakespeare's company was the King's Players, and it would be natural for them to be commanded to produce a story of Scottish history touching on the ancestry of their patron. The title role was created by the great Richard Burbage and his infamous queen by the boy-actress Edmans.



*Notes* The play was first printed in the Folio of 1623, where the text shows some signs of cutting and alteration. The lyrical episodes of Hecate and the witches are thought to have been added by another playwright.

When Charles II ascended the British throne in 1660, he assigned Macbeth to William Davenant and the Duke's Company. Not content to produce the play in its original form, Davenant altered the work considerably to indulge his two favorite hobbies. The first was his desire for operatic and scenic splendor; the second, his pursuit of structural balance. The first he obtained by elaborating the witches' scenes, introducing all kinds of dancing, singing, and gibberish, some of it taken from Middleton's *The Witch*. The second was achieved by amplifying the role of Lady Macduff, for whom he created numerous scenes between her and her lord symmetrically opposed to the bits between Macbeth and his wicked wife. Macduff's virtuous lady inveighs to him against ambition. Lady Macbeth is given a new scene in which she is haunted by the ghost of Duncan, which induces her to try to persuade Macbeth to give up ambition and the crown. Davenant's bastardization, with Thomas Betterton in the title role, drove Shakespeare's original from the stage until 1744.

It was David Garrick who, during his management of the Drury Lane Theatre (1742-1776), revived Macbeth as written by Shakespeare, playing the title role there every season except four. Although he kept Davenant's operatic witch scenes, he omitted the spurious Lady Macduff scenes, along with her infamous murder scene and the bit with the Porter. He could not resist writing a new climactic speech for Macbeth, in which the hero-villain mentions, with his dying breath, his guilt, delusion, the witches, and horrid visions of future punishment. Garrick and his leading lady, Hannah Pritchard, introduced a natural style of acting and became famous as the tortured hero and heroine. So urgent was Garrick's delivery that in one performance when he told the First Murderer "There's blood upon thy face," the actor in question involuntarily replied, "Is there, by God?"

The next famous pair to assay these roles were John Philip Kemble (1757-1823) and his talented sister, Sarah Siddons, at Drury Lane in the season of 1784 and for many years thereafter. Siddons made an extraordinary innovation when in the sleep-walking scene she put the candle down, defying the tradition of carrying the candle throughout. J. Boaden recorded in her *Memoirs* (1827), "She laded the water from the imaginary ewer over her hands-bent her body to listen to the sounds presented to her fancy, and hurried to resume the taper where she had left it, that she might with all speed drag her husband to their chamber." Her delivery of several lines has become legendary: the long pause on "made themselves-air," the sudden energy on "shalt be what thou art promised," the association of "my spirits in your ear" with the spirits she has just invoked, and the downward and

decisive inflection on "We fail." Siddons imagined the character as a fragile and delicate blonde who subdued Macbeth by the dual exercise of intellect and beauty, moved by the memory of her father and the babe to whom she had "given suck." She achieved every part of the role except the blonde fragility, which was beyond her stately, statuesque appearance.

William Charles Macready proved a workmanlike Macbeth in his revival of 1837, which featured new scenic effects and innovative staging. John Bull recorded his admiration of the scene in which the murder of Duncan is discovered, and the march of the army from Birnam Wood. "In the latter each man was completely screened by the immense bough he carried; and the scenic illusion by which a whole host was represented stretching away into the distance, and covered as by one leafy screen, which was removed at the same time that the soldiers in the foreground threw down theirs, had all the reality of a dioramic effect." Macready himself made memorable several moments: his imperious command to the witches—"Stay and speak," his desperate recoil from Banquo's ghost, the dropping of his truncheon on hearing that Lady Macbeth is dead, his half-drawn sword over the messenger who announces the approach of Birnam Wood, and the remarkable energy of the fight in which he died.



**Task** Illustrate that William Charles Macready proved a workmanlike Macbeth in his revival of 1837, which featured new scenic effects and innovative staging.

Samuel Phelps (1804-1878) is credited with removing the last vestiges of adaptation from Macbeth during his management of Sadler's Wells between 1844 and 1862. Unlike his contemporaries, who rearranged the play to avoid scene shifts and made drastic cuts to allow scope for spectacle, Phelps made only minor cuts and transpositions.

Charles Kean and his wife Ellen Tree staged a spectacular, long-running Macbeth at the Princess's Theatre in 1853, famed for its historically accurate scenery and costumes. Kean apparently turned in a performance considerably less ferocious than his wife's. The Leader reported, "When the witches accost him, his only expression of 'metaphysical influence' is to stand still with his eyes fixed and his mouth open ... In Charles Kean's Macbeth all tragedy has vanished; sympathy is impossible, because the mind of the criminal is hidden from us. He makes Macbeth ignoble, with perhaps a tendency towards Methodism."

The last great pair of the 19th Century were Henry Irving and Ellen Terry at the Lyceum Theatre in 1874 and later in 1889. Terry's Lady Macbeth was less fearsome than sympathetic, according to *The Times*. "Her matted red hair, hanging in long tresses and her ruddy cheeks mark her as a raw-boned daughter of the North, and she wears an appropriate dress of garish green stuff embroidered with gold. There is nothing of the martial or adventurous spirit in her composition to bring her into harmony with her barbarous surroundings. On the contrary, she is a woman of warm sympathies living in the tenderest relation with her husband."



**Notes** The 20th Century has seen numerous great revivals, especially Orson Welles' "Voodoo" Macbeth at the Lafayette Theatre in Harlem (1936), Margaret Webster's famous production with Maurice Evans and Judith Anderson (1941) which set a standard for decades to come, and Glen Byam Shaw's Royal Shakespeare Theatre production with Laurence Olivier and Vivien Leigh (1955). Kenneth Tynan argued that in the role of Macbeth Olivier "shook hands with greatness," and proclaimed the performance "a masterpiece: not of the superficial, booming, have-a-bash kind, but the real thing, a structure of perfect forethought and proportion, lit by flashes of intuitive lightning."



Notes

## Self Assessment

Multiple Choice Questions:

1. The story of Macbeth is taken from
  - (a) Holinshed's Chronicle of the History of Scotland
  - (b) the Folio of 1723
  - (c) the book of Stationers' Company
  - (d) the Folio of Blount and Jaggard.
2. Shakespeare was indebted in the supernatural parts of Macbeth to *The Witch*, a play by
  - (a) Collier
  - (b) Thomas Middleton
  - (c) Richard Grant
  - (d) John Bellenden.
3. Macbeth was written by command as one of the plays to be given before
  - (a) King of England and the King James of Denmark
  - (b) William Davenant and Charles II
  - (c) King James I and the King of Denmark
  - (d) King James I and Charles II.

Fill in the blanks:

4. Macbeth was written by command as one of the plays to be given before ..... and the King of Denmark.
5. Charles Kean and his wife Ellen Tree staged a spectacular, long-running Macbeth at the ..... in 1853.
6. Macbeth was first printed in the .....of 1623.
7. William Charles Macready proved a ..... Macbeth in his revival of 1837.

State whether the following statements are true or false:

8. David Garrick during his management of the Drury Lane Theatre (1742-1776), revived Macbeth as written by Shakespeare.
9. Charles Kean and his wife Ellen Tree staged a spectacular, long-running Macbeth at the Drury Lane Theatre in 1853.
10. Margaret Webster's famous production of Macbeth with Maurice Evans and Judith Anderson set a standard for decades to come.

## 9.2 Summary

- The play Macbeth has immense historic interest, its incidents dating back to the days of Edward the Confessor.
- There were sufficient materials for the drama in Holinshed's *Chronicles of Englande, Scotlande, and Ireland*, the first edition of which was issued in 1577, and the second in 1586-87. The extracts from Holinshed in the notes will show that the main incidents are taken from his account of two separate events—the murder of Duncan by Macbeth, and that of King Duffe, the great-grandfather of Lady Macbeth, by Donwald.

- Macbeth, his near relation, also a grandchild of Malcolm II, though by the mother's side, was stirred up by ambition to contest the throne with the possessor.
- Three women, of more than human stature and beauty, appeared to Macbeth in a dream or vision, and hailed him successively by the titles of Thane of Cromarty, Thane of Moray, which the king afterwards bestowed on him, and finally by that of King of Scots; this dream, it is said, inspired him with the seductive hopes so well expressed in the drama.
- Macbeth was first printed in the folio of 1623, where it occupies pages 131 to 151 inclusive, in the division of "Tragedies."
- George Steevens maintained that Shakespeare was indebted, in the supernatural parts of Macbeth, to *The Witch*, a play by Thomas Middleton, which was discovered in manuscript towards the end of the eighteenth century.
- Evidence suggests that Macbeth was written by command as one of the plays to be given before King James I and the King of Denmark during the latter's notable visit to England in the summer of 1606.
- Shakespeare's company was the King's Players, and it would be natural for them to be commanded to produce a story of Scottish history touching on the ancestry of their patron. The title role was created by the great Richard Burbage and his infamous queen by the boy-actress Edmans.
- When Charles II ascended the British throne in 1660, he assigned Macbeth to William Davenant and the Duke's Company. Not content to produce the play in its original form, Davenant altered the work considerably to indulge his two favorite hobbies.
- David Garrick who, during his management of the Drury Lane Theatre (1742-1776), revived Macbeth as written by Shakespeare, playing the title role there every season except four.
- The next famous pair to assay these roles were John Philip Kemble (1757-1823) and his talented sister, Sarah Siddons, at Drury Lane in the season of 1784 and for many years thereafter.
- Siddons made an extraordinary innovation when in the sleep-walking scene she put the candle down, defying the tradition of carrying the candle throughout.
- Samuel Phelps (1804-1878) is credited with removing the last vestiges of adaptation from Macbeth during his management of Sadler's Wells between 1844 and 1862.
- Charles Kean and his wife Ellen Tree staged a spectacular, long-running Macbeth at the Princess's Theatre in 1853, famed for its historically accurate scenery and costumes.
- Kean apparently turned in a performance considerably less ferocious than his wife's.
- The last great pair of the 19th Century were Henry Irving and Ellen Terry at the Lyceum Theatre in 1874 and later in 1889.

### 9.3 Keywords

- Interlude** : A short dramatic piece, especially of a light or farcical character, formerly introduced between the parts or acts of miracle and morality plays or given as part of other entertainments.
- Witch** : A person, now especially a woman, who professes or is supposed to practice magic, especially black magic or the black art.
- Plagiarist** : The unauthorized use or close imitation of the language and thoughts of another author and the representation of them as one's own original work, as by not crediting the author.
- Imperfections** : The quality or condition of being imperfect.

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- Fragility** : Easily broken, shattered, or damaged; delicate; brittle; frail.
- Metaphysical** : Designating or pertaining to the poetry of an early group of 17th-century English poets, notably John Donne, whose characteristic style is highly intellectual and philosophical and features intensive use of ingenious conceits and turns of wit.

### 9.4 Review Questions

1. Describe the sources of the story of Macbeth.
2. Mention any two impacts of Macbeth on the history of 18th and 19th century.
3. Give a brief view of the stage history of Macbeth?
4. Write short notes on the contribution of the following on the historical development of Macbeth:  
(a) Charles Kean                      (b) Ellen Terry                      (c) Orson Welles
5. Write the brief account of following critics on Macbeth:  
(a) George Steevens                      (b) John Bellenden                      (c) Malone

### **Answers: Self Assessment**

1. (a)
2. (b)
3. (c)
4. King James I
5. Princess's Theatre
6. folio
7. workmanlike
8. True
9. False
10. True

### 9.5 Further Readings



*Books*

William Shakespeare (A), G. Blakemore Evans and J. J. M. Tobin (eds.). 1996. *The Riverside Shakespeare*, 2nd Edition. Houghton Mifflin Company, UK.

Coursen, H. R. 1997. *Macbeth A Guide to the Play*. Greenwood Press, Westport, CT, London.



*Online links*

<http://www.theatrehistory.com/british/macbeth001.html>

[http://www.theatrehistory.com/british/historical\\_sources\\_of\\_macbeth.html](http://www.theatrehistory.com/british/historical_sources_of_macbeth.html)

<http://dramamacbeth/macbethplotact.shtml>

## Unit 10: Doctor Faustus: Morality Play

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10.3 Summary

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### Objectives

After studying this unit, you will be able to:

- Enumerate the themes and characteristics of morality play;
- Cite the examples of morality in Doctor Faustus Play;
- Explain that Doctor Faustus is a morality play;
- Elaborate the features of morality in Doctor Faustus play.

Notes

## **Introduction**

The Tragical History of the Life and Death of Doctor Faustus, commonly referred to simply as Doctor Faustus, is a play by Christopher Marlowe, based on the Faust story, in which a man sells his soul to the devil for power and knowledge. Doctor Faustus was first published in 1604, eleven years after Marlowe's death and at least twelve years after the first performance of the play.

"No Elizabethan play outside the Shakespeare canon has raised more controversy than Doctor Faustus. There is no agreement concerning the nature of the text and the date of composition... and the centrality of the Faust legend in the history of the Western world precludes any definitive agreement on the interpretation of the play. A judicious analysis and interpretation of the play ascertain that it is a morality play.

This unit elaborates the morality features of Doctor Faustus at length. More emphasis is given to justify that it is a morality play. The themes and characteristics of morality have also been dealt with in this unit.

### **10.1 Morality of Doctor Faustus Play**

Liturgical Drama in the beginning had three forms, Mystery, Miracle and Morality. The morality plays are a type of allegory in which the protagonist is met by personification of various moral attributes, who try to prompt him to choose a godly life over one of evil. It flourished in the middle ages, was at its height in the first half of the 15 century, disappeared after the second half, but reappeared in Elizabethan drama. In this play the characters were personified abstractions of vice or virtues such as Good deeds, Faith, Mercy, Anger, Truth, Pride, etc. The general theme of the moralities was theological and the main one was the struggle between the good and evil powers for capturing the man's soul and good always won. The story of whole morality play centres round the single towering figure. The seven deadly sins were found engaged in physical and verbal battle with cardinal virtues. The antics of vices and devils, etc. offered a considerable opportunity for low comedy or buffoonery. The morality play often ended with a solemn moral.

#### **10.1.1 Themes of the Morality Play**

- The main theme of the morality play is: Man begins in innocence, man falls into temptation, man repents and is saved or killed.
- The central action is the struggle of man against the seven deadly sins that are personified into real characters.
- Morality plays help the audience understand the greater concepts of sin and virtue.

#### **10.1.2 Characteristics of the Morality Play**

Following are some elements of morality plays:

- In these plays character were personified abstractions of vice and virtues such as good and evil and faith and anger.
- Theme was dividing in terms of general and main.
- General: this theme was theological. Main: the struggle between good and bad powers for capturing man's soul.
- Seven sins were also the part of these plays.
- Comic scenes were also included in morality plays.
- Concept of damnation/salvation was also there.



*Notes* Morality plays are a type of allegory in which the protagonist is met by personification of various moral attributes, who try to prompt him to choose a godly life over one of evil.

Notes

### 10.1.3 Morality in Doctor Faustus Play

There are many ways in which Doctor Faustus resembles medieval morality plays. Morality plays use allegorical characters to teach the audience moral lessons, typically of a Christian nature. In the story of Doctor Faustus we see how his trend with his sin of excessive pride, which led him to become a greedy person, obsess with knowing everything about life. In this story we also see how a good angel, a bad angel and an old man try to tell Doctor Faustus what type of decision to make.

In the light of the theme and characteristics of morality play, we may call "*Doctor Faustus*" a belated morality play in spite of its tragic ending. It has been mentioned that in morality plays the characters were personified abstractions of vice or virtues. In "*Doctor Faustus*" also we find the Good and Evil angels, the former stand for the path of virtue and the latter for sin and damnation, one for conscience and the other for desires. Then we have the old man appearing, telling Faustus that he is there "To guide' thy steps unto the way of life". He symbolizes the forces of righteousness and morality. The seven deadly sins are also there in a grand spectacle to cheer up the despairing soul of Faustus.



*Did u know?* Christian monks developed the morality play in the 13th century by adding actors and theatrical elements. By doing so the masses could more easily learn the basics of Christianity through dramatic spoken words.

If the, general theme of morality plays was theological dealing with the struggle of forces of good and evil for man's soul, then "*Doctor Faustus*" may be called a religious or morality play to a very great extent. We find Faustus, abjuring the scriptures, the Trinity and Christ. He surrenders his soul to the devil out of his inordinate ambition to gain:

".....a world of profit and delight'

Of power, of honour, of omnipotence."

Through knowledge by mastering the unholy art of magic. About the books of magic, he declares:

"These metaphysics of magicians,

And necromantic books are heavenly."

By selling his soul to the devil he lives a blasphemous life full of vain and sensual pleasures just for only twenty-four years. There is struggle between his overwhelming ambition and conscience which are externalized by good angel and evil angel. But Faustus has already accepted the opinion of evil angel, who says: "Be thou on earth as Jove in the sky." Faustus is also fascinated by the thought:

"A sound magician is a mighty god,

Here, Faustus, tire thy brains to gain a deity."

When the final hours approaches, Faustus find himself at the edge of eternal damnation and cries with deep sorrow: "My God, my God, look not so fierce to me!"

Through the story of *Doctor Faustus*, the author gives the lesson that the man, who desires to be God, is doomed to eternal damnation. The chief aim of morality play was didactic. It was a dramatized guide to Christian living and Christian dying. Whosoever discards the path of virtue and faith in God and Christ is destined to despair and eternal damnation – this is also the message of the story of *Doctor Faustus*. And it has found the most touching expression in the closing lines of the play:

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“Whose deepness doth entice such forward wits,  
To practice more than heavenly power permits.”

The tradition of chorus is also maintained. We find the chorus introducing the story just before the beginning of the first scene and subsequently filling in the gaps in the narrative and announcing the end of the play with a very solemn moral. The appearance of seven deadly sins shows that the playwright in “*Doctor Faustus*” adopted some of the conventions of the old morality plays. The seven deadly sins – pride, covetousness, wrath, envy, gluttony, sloth and lechery of good old morality plays are also very much here in this play in a grand spectacle to cheer up the dejected soul of Faustus. And the old favourite and familiar figure of the devil is also not missing. Mephistophilis, an assistant to Lucifer, appears as a servile slave of Faustus in many scenes. The comic scenes of “*Doctor Faustus*” also belong to the tradition of old morality plays. The comic scenes were not integral part of those plays but were introduced to entertain. In “*Doctor Faustus*” many comic scenes are depicted especially his pranks on the Pope, the planting of a pair of horns on the head of a knight and the cheating of a greedy horse-dealer. They throw light on the nature of the tragedy of *Doctor Faustus*. The comic episodes underline the fact that Faustus has sunk to the low level of a sordid fun-loving sorcerer. In “*Doctor Faustus*” there is only one towering figure all the action and incidents centre round him. Then just like the earlier morality plays, it also suffers from looseness of construction especially in the middle part of the play.



*Caution* The comic scenes were not integral part of traditional morality plays, but introduced to entertain. In “*Doctor Faustus*” many comic scenes are depicted especially his pranks on the Pope, the planting of a pair of horns on the head of a knight and the cheating of a greedy horse-dealer. Such comic scenes underline the fact that Faustus has sunk to the low level of a sordid fun-loving sorcerer.

Though to a great extent, “*Doctor Faustus*” is a morality play yet there are also some other elements which make it different from morality play. The difference is that in morality plays, all characters are abstractions, not concrete. But in “*Doctor Faustus*” the main character, Faustus is not an abstraction but as person with desires and high ambitions. He is a living person like other human beings. Then the element of conflict is the fountain head of the entire action in the play and the movement of the action defines the plot of the play. Faustus heart and soul is the greatest battle field for the internal or spiritual conflict. Though Faustus has abjured God and has made his pact with the devil, yet there is a conflict in his mind between good and evil, he feels the pricks of conscience. The growing sense of loss and of the wages of “*damnation*” begins to sting him like a scorpion.

“When I behold the heaven, then I repent,  
And curse thee, Wicked Mephistophilis,  
Because thou hast deprived me of those joys”



*Notes* This inner conflict in Faustus is the element of tragedy not of morality, on the basis of which we some times think that it is not a morality play. In a morality play, the moral is always positive and goodness always triumphs over evil, truth over lie and virtue over vice. Virtue is always rewarded. But in “*Doctor Faustus*” we find evil spreading its powerful hands over goodness and then laying it down.

Faustus follows the path told by evil angel and ultimately is ruined. He cannot repent and devil is successful in getting hold of his soul. This moral is negative which is not in accordance with morality

plays. Moreover, in this play, Faustus plays pranks with pope and knight and makes fun of them. Unlike morality plays the butt of this low comedy is Pope instead of devil.

Faustus is a character ideal to be the hero of a tragedy where man alone is the maker of his fate, good or bad. He falls not by the fickleness of fortune or the decree of fate, or because he has been corrupted by Mephistophilis, the agent of Lucifer; the devil, but because of his own will. Faustus, being a tragic hero was dominated by some uncontrollable passion or inordinate ambition. There is a conflict in his mind between good and evil. He falls from high to low and this degradation is clear in his soliloquy, when he says:

“O soul, be changed into little water drops,  
And fall into ocean, never to be found!”

Such a tragic hero cannot be the hero of a morality play. Thus we see that in spite of its entire links with medieval miracle plays or moralities, Doctor Faustus can never be treated wholly as a morality play. It is the greatest heroic tragedy before Shakespeare with its enormous stress on characterization and inner conflict in the soul of a towering personality. We may call this play the last of the morality plays and the beginning of tragedy that was developed by Shakespeare. We may conclude in the words of a critic: “*Doctor Faustus* is both the consummation of the English morality, tradition and the last and the finest of Marlowe’s heroic plays.”



Task

Is Doctor Faustus a morality play? Why or why not? Illustrate.

We conclude that how Doctor Faustus came from a respected and admired person by society to a corrupted person. He embarked on this path due to his temptations. At the beginning of the story scene 1 “Shall I make spirits fetch me what I please, perform what desperate enterprise I will? Have them fly to India for gold, Ransack the ocean for orient pearl.” In this part we have both angels telling Doctor Faustus what to do. But he only seems to listen to the bad angel because he not thinking about God but only of the benefits that performing black magic would bring to him. Doctor Faustus did a conjured as a result Mephistophilis appeared to him. All he could think about was possibilities. All he would think about was all the things he was going to be able to accomplish with Mephistophilis assistance. Another example of how Doctor Faustus resembles a morality play can be seen on scene 5 here on this scene with have the good and evil angel trying to convince Doctor Faustus to do what is right. Both sides tell their point of view. Good angel tells him to leave dark magic and evil angel tells him to think of honor and wealth. But once again Doctor Faustus only thinks about the benefits that giving up his soul would bring to him without thinking of the consequences. Another scene in which we see how this story resembles a morality play is scene 5. “ Good Angel Never Too late, if Faustus will repent.” And the “Evil Angel if thou repent, devils.”

## Self Assessment

Multiple Choice Questions:

- Liturgical drama in the beginning had three forms, viz.
  - Mystery, Miracle, and Morality
  - Tragedy, Mystery, and Miracle
  - Mercy, Tragedy, and Morality
  - Mercy, Anger, and Truth.
- Which of the following statements is correct about the Doctor Faustus ?
  - It is a typical morality play



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- (b) It is a belated morality play
  - (c) Themes and characters make it a supernatural morality play
  - (d) The seven sin make it a tragedy.
3. Which of the following is not a theme of morality play?
- (a) Man begins in innocence, man falls into temptation, man repents and is saved or killed
  - (b) The struggle of man against the seven deadly sins
  - (c) The contemplation of man with seven deadly sins and to indulge in them
  - (d) Audience understand the greater concepts of sin and virtue.

Fill in the blanks:

- 4. The morality plays are a type of ..... in which the protagonist is met by personification of various moral attributes.
- 5. Morality plays help the audience understand the greater concepts of ..... and virtue.
- 6. Theme was dividing in terms of ..... and main.
- 7. Faustus follows the path told by ..... and ultimately is ruined.

State whether the following statements are true or false:

- 8. The appearance of seven deadly sins shows that the playwright in “*Doctor Faustus*” adopted some of the conventions of the old morality plays.
- 9. The morality plays are a type of allegory in which the protagonist is met by personification of various immoral attributes.
- 10. Comic scenes were also included in morality plays.

## **10.2 Doctor Faustus’ Features of a Morality Play**

Doctor Faustus has many features of a morality play: the conflict between good and evil, the conflict between medieval and renaissance values, power as a corrupting influence, magic and the supernatural, the creation of good and bad angels, the old man as good counsel, the pageant of the seven deadly sins and the appearance of Faustus’ enemies to ambush and kill him.

### **10.2.1 Conflict between Good and Evil**

The conflict between Good and Evil was a recurring theme in the medieval morality plays. From this point of view, the play Doctor Faustus is a morality play in which heaven struggles for the soul of a Renaissance Everyman, namely Doctor Faustus.

#### **Sin, Redemption, and Damnation**

Insofar as Doctor Faustus is a Christian play, it deals with the themes at the heart of Christianity’s understanding of the world. First, there is the idea of sin, which Christianity defines as acts contrary to the will of God. In making a pact with Lucifer, Faustus commits what is in a sense the ultimate sin: not only does he disobey God, but he consciously and even eagerly renounces obedience to him, choosing instead to swear allegiance to the devil. In a Christian framework, however, even the worst deed can be forgiven through the redemptive power of Jesus Christ, God’s son, who, according to Christian belief, died on the cross for humankind’s sins. Thus, however terrible Faustus’s pact with Lucifer may be, the possibility of redemption is always open to him. All that he needs to do,

theoretically, is ask God for forgiveness. The play offers countless moments in which Faustus considers doing just that, urged on by the good angel on his shoulder or by the old man in scene 12 – both of whom can be seen either as emissaries of God, personifications of Faustus’s conscience, or both.

Each time, Faustus decides to remain loyal to hell rather than seek heaven. In the Christian framework, this turning away from God condemns him to spend an eternity in hell. Only at the end of his life does Faustus desire to repent, and, in the final scene, he cries out to Christ to redeem him. But it is too late for him to repent. In creating this moment in which Faustus is still alive but incapable of being redeemed, Marlowe steps outside the Christian worldview in order to maximize the dramatic power of the final scene. Having inhabited a Christian world for the entire play, Faustus spends his final moments in a slightly different universe, where redemption is no longer possible and where certain sins cannot be forgiven.

### The Divided Nature of Man

Faustus is constantly undecided about whether he should repent and return to God or continue to follow his pact with Lucifer. His internal struggle goes on throughout the play, as part of him of wants to do good and serve God, but part of him (the dominant part, it seems) lusts after the power that Mephistophilis promises. The good angel and the evil angel, both of whom appear at Faustus’s shoulder in order to urge him in different directions, symbolize this struggle. While these angels may be intended as an actual pair of supernatural beings, they clearly represent Faustus’s divided will, which compels Faustus to commit to Mephistophilis but also to question this commitment continually.

### 10.2.2 The Conflict between Medieval and Renaissance Values

Scholars remarked that Doctor Faustus tells “the story of a Renaissance man who had to pay the medieval price for being one.” While slightly simplistic, this quotation does get at the heart of one of the play’s central themes: the clash between the medieval world and the world of the emerging Renaissance. The medieval world placed God at the center of existence and shunted aside man and the natural world.



*Notes* The Renaissance was a movement that began in Italy in the fifteenth century and soon spread throughout Europe, carrying with it a new emphasis on the individual, on classical learning, and on scientific inquiry into the nature of the world. In the medieval academy, theology was the queen of the sciences. In the Renaissance, though, secular matters took center stage.

Faustus, despite being a magician rather than a scientist (a blurred distinction in the sixteenth century), explicitly rejects the medieval model. In his opening speech in scene 1, he goes through every field of scholarship, beginning with logic and proceeding through medicine, law, and theology, quoting an ancient authority for each: Aristotle on logic, Galen on medicine, the Byzantine emperor Justinian on law, and the Bible on religion. In the medieval model, tradition and authority, not individual inquiry, were key. But in this soliloquy, Faustus considers and rejects this medieval way of thinking. He resolves, in full Renaissance spirit, to accept no limits, traditions, or authorities in his quest for knowledge, wealth, and power.

The play’s attitude toward the clash between medieval and Renaissance values is ambiguous. Marlowe seems hostile toward the ambitions of Faustus, and, as Dawkins notes, he keeps his tragic hero squarely in the medieval world, where eternal damnation is the price of human pride. Yet Marlowe himself was no pious traditionalist, and it is tempting to see in Faustus – as many readers

## Notes

have—a hero of the new modern world, a world free of God, religion, and the limits that these imposed on humanity. Faustus may pay a medieval price, this reading suggests, but his successors will go further than he and suffer less, as we have in modern times. On the other hand, the disappointment and mediocrity that follow Faustus's pact with the devil, as he descends from grand ambitions to petty conjuring tricks, might suggest a contrasting interpretation. Marlowe may be suggesting that the new, modern spirit, though ambitious and glittering, will lead only to a Faustian dead end.

### 10.2.3 Power as a Corrupting Influence

Early in the play, before he agrees to the pact with Lucifer, Faustus is full of ideas for how to use the power that he seeks. He imagines piling up great wealth, but he also aspires to plumb the mysteries of the universe and to remake the map of Europe. Though they may not be entirely admirable, these plans are ambitious and inspire awe, if not sympathy. They lend a grandeur to Faustus's schemes and make his quest for personal power seem almost heroic, a sense that is reinforced by the eloquence of his early soliloquies.

Once Faustus actually gains the practically limitless power that he so desires, however, his horizons seem to narrow. Everything is possible to him, but his ambition is somehow sapped. Instead of the grand designs that he contemplates early on, he contents himself with performing conjuring tricks for kings and noblemen and takes a strange delight in using his magic to play practical jokes on simple folks. It is not that power has corrupted Faustus by making him evil: indeed, Faustus's behavior after he sells his soul hardly rises to the level of true wickedness. Rather, gaining absolute power corrupts Faustus by making him mediocre and by transforming his boundless ambition into a meaningless delight in petty celebrity.



*Example:* In the Christian framework of the play, one can argue that true greatness can be achieved only with God's blessing. By cutting himself off from the creator of the universe, Faustus is condemned to mediocrity. He has gained the whole world, but he does not know what to do with it.

### 10.2.4 Magic and the Supernatural

The supernatural pervades *Doctor Faustus*, appearing everywhere in the story. Angels and devils flit about, magic spells are cast, dragons pull chariots (albeit off stage), and even fools like the two ostlers, Robin and Rafe, can learn enough magic to summon demons. Still, it is worth noting that nothing terribly significant is accomplished through magic. Faustus plays tricks on people, conjures up grapes, and explores the cosmos on a dragon, but he does not fundamentally reshape the world. The magic power that Mephistophilis grants him is more like a toy than an awesome, earth-shaking ability. Furthermore, the real drama of the play, despite all the supernatural frills and pyrotechnics, takes place within Faustus's vacillating mind and soul, as he first sells his soul to Lucifer and then considers repenting. In this sense, the magic is almost incidental to the real story of Faustus's struggle with himself, which Marlowe intended not as a fantastical battle but rather as a realistic portrait of a human being with a will divided between good and evil.

#### Creation of Good and Bad Angels

The Good Angel and the Bad Angel are characters derived from the medieval morality plays like *The Castle of Perseverance*. They are sometimes regarded as an externalization of the thoughts of Faustus. This is a twentieth-century view. The Angels are independent absolutes, one wholly good and one wholly evil. They appear in *Doctor Faustus* like allegorical figures of a morality play. They reflect the possibility of both damnation and redemption being open to Faustus—the good angel

urging him to repent and serve God, the evil angel urging him to follow his lust for power and serve Lucifer. The two symbolize his divided will, part of which wants to do good and part of which is sunk in sin. A close examination shows that the Evil Angel declines in importance as the play advances. The angles work by suggestion, as allegorical characters in morality plays do.

### **Blood**

Blood plays multiple symbolic roles in the play. When Faustus signs away his soul, he signs in blood, symbolizing the permanent and supernatural nature of this pact. His blood congeals on the page, however, symbolizing, perhaps, his own body's revolt against what he intends to do. Meanwhile, Christ's blood, which Faustus says he sees running across the sky during his terrible last night, symbolizes the sacrifice that Jesus, according to Christian belief, made on the cross; this sacrifice opened the way for humankind to repent its sins and be saved. Faustus, of course, in his proud folly, fails to take this path to salvation.

## **10.2.5 The Pageant of Seven Deadly Sins**

The audience also observes the pageant of the Seven Deadly Sins in Doctor Faustus. This is another feature borrowed by Marlowe from the tradition of the morality play. In Marlowe's play, to divert Faustus' attention from Christ, his savior, Lucifer, comes with his attendant devils to rebuke him for invoking Christ and then presents the pageant of the Seven Deadly Sins as a diversion. The following are the deadly sins as described in Bible.

### **Pride**

Seeing ourselves as we are and not comparing ourselves to others is humility. Pride and vanity are competitive. If someone else's pride really bothers you, you have a lot of pride.

### **Envy**

"Love is patient, love is kind..." Love actively seeks the good of others for their sake. Envy resents the good others receive or even might receive. Envy is almost indistinguishable from pride at times.

### **Wrath/Anger**

Kindness means taking the tender approach, with patience and compassion. Anger is often our first reaction to the problems of others. Impatience with the faults of others is related to this.

### **Sloth**

Zeal is the energetic response of the heart to God's commands. The other sins work together to deaden the spiritual senses so we first become slow to respond to God and then drift completely into the sleep of complacency.

### **Avarice/Greed**

This is about more than money. Generosity means letting others get the credit or praise. It is giving without having expectations of the other person. Greed wants to get its "fair share" or a bit more.

### **Gluttony**

Temperance accepts the natural limits of pleasures and preserves this natural balance. This does not pertain only to food, but to entertainment and other legitimate goods, and even the company of others.

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**Lust**

Self control and self mastery prevent pleasure from killing the soul by suffocation. Legitimate pleasures are controlled in the same way an athlete's muscles are: for maximum efficiency without damage. Lust is the self-destructive drive for pleasure out of proportion to its worth. Sex, power, or image can be used well, but they tend to go out of control.

**10.2.6 Appearance of Faustus' Enemies to Ambush and Kill Him**

Benvolio's attempt to ambush and take revenge on Faustus is also a device taken from the medieval morality play. Faustus loses his head, only for it to be revealed as a false one. This theatrical device was originally used in the medieval morality play, *Mankind*. Similarly, Faustus' attempt to strike Dick, Robin and the others dumb in the Vanholt show scene is also derived from the medieval morality play. Doctor Faustus has many features of the morality play of the middle ages.

**Self Assessment**

Multiple Choice Questions:

11. Which of the following is not feature of a morality play, that Doctor Faustus has?
  - (a) Magic as a corrupting power
  - (b) Conflict between good and evil
  - (c) Power as a corrupting influence
  - (d) Creation of good and bad angels.
12. Which of the following play regarding Doctor Faustus is incorrect?
  - (a) Doctor Faustus deals with the themes at the heart of Christianity
  - (b) Doctor Faustus deals with morality more than the sin
  - (c) Doctor Faustus deals with seven deadly sins
  - (d) Doctor Faustus disobey God.
13. Doctor Faustus, despite being a magician rather than a scientist, explicitly rejects
  - (a) the deadly sins
  - (b) the moral code of conduct
  - (c) the medieval model
  - (d) supernatural thoughts.

Fill in the blanks:

14. The conflict between ..... and Evil was a recurring theme in the medieval morality plays.
15. Doctor Faustus deals with the themes at the heart of ..... understanding of the world.
16. Throughout the play, Doctor Faustus decides to remain loyal to ..... rather than seek heaven.
17. The Good Angel and the Bad Angel are characters derived from the ..... plays.

State whether the following statements are true or false:

18. Blood plays only one symbolic role in the play.
19. The audience also observes the pageant of the Seven Deadly Sins in Doctor Faustus.
20. Seeing ourselves as we are and not comparing ourselves to others is humility.

### 10.3 Summary

Notes

- Liturgical Drama in the beginning had three forms, Mystery, Miracle and Morality.
- The morality plays are a type of allegory in which the protagonist is met by personification of various moral attributes, who try to prompt him to choose a godly life over one of evil.
- Morality play flourished in the middle ages, was at its height in the first half of the 15 century, disappeared after the second half, but reappeared in Elizabethan drama.
- In the play, Doctor Faustus, the characters were personified abstractions of vice or virtues such as Good deeds, Faith, Mercy, Anger, Truth, Pride, etc.
- The general theme of the moralities was theological and the main one was the struggle between the good and evil powers for capturing the man's soul and good always won.
- The story of whole morality play centres round the single towering figure.
- The seven deadly sins were found engaged in physical and verbal battle with cardinal virtues. The antics of vices and devils, etc. offered a considerable opportunity for low comedy or buffoonery. The morality play often ended with a solemn moral.
- The main theme of the morality play is: Man begins in innocence, man falls into temptation, man repents and is saved or killed.
- Morality plays help the audience understand the greater concepts of sin and virtue.
- There are many ways in which Doctor Faustus resembles medieval morality plays.
- In the story of Doctor Faustus we see how his trend with his sin of excessive pride, which led him to become a greedy person, obsess with knowing everything about life. In this story we also see how a good angel, a bad angel and an old man try to tell Doctor Faustus what type of decision to make.
- In the light of the theme and characteristics of morality play, we may call "*Doctor Faustus*" a belated morality play in spite of its tragic ending.
- Faustus follows the path told by evil angel and ultimately is ruined. He cannot repent and devil is successful in getting hold of his soul. This moral is negative which is not in accordance with morality plays.
- Faustus is a character ideal to be the hero of a tragedy where man alone is the maker of his fate, good or bad.
- We conclude that how Doctor Faustus came from a respected and admired person by society to a corrupted person. He embarked on this path due to his temptations.
- Doctor Faustus has many features of a morality play: the conflict between good and evil, the conflict between medieval and renaissance values, power as a corrupting influence, magic and the supernatural, the creation of good and bad angels, the old man as good counsel, the pageant of the seven deadly sins and the appearance of Faustus' enemies to ambush and kill him.

### 10.4 Keywords

**Morality Play** : An allegorical form of the drama current from the 14th to 16th centuries and employing such personified abstractions as Virtue, vice, Greed, Gluttony, etc.

**Angels** : One of a class of spiritual beings; a celestial attendant of God. In medieval angelology, angels constituted the lowest of the nine celestial orders.

<b>Notes</b>	<b>Counsel</b>	: Advice; opinion or instruction given in directing the judgment or conduct of another. Or interchange of opinions as to future procedure; consultation; deliberation. Or one of the advisory declarations of Christ, considered by some Christians as not universally binding but as given for aid in attaining moral perfection.
	<b>Deadly Sins</b>	: The seven sins of pride, covetousness, lust, anger, gluttony, envy, and sloth.
	<b>Allegorical</b>	: Consisting of or pertaining to allegory; of the nature of or containing allegory.
	<b>Savior</b>	: A person who saves, rescues, or delivers: <i>the savior of the country</i> .
	<b>Pageant</b>	: An elaborate public spectacle illustrative of the history of a place, institution, or the like, often given in dramatic form or as a procession of colorful floats. Or a costumed procession, masque, allegorical tableau, or the like forming part of public or social festivities. Or a show or exhibition, especially one consisting of a succession of participants or events: a beauty pageant. Or something comparable to a procession in colorful variety, splendor, or grandeur

### 10.5 Review Questions

1. What is a morality play?
2. Mention four characteristics of morality play.
3. What are the main themes of traditional morality play?
4. Write short notes on the following:
  - (a) Good Angel and Bad Angel
  - (b) The conflict between medieval and renaissance values
  - (c) Magic and the supernatural themes in Doctor Faustus play.
5. Explain the following in context of Doctor Faustus play:
  - (a) Pride
  - (b) Sloth
  - (c) Gluttony
6. Illustrate that Doctor Faustus is a morality play.
7. What are the pageant of seven deadly sins?
8. The main theme of the morality play is: Man begins in innocence, man falls into temptation, man repents and is saved or killed, in the context of this theme, explain the play Doctor Faustus.
9. Evaluate the the conflict between good and evil in the context of Doctor Faustus.
10. Illustrate the character of Doctor Faustus as a divided nature of man.

### **Answers: Self Assessment**

- |               |                       |                    |
|---------------|-----------------------|--------------------|
| 1. (a)        | 2. (b)                | 3. (c)             |
| 4. allegory   | 5. sin                | 6. general         |
| 7. evil angel | 8. True               | 9. False           |
| 10. True      | 11. (a)               | 12. (b)            |
| 13. (c)       | 14. Good              | 15. Christianity's |
| 16. hell      | 17. medieval morality | 18. False          |
| 19. True      | 20. True              |                    |

## 10.6 Further Readings

Notes



Books

Farnham, Willard. 1969. *Twentieth-Century Interpretations of Doctor Faustus*. Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice- Hall.

Tydeman, William. 1984. *Doctor Faustus : Text and Performance*. Macmillan, Basingstoke, England.



Online links

<http://www.gradesaver.com/dr-faustus/study-guide/short-summary/>

<http://www.enotes.com/faustus/>

<http://www.pinkmonkey.com/booknotes/monkeynotes/pmDrFaustus40.asp>

<http://bookstove.com/book-talk/doctor-faustus-as-a-morality-play/>

<http://www.eliterarysociety.com/tag/dr-faustus-as-a-morality-play/>



## Unit 11: Doctor Faustus: Plot Construction Including Detailed Analysis of Sub Plot and Theme

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## Objectives

Notes

After studying this unit, you will be able to:

- Discuss the plot construction in Doctor Faustus;
- Illustrate the detailed analysis of sub plot;
- Examine the various themes used in Doctor Faustus;
- Elaborate the analysis of themes used in Doctor Faustus.

## Introduction

Doctor Faustus, a well-respected German scholar, grows dissatisfied with the limits of traditional forms of knowledge—logic, medicine, law, and religion—and decides that he wants to learn to practice magic. His friends Valdes and Cornelius instruct him in the black arts, and he begins his new career as a magician by summoning up Mephistophilis, a devil. Despite Mephistophilis's warnings about the horrors of hell, Faustus tells the devil to return to his master, Lucifer, with an offer of Faustus's soul in exchange for twenty-four years of service from Mephistophilis. Meanwhile, Wagner, Faustus's servant, has picked up some magical ability and uses it to press a clown named Robin into his service.

Armed with his new powers and attended by Mephistophilis, Faustus begins to travel. He goes to the pope's court in Rome, makes himself invisible, and plays a series of tricks. He disrupts the pope's banquet by stealing food and boxing the pope's ears. Following this incident, he travels through the courts of Europe, with his fame spreading as he goes. Eventually, he is invited to the court of the German emperor, Charles V (the enemy of the pope), who asks Faustus to allow him to see Alexander the Great, the famed fourth-century BC Macedonian king and conqueror. Faustus conjures up an image of Alexander, and Charles is suitably impressed. A knight scoffs at Faustus's powers, and Faustus chastises him by making antlers sprout from his head. Furious, the knight vows revenge. Doctor Faustus is a well-constructed play. The plot construction is superb and the themes used were so well organised that the play seems a real story. This unit elaborates the plot construction of the play Doctor Faustus at length. Emphasis has also been given on the detailed analysis of sub-plot and theme.

### 11.1 Story of Doctor Faustus Play

Doctor Faustus, a talented German scholar at Wittenburg, rails against the limits of human knowledge. He has learned everything he can learn, or so he thinks, from the conventional academic disciplines. All of these things have left him unsatisfied, so now he turns to magic. A Good Angel and an Evil Angel arrive, representing Faustus' choice between Christian conscience and the path to damnation. The former advises him to leave off this pursuit of magic, and the latter tempts him. From two fellow scholars, Valdes and Cornelius, Faustus learns the fundamentals of the black arts. He thrills at the power he will have, and the great feats he'll perform. He summons the devil Mephistophilis. They flesh out the terms of their agreement, with Mephistophilis representing Lucifer. Faustus will sell his soul, in exchange for twenty-four years of power, with Mephistophilis as servant to his every whim.



*Notes* In a comic relief scene, we learn that Faustus' servant Wagner has gleaned some magic learning. He uses it to convince Robin the Clown to be his servant.

Notes

Before the time comes to sign the contract, Faustus has misgivings, but he puts them aside. Mephistophilis returns and Faustus signs away his soul, writing with his own blood. The words "Homo fuge" ("Fly, man) appear on his arm, and Faustus is seized by fear. Mephistophilis distracts him with a dance of devils. Faustus requests a wife, a demand Mephistophilis denies, but he does give Faustus books full of knowledge.

Some time has passed. Faustus curses Mephistophilis for depriving him of heaven, although he has seen many wonders. He manages to torment Mephistophilis, he can't stomach mention of God, and the devil flees. The Good Angel and Evil Angel arrive again. The Good Angel tells him to repent, and the Evil Angel tells him to stick to his wicked ways. Lucifer, Belzebub, and Mephistophilis return, to intimidate Faustus. He is cowed by them, and agrees to speak and think no more of God. They delight him with a pageant of the Seven Deadly Sins, and then Lucifer promises to show Faustus hell. Meanwhile, Robin the Clown has gotten one of Faustus' magic books.

Faustus has explored the heavens and the earth from a chariot drawn by dragons, and is now flying to Rome, where the feast honoring St. Peter is about to be celebrated. Mephistophilis and Faustus wait for the Pope, depicted as an arrogant, decidedly unholy man. They play a series of tricks, by using magic to disguise themselves and make themselves invisible, before leaving.

The Chorus returns to tell us that Faustus returns home, where his vast knowledge of astronomy and his abilities earn him wide renown. Meanwhile, Robin the Clown has also learned magic, and uses it to impress his friend Rafe and summon Mephistophilis, who doesn't seem too happy to be called.

At the court of Charles V, Faustus performs illusions that delight the Emperor. He also humiliates a knight named Benvolio. When Benvolio and his friends try to avenge the humiliation, Faustus has his devils hurt them and cruelly transform them, so that horns grow on their heads.

Faustus swindles a Horse-courser, and when the Horse-courser returns, Faustus plays a frightening trick on him. Faustus then goes off to serve the Duke of Vanholt. Robin the Clown, his friend Dick, the Horse-courser, and a Carter all meet. They all have been swindled or hurt by Faustus' magic. They go off to the court of the Duke to settle scores with Faustus.

Faustus entertains the Duke and Duchess with petty illusions, before Robin the Clown and his band of ruffians arrives. Faustus toys with them, besting them with magic, to the delight of the Duke and Duchess.

Faustus' twenty-four years are running out. Wagner tells the audience that he thinks Faustus prepares for death. He has made his will, leaving all to Wagner. But even as death approaches, Faustus spends his days feasting and drinking with the other students. For the delight of his fellow scholars, Faustus summons a spirit to take the shape of Helen of Troy. Later, an Old Man enters, warning Faustus to repent. Faustus opts for pleasure instead, and asks Mephistophilis to bring Helen of Troy to him, to be his love and comfort during these last days. Mephistophilis readily agrees.

Later, Faustus tells his scholar friends that he is damned, and that his power came at the price of his soul. As the hour approaches, Mephistophilis taunts Faustus. Faustus blames Mephistophilis for his damnation, and the devil proudly takes credit for it. The Good and Evil Angel arrive, and the Good Angel abandons Faustus. The gates of Hell open. The Evil Angel taunts Faustus, naming the horrible tortures seen there.

The Clock strikes eleven. Faustus gives a final, frenzied monologue, regretting his choices. At midnight the devils enter. As Faustus begs God and the devil for mercy, the devils drag him away. Later, the Scholar friends find Faustus' body, torn to pieces.



*Notes* The chorus emphasizes that Faustus is gone, his once-great potential wasted. The chorus warns the audience to remember his fall, and the lessons it offers.

## 11.2 Plot Construction

Notes

Doctor Faustus is a well-constructed play. In the opening of the play, the audience is given the exposition: an explanation of the subject matter of this tragedy. Faustus the man is presented by the chorus. In the first act, Faustus surveys different branches of knowledge and chooses to practice the black arts. In this section of the play, Faustus has a foretaste of what magic can do for him when he commands Mephistophilis to perform certain magical feats, with which the action rises.

The climax is reached in Act II, Scene 1, in which Faustus signs a pact with Lucifer. Following this pact, the audience sees a series of demonstrations of Faustus' magical powers. The action falls in Act IV, in which Faustus as a magician is challenged by Benvolio, as well as Robin, Dick, the horse dealer and other plebeians.

The outcome of the protagonist's pact with the devil is seen in Act V. In this act the devils come and carry Faustus away to hell. Faustus is perpetually damned. The Epilogue presents the moral of the play. Men should not delve into forbidden territories. They should go only where "heaven permits" one to tread.



*Notes* Throughout the play the comic scenes parody Faustus' magical feats, which are imitated by the clown. They serve as a sub-plot that runs parallel to the main plot of the play.



*Task* Men should not delve into forbidden territories. They should go only where "heaven permits" one to tread. Illustrate this statement in context of the play Doctor Faustus.

## Self Assessment

Multiple Choice Questions:

1. Doctor Faustus is
  - (a) a talented German scholar
  - (b) a talented magician
  - (c) a shrewd deceit
  - (d) a victim of the plot of Lucifer.
2. Faustus curses Mephistophilis for
  - (a) refusing the service
  - (b) depriving him of heaven
  - (c) creating illusion in the Court of Charles V
  - (d) returning to his master Lucifer.
3. Doctor Faustus is a well constructed play, and in the opening of the play
  - (a) Faustus surveys different branches of knowledge
  - (b) Faustus has a foretaste of what magic can do for him
  - (c) the audience is given an explanation of the subject matter of this tragedy
  - (d) Faustus as a magician is challenged by Benvolio.

Notes

Fill in the blanks:

4. Faustus has explored the heavens and the ..... from a chariot drawn by dragons.
5. Doctor Faustus, a talented ..... at Wittenburg, rails against the limits of human knowledge.
6. Faustus ..... Mephostophilis for depriving him of heaven.
7. The outcome of the Doctor Faustus' pact with the devil is seen in ..... .

State whether the following statements are true or false:

8. The Good Angel tells Doctor Faustus to repent, and the Evil Angel tells him to stick to his wicked ways.
9. All the knowledge from conventional academic disciplines has left Doctor Faustus unsatisfied, so now he turns to magic.
10. Faustus swindles a horse-courser, and when the horse-courser returns, Faustus plays a frightening trick on him.

### **11.3 Themes in Doctor Faustus**

#### **11.3.1 Conflict between Good and Evil**

One of the most important and prominent themes in Doctor Faustus is by far the conflict between good and evil in the world and the human soul. Marlowe's play set the precedent for religious works that were concerned with morals and suffering. In the play, Doctor Faustus is frequently accompanied by two angels, one good and one evil. Both spirits try to advise him on a course of action, with the evil one usually being more influential over his mind. These two angels embody the internal battle that is raging inside of Faustus. On one hand, he has an insatiable thirst for knowledge and supreme power; on the other hand, Faustus realizes that it is folly to relinquish heavenly pleasures for fleeting mortal happiness.

Although society is accustomed to believing that good will always prevails, evil gains the upper hand in Marlowe's play. Innocent and often devout men are tortured at Faustus's delight and command. He partakes in many pleasures with devils and is even shown the seven deadly sins in person. Thus, Faustus is depicted as doomed from the very beginning. Although he has moments of contrition, he quickly shoves aside thoughts of God and turns to evil. Marlowe attempted to express to his audience that while prayer and repentance are the paths to heaven, sin and mortal pleasure are very hard temptations to pass over.

Lucifer's acquisition of Faustus's soul is especially delightful for him because Faustus was once a good and devout soul. Even during his last moments on earth, Faustus curses himself for willingly burning the scriptures and denouncing God. In Doctor Faustus, Marlowe shows the reader that everything in the mortal world is a double-edged sword.



*Example:* In his never-ending quest for knowledge, Faustus exemplifies how even scholarly life can have evil undertones when studies are used for unholy purposes. Doctor Faustus's miserable defeat against the forces of evil within and without enlightens the reader to beware a surfeit of anything.

#### **11.3.2 Greed**

Like many of Marlowe's heroes, Faustus was self-driven by greed and ambition. In this case, the Doctor tries to satiate his appetite for knowledge and power. These heroes forget their responsibilities

to God and their fellow creatures. Instead, they attempt to hide their weak characters with a megalomaniacal insanity. While Faustus is amused by the seven deadly sins, he does not realize that he is guilty of every single one, namely avarice and jealousy. In effect, Marlowe presents to the reader a good soul gone bad—a brilliant scholar who squanders his time with necromancy and is later courted by the devil himself. Although he is frequently surrounded by powerful heads of state, beautiful women and servile devils, Faustus is never truly happy. He tries to bury his unrest with luxury and debauchery, to no avail.



*Task* What Faustus does not realize is that he craves happiness and salvation, not wealth and damnation. Instead, in a tragic cycle of greed and despair, Faustus sadly wallows in riches up to the time of his miserable death. Keeping this in view, explain that Doctor Faustus is a tragic hero.

### 11.3.3 Salvation through Prayer

A third important motif in the play is that of salvation through prayer. While Doctor Faustus is an example of what happens to a wayward soul, the old man represents the devout Christian soul. The old man begs Faustus to repent, regardless of the tortures that the devils inflict on him for this. He clings to his faith to the very end and even Mephostophilis is wary of harming him because of his good soul. Thus, the old man serves as a foil to Faustus's misery and damnation.

### 11.3.4 Tragic Hero

A fourth theme in Doctor Faustus is that of the tragic hero. Despite his unholy soul, Faustus is often viewed by audiences with pity and compassion. A tragic hero is a character that the audience sympathizes with despite his/her actions that would indicate the contrary. Faustus is not the mere shell of a man in the play, existing only to represent the evil in the world. He is a veritable human being with a range of emotions and thoughts. He displays pride, joy, contrition and self-doubt quite frequently. At many times, Faustus alternately displays his cowardice and foolish strength against the devils. Thus, Faustus's one saving grace with the audience is his identifiable character. Although the Doctor himself does not care for humanity, many find themselves identifying with his all too human dreams of power, knowledge and lechery. Unfortunately, Faustus's humanity was not enough in the play to make him repent and save him from the depths of hell.



*Caution* Doctor Faustus has an unholy soul existing only to represent the evil in the world, but he is often viewed by audiences with pity and compassion—a tragic hero.

### 11.3.5 Man's Limitations and Potential

The axis of this theme is the conflict between Greek or Renaissance worldviews, and the Christian worldview that has held sway throughout the medieval period. As Europe emerged from the Middle Ages, contact with previously lost Greek learning had a revelatory effect on man's conception of himself. While the Christian worldview places man below God, and requires obedience to him, the Greek worldview places man at the center of the universe. For the Greeks, man defies the gods at his own peril, but man has nobility that no deity can match.

Notes



*Notes* The possible range of human accomplishment is at the heart of Doctor Faustus, and many of the other themes are auxiliary to this one.

Doctor Faustus, scholar and lover of beauty, chafes at the bit of human limitation. He seeks to achieve godhood himself, and so he leaves behind the Christian conceptions of human limitation. Though he fancies himself to be a seeker of Greek greatness, we see quickly that he is not up to the task.

### 11.3.6 Pride and Sin

Pride is one of the Seven Deadly Sins, arguable the one that leads to all the others. Within the Christian framework, pride is a lethal motivation because it makes the sinner forget his fallen state. A man made haughty with pride forgets that he shares Eve's sin, and must therefore be saved by the gift of grace. Only God, through Christ, can dispense this grace, and the man who forgets that fact deprives himself of the path to salvation.



*Notes* For Christians, men are fallen since birth, because they carry with them the taint of original sin.

Faustus' first great sin is pride. He does not stop there. Reflecting the Christian view, pride gives rise to all of the other sins, and ends ironically with the proud man's abasement. Faustus goes quickly from pride to all of the other sins, becoming increasingly petty and low.

### 11.3.7 Flesh and Spirit

The division between flesh and spirit was stronger in Greek thought than in Hebrew thought, but Christians adapted the divide into their own belief system. While Westerners now take this conception of being for granted, the flesh/spirit divide is not a feature of many of the world's major belief systems. Nor is the flesh/spirit divide necessary for belief in the afterlife: both Hindus and Buddhists conceive of the human entity differently, while retaining belief in life after death.

In Christianity, flesh and spirit are divided to value the later and devalue the former. Faustus' problem is that he values his flesh, and the pleasure it can provide him, while failing to look after the state of his soul.

### 11.3.8 Damnation

Damnation is eternal. Eternal hell is another concept that Westerners take for granted as part of religion, but again this belief's uniqueness needs to be appreciated. While the Jewish view of the afterlife was somewhat vague, Christians developed the idea of judgment after death. Moslems adapted a similar conception of hell and heaven, and to this day eternal hell and eternal heaven remains an important feature of Christianity and Islam. While Buddhists and Hindus have hell in their belief systems, for the most part in neither religion is hell considered eternal. For example, an eternal hell in Mahayana Buddhism would contradict Buddhist beliefs about transience and the saving power of Buddha's compassion.

Not so in Christianity. If Faustus dies without repenting and accepting God, he will be damned forever. As we learn from Mephostophilis, hell is not merely a place, but separation from God's love.

### 11.3.9 Salvation, Mercy and Redemption

Hell is eternal, but so is heaven. For a Christian, all that is necessary to be saved from eternal damnation is acceptance of Jesus Christ's grace. Even after signing away his soul to the devil, Faustus

has the option of repentance that will save him from hell. But once he has committed himself to his own damnation, Faustus seems unable to change his course. While Christianity seems to accept even a deathbed repentance as acceptable for the attainment of salvation, Marlowe plays with that idea, possibly rejecting it for his own thematic purposes.

### 11.3.10 Valuing Knowledge over Wisdom

Faustus has a thirst for knowledge, but he seems unable to acquire wisdom. Faustus' thirst for knowledge is impressive, but it is overshadowed by his complete inability to understand certain truths. Because of this weakness, Faustus cannot use his knowledge to better himself or his world. He ends life with a head full of facts, and vital understanding gained too late to save him.

### 11.3.11 Talk and Action

Faustus is, with no exceptions, beautiful when he speaks and contemptible when he acts. His opening speeches about the uses to which he'll put his power are exhilarating, but once he gains near-omnipotence he squanders twenty-four years in debauchery and petty tricks. This gap between high talk and low action seems related to the fault of valuing knowledge over wisdom. While Faustus has learned much of the Greek world's learning, he has not really understood what he's been reading. He can talk about potential and plans in terms of a Greek worldview, but he lacks the internal strength to follow through on his purported goals.

### 11.3.12 Quest for Power

The theme of the quest for power in Doctor Faustus is connected with the theme of the quest for knowledge. Knowledge bestows power on the knower. The kind of knowledge pursued by Faustus is practical knowledge, bestowing upon him practical powers.

However, Faustus' quest for power transforms him into a magician. With the help of Mephistophilis, he demonstrates his powers in the papal court and in the palace of the Duke and the Duchess of Vanholt. His power reduces him to the position of a mere court entertainer.



*Notes* Faustus' quest for power does not take into account the need for acquiring spiritual power. Faustus' magic is magic divorced from spirituality. Hence, it is shown to be dangerous. Instead of leading to his salvation, his quest for power results in his damnation.

### 11.3.13 Quest for Knowledge

Marlowe's Faustus embodies the Renaissance aspiration for infinite knowledge. In the first scene of the play, Faustus reviews all the existing branches of knowledge. He rejects them all and opts for the study of the black arts, since they will bestow upon him "a world of profit and delight/of power, of honor, of omnipotence."

Faustus' pursuit of knowledge involves every aspect of his complex being: spiritual, intellectual and physical. Faustus' choice of magic make more sense if the audience imagines him in the modern world rejecting theoretical studies and choosing technology. He commits himself to the world of experience. This appeals to his creative instinct, but in the process it leads to his destruction.

Faustus' knowledge gives him power. He exhibits his magical power to emperors and dukes. He descends to the level of a court entertainer by invoking the spirits of Alexander and his paramour and of Helen of Troy. He is reduced to the role of producing grapes out of season for a pregnant



**Notes**

duchess. All this is far removed from his initial assertion: "A sound magician is a demi-god." The knowledge of magic and its powers makes a buffoon of him. In this way, Faustus' quest for knowledge is shown to be inadequate, unsatisfying and incomplete.

**Self Assessment**

Multiple Choice Questions:

11. Conflict between good and evil is best depicted by
  - (a) good angel and bad angel
  - (b) morals and sufferings
  - (c) thrust for knowledge and supreme power
  - (d) evil will gains the upper hand over good will.
12. Pride and sin is one of the seven deadly sins that leads to
  - (a) be saved by the gift of grace
  - (b) all other deadly sins
  - (c) the man's abasement
  - (d) world's major belief system.
13. The theme quest for knowledge best embodies by
  - (a) the gain the magical power by Doctor Faustus
  - (b) the creation of illusion
  - (c) the Renaissance aspiration for infinite knowledge
  - (d) the gain of spiritual knowledge.

Fill in the blanks:

14. Doctor Faustus is frequently accompanied by two angels, one ..... and one evil.
15. Faustus was self-driven by ..... and ambition.
16. Faustus has a thirst for knowledge, but he seems unable to acquire ..... .
17. Knowledge bestows ..... on the knower.

State whether the following statements are true or false:

18. Pride is a lethal motivation because it makes the sinner forget his fallen state.
19. The division between flesh and spirit was stronger in Christian Theology.
20. This gap between high talk and low action seems related to the fault of valuing knowledge over wisdom.

**11.4 Summary**

- Doctor Faustus, a talented German scholar at Wittenburg, rails against the limits of human knowledge. He has learned everything he can learn, or so he thinks, from the conventional academic disciplines. All of these things have left him unsatisfied, so now he turns to magic.
- A Good Angel and an Evil Angel arrive, representing Faustus' choice between Christian conscience and the path to damnation.
- Faustus curses Mephostophilis for depriving him of heaven, although he has seen many wonders. He manages to torment Mephostophilis, he can't stomach mention of God, and the devil flees.

- Faustus has explored the heavens and the earth from a chariot drawn by dragons, and is now flying to Rome, where the feast honoring St. Peter is about to be celebrated. Mephostophilis and Faustus wait for the Pope, depicted as an arrogant, decidedly unholy man.
- Doctor Faustus is a well-constructed play. In the opening of the play, the audience is given the exposition: an explanation of the subject matter of this tragedy.
- The climax is reached in Act II, Scene 1, in which Faustus signs a pact with Lucifer. Following this pact, the audience sees a series of demonstrations of Faustus' magical powers.
- The outcome of the protagonist's pact with the devil is seen in Act V.
- The most important and prominent themes in Doctor Faustus is by far the conflict between good and evil in the world and the human soul.
- Like many of Marlowe's heroes, Faustus was self-driven by greed and ambition.
- Salvation through Prayer is the third important motif in the play.
- Despite his unholy soul, Faustus is often viewed by audiences with pity and compassion.
- The axis of this theme is the conflict between Greek or Renaissance worldviews, and the Christian worldview that has held sway throughout the medieval period.
- Pride is one of the Seven Deadly Sins, arguable the one that leads to all the others.
- The theme of the quest for power in Doctor Faustus is connected with the theme of the quest for knowledge. Knowledge bestows power on the knower.

### 11.5 Keywords

- Repent** : To feel sorry, self-reproachful, or contrite for past conduct; regret or be conscience-stricken about a past action, attitude, etc.
- Monologue** : A form of dramatic entertainment, comedic solo, or the like by a single speaker. Or a prolonged talk or discourse by a single speaker, especially one dominating or monopolizing a conversation.
- Exposition** : A large-scale public exhibition or show, as of art or manufactured products. Or writing or speech primarily intended to convey information or to explain.
- Plebeians** : Belonging or pertaining to the common people.
- Epilogue** : A speech, usually in verse, delivered by one of the actors after the conclusion of a play.
- Morals** : Pertaining to, or concerned with the principles or rules of right conduct or the distinction between right and wrong, ethical, moral attitudes. Or expressing or conveying truths or counsel as to right conduct, as a speaker or a literary work.
- Greed** : Excessive or rapacious desire, especially for wealth or possessions.
- Ambition** : An earnest desire for some type of achievement or distinction, as power, honor, fame, or wealth, and the willingness to strive for its attainment.
- Avarice** : Insatiable greed for riches; inordinate, miserly desire to gain and hoard wealth.
- Salvation** : The act of saving or protecting from harm, risk, loss, destruction, etc. Or the state of being saved or protected from harm, risk, etc.
- Despair** : Someone or something that causes hopelessness.
- Tragic Hero** : A great or virtuous character in a dramatic tragedy who is destined for downfall, suffering, or defeat.
- Pride** : A high or inordinate opinion of one's own dignity, importance, merit, or superiority, whether as cherished in the mind or as displayed in bearing, conduct, etc.
- Redemption** : An act of redeeming or the state of being redeemed.

Notes

### 11.6 Review Questions

1. Give a detailed analysis of plot in Doctor Faustus.
2. Quist for knowledge is an important theme used in Doctor Faustus. Explain.
3. What are the main themes used in Doctor Faustus?
4. Write short notes on the following in context of Doctor Faustus:
  - (a) Conflict between good and evil
  - (b) Pride and sin
  - (c) Valuing knowledge over wisdom.
5. Explain the following in context of Doctor Faustus play:
  - (a) Flesh and spirit
  - (b) Quist for Power
  - (c) Tragic Hero
6. Illustrate that salvation through power is an important motif in Doctor Faustus play.

### **Answers: Self Assessment**

- |            |                   |           |
|------------|-------------------|-----------|
| 1. (b)     | 2. (b)            | 3. (c)    |
| 4. earth   | 5. German scholar | 6. curses |
| 7. Act V   | 8. True           | 9. True   |
| 10. True   | 11. (a)           | 12. (b)   |
| 13. (c)    | 14. good          | 15. greed |
| 16. wisdom | 17. power         | 18. True  |
| 19. False  | 20. True          |           |

### 11.7 Further Readings



*Books*

Farnham, Willard. 1969. *Twentieth-Century Interpretations of Doctor Faustus*. Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice- Hall.

Tydemman, William. 1984. *Doctor Faustus : Text and Performance*. Macmillan, Basingstoke, England.



*Online links*

<http://www.sparknotes.com/lit/doctorfaustus/summary.html>

<http://www.gradesaver.com/dr-faustus/study-guide/major-themes/>

<http://www.sparknotes.com/lit/doctorfaustus/themes.html>

<http://www.enotes.com/lit/q-and-a/plot-construction-play-doctor-faustus-296885>

## Unit 12: Doctor Faustus: Detailed Analysis of Seven Deadly Sins

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### Objectives

After studying this unit, you will be able to:

- Explain the term sin;
- Elaborate the seven deadly sins as set forth in literature;
- Illustrate the seven cardinal sins as ordered Marlowe in the play Doctor Faustus;
- Enumerate an illustrative analysis of the seven sins.

### Introduction

The Tragicall History of the Life and Death of Doctor Faustus, commonly referred to simply as Doctor Faustus, is a play by Christopher Marlowe, based on the Faust story, in which a man sells his soul to the devil for power and knowledge. Marlowe very effectively depicted the seven deadly sins in the character of Doctor Faustus. But what exactly is sin? While there are many definitions of

## Notes

sin, the broadest and most accurate definition of sin is found in 1 John 5: 17: "All wrongdoing is sin. ..." In other words, all unrighteousness is considered sin. The Bible has clearly and emphatically indicated that which is not right; Gods laws and standards are very specific, showing us His utter and complete holiness. This unit elaborates the seven deadly sins used in Doctor Faustus at length.

## 12.1 Seven Deadly Dins

The Seven Deadly Sins, when mentioned, conjure up ancient tales of dark deeds and dark characters, like Faustus and Mephistopheles. Doctor Faustus supposedly sold his soul to the devil, the evil Mephistopheles and, in so doing, made himself prey to all types of corruption and degradation. In his descent into wickedness, the ruined Faustus committed all of these deadly sins: pride, envy, gluttony, lust, anger, greed, and sloth. These sins were considered deadly because they led Faustus, or any man or woman who would commit them onto a path from which there was no return.

The characteristics that are considered to be the seven deadly sins can be described this way: Pride is the exaggerated opinion of one's worth in comparison to God and others and a willful oblivion to one's flaws. Envy is the unhealthy longing for the possessions, abilities, or status of another. Gluttony is excessive indulgence in the pleasures of food and drink. Lust is extreme desire for sexual and sensual gratification. Anger is manifested by fits of wrath and rage due to intolerance of others. Greed is an insatiable desire to acquire material goods. Sloth is an almost pathological laziness which hinders productivity and good health. Anyone possessing some of these vices was considered evil; anyone who possessed all of them was utterly doomed.

By using the words "seven deadly sins," it suggests that there are serious character flaws which may exist in a man and that the deeds which are produced as a result of these flaws have fatal consequences. All death is a type of separation; spiritual death is separation from God. The Bible indicates that sin ends in death: "For the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord."



### Task

The use of words seven deadly sins suggests that there are serious character flaws which may exist in a man and that the deeds which are produced as a result of these flaws have fatal consequences. Explain.

James, the brother of Jesus said it this way, "But each one is tempted when, by his own evil desire, he is dragged away and enticed. Then, after desire has conceived, it gives birth to sin; and sin, when it is full-grown, gives birth to death."



### Notes

In Romans, Paul indicates that the Gospel reveals the righteousness of God. The Gospel is the Good News that Jesus Christ died for our sins and rose again; Jesus paid the price. Jesus paid this price by being brutalized and massacred in ignominy on a cross. This painful and humiliating death showed us God's attitude towards sin.

The Seven Deadly Sins as set forth in literature – pride, envy, gluttony, lust, anger, greed, and sloth – are by no means an exhaustive list of sins. It has already established that all unrighteousness is sin, but the book of Proverbs also lists seven things that God hates: "There are six things the Lord hates, seven that are detestable to him: haughty eyes, a lying tongue, hands that shed innocent blood, a heart that devises wicked schemes, feet that are quick to rush into evil, a false witness who pours out lies and a man who stirs up dissension among brothers." Yes, God has indicated that these are things that he despises and that every wrong is sin – but He has also provided a remedy:

“Come now, let us reason together,’ says the Lord. ‘Though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be as white as snow; though they are red as crimson, they shall be like wool.”

Notes



*Notes* God has promised to make us pure and white and whole; this cleansing and purification was provided through, His Son, Jesus Christ. There was no contribution from man. “You see, at just the right time, when we were still powerless, Christ died for the ungodly.” All we need to do is believe that Christ died for us and accept Him as Savior and Lord.

If God has provided a remedy for sin, how can it be deadly? The deadliness of sin was erased through the death of Christ and the shedding of His blood. God loves us so much that He sent His Son to earth for the express purpose of accomplishing this. However, if we do not believe and accept what God has offered, than *any* sin we commit will be deadly. “For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life. For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him. Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe stands condemned already because he has not believed in the name of God’s one and only Son.



*Task* Elucidate that the deadliness of sin was erased through the death of Christ and the shedding of His blood.

## Self Assessment

Multiple Choice Questions:

1. The seven deadly sins, when mentioned, conjure up ancient tales of dark deeds
  - (a) ancient tales of dark deeds and dark characters
  - (b) fairy tales of dark deeds
  - (c) modern tales of dark characters
  - (d) medieval tales of dark deeds and dark characters.
2. The characteristics that are considered to be the seven deadly sins can be described as
  - (a) gluttony, fight, lust, anger, sloth, proud, and envy
  - (b) pride, envy, gluttony, lust, anger, greed, and sloth
  - (c) fight, repent, pride, lust, sloth, anger, and worship
  - (d) repent, fight, gluttony, pride, sloth, anger, and worship.
3. The deadliness of sin was erased through
  - (a) repent
  - (b) worship
  - (c) the death of Christ and shedding of His blood
  - (d) both repent and worship.

Fill in the blanks:

4. Doctor Faustus supposedly sold his ..... to the devil.

Notes

5. In his descent into wickedness, the ruined Faustus committed all of the .....
6. By using the words “seven deadly sins,” it suggests that there are serious ..... flaws.
7. God has indicated that these are things that he despises and that every ..... is sin.

State whether the following statements are true or false:

8. Even though God has provided a remedy for sin, then how can it be deadly?
9. Anger is manifested by fits of wrath and rage due to intolerance of others.
10. In Romans, Paul indicates that the Gospel reveals the righteousness of God.

## 12.2 Marlowe’s Cardinal Sins

Marlowe has ordered seven cardinal sins in his play *Doctor Faustus*, viz. pride, covetousness, envy, wrath, gluttony, sloth, and lechery.

### 12.2.1 Pride

Faustus is proud of his knowledge. Pride, creates Doctor Faustus’ inability to repent, therefore ultimately resulting in his death. “His fall is caused by the same pride and ambition that caused the fall of angels in heaven, and of humanity in the Garden of Eden.” Faustus’ fall is foreshadowed during his first encounter with a devil, inquiring of the reason for Lucifer’s exile in hell.

FAUSTUS: How comes it then that he is prince of devils?

MEPHASTOPHILIS: O, by aspiring pride and insolence

For which God threw him from the face of Heaven.

An eternity in hell becomes Doctor Faustus’ fate, a fate determined by his own irrational decisions. Although he is a well-educated scholar, traits of arrogance, selfishness, and pride hinder his judgment. Doctor Faustus’ troubles begin when he craves power and knowledge beyond human capacity. Bored with his great knowledge, he wishes to find another subject to study to pacify himself and achieve happiness.



*Example:* FAUSTUS: Then read no more, thou hast attained the end;

A greater subject fitteth Faustus’ wit.

By making a deal with the devil, Faustus trades his soul for satisfaction, and a greater field of study. He is selfish—wanting knowledge, power, and fun without having to work or take responsibility for it. As result of his selfish desires, he signs a contract with his blood trading his soul for his desires, eternal peace for eternal anguish, thus beginning his hardships.

Throughout the twenty-four year period in which Faustus has power and knowledge, his pride is constant and emerges in several scenes. Evidence of this threatening pride begins as early as the prologue when the chorus compares Doctor Faustus with Icarus, their similarity being vanity.

This excerpt suggests, that like Icarus, Doctor Faustus’ pride will lead to his overthrow. Other examples of Faustus’ arrogance are the scenes in which he comments on the things that the devil shows him. Several times in the play, Faustus remarks that hat Mephistophilis shows or tells him could easily be figured out by his own student, Wagner.

To make a statement such as that is egotistical, and typical of his character. Other statements that Doctor Faustus made in which his egotism is apparent.



*Examples:* FAUSTUS. I charge thee to return and change thy shape,

Thou art too ugly to attend on me;

FAUSTUS: Come, I think hell's a fable.

Thinkest thou that Faustus is so fond to imagine

That after this life there is any pain?

Tush, these are trifles and mere old wives' tales.

In these examples, Doctor Faustus clearly regards himself on a higher level than hell and its devils. He will allow Mephistophilis to be his "servant", but only in a more becoming shape, even though it is Mephistophilis that brings Faustus his magic. Furthermore, despite Mephistophilis' warnings, Faustus is oblivious to the dangers about him; he believes nothing will or can happen to him. It is the notion of near superhuman power that Faustus possesses that creates this unmovable pride. Faustus believes he is all-knowing; if anything was wrong, he would perceive it.

The arrogance that hinders Doctor Faustus' judgment continues as the play progresses, and it is depicted in several scenes. Faustus wishes to visit the Pope, as he feels he is entitled, and during this encounter in which Faustus is invisible, he grabs an important dish meant to be given to the Friar.

It is the extreme pride of Doctor Faustus that leads him to believe that he is more deserving of the special dish than the Pope. Faustus also reacts in the same manner with the horse-courser. Instead of selling his horse made of magic for a fair price, he insists on more money than the courser can afford. Throughout the play, Marlowe combines these shameful displays of pride with several interventions between Faustus and the Good and Evil Angels. During these encounters, Faustus is asked and given the chance to repent to receive God's forgiveness and release from his contract with Lucifer. However, he reacts negatively to the Good Angel's advice and is tempted by the Evil Angel's persuasions of worldly possessions and power, to maintain his pact with Lucifer.

Despite his agreement with the devil, Faustus is a free individual. However, Faustus was too stubborn and overcome by his pride to realize his freedom, and therefore does not repent. He is again unconcerned with the fate that lies ahead of him. He believes himself to be so powerful that there is no pain in hell capable of harming him.

The level of pride that Faustus contains at the end of the play is still abundant, and at this point, it is too late for him. In his last words, Faustus finally realizes the terrible fate upon him and admits his vulnerability asking for mercy on his soul, but only to lessen the pain of hell.



*Examples:* FAUSTUS: O God, if thou wilt not have mercy on my soul,

Yet for Christ's sake, whose blood hath ransomed me,

Impose some end to my incessant pain:

Let Faustus live in hell a thousand years,

A hundred thousand, and at last be saved

With the closing of the play as Doctor Faustus is sent to hell, there are many ironic details evident. The main one is that despite his great knowledge and power, Faustus makes the most unwise decision. Repenting to Mephistophilis instead of God, he gives up everything for nothing in return. In all his years with his new knowledge and power. He did nothing of significance; he merely played tricks and showed off his new talents. Marlowe's play is full of irony depicting the downfall of man riddled with sin. The underlying theme however is that, like Icarus and Lucifer, Doctor Faustus allows his pride, a key to most tragedies, to become excessive and ultimately it is his downfall.



Notes

### 12.2.2 Covetousness

Faustus demonstrates this in various scenes, when he evokes the devils magic, the want of a wife, and the overall actions of his character portray his pursuit of knowledge and glory. Usually this sin is manifested through sex, power, or image which demises the self control and can suffocate the soul. It is the self-destructive drive for pleasure which is out of control. Faustus ... performs his silly tricks for self indulgence.



Task

Illustrate a few scenes where Faustus demonstrates covetousness.

### 12.2.3 Envy

Doctor Faustus wanted more in his life and envied the powers of others. Therefore he wanted to command the demons to control the world to his accord... Doctor Faustus was envious of the accomplishment of others and wanted to exceed their glory (Act One). In one of the comic scenes, scene 6, we learn that Robin and Rafe have stolen one of Faustus' books and plan to use it to seduce a woman. They must have been jealous of Faustus' power and his magical aptitude.

### 12.2.4 Wrath

Often this is our first reaction to the faults of others. Faustus demonstrates his impatience with the way he treats the people around him, his servants (demonic and human), as well as other characters ... Wrath is what Faustus feels when he conjures up horns to place on the head of a knight of Emperor Charles V, court. Since the knight shows skepticism in Faustus' powers, Faustus must rebuke his insolence by placing horns on the knight's head.

### 12.2.5 Gluttony

Gluttony is temperance in accepting the natural limits of pleasures, and preserves of the natural balance. This does not pertain only to food, but to entertainment and other legitimate goods, and even the company of others. Faustus demonstrates gluttony when he evokes the use of the dark arts. He is attempting to go beyond his earthly knowledge while disturbing the natural balance of Gods laws and expectations. Faustus wants to elevate himself as an equal to God. In Faustus's eyes God is no longer the balance or medium in his life, the devil has become the greater power to Faustus. ... Faustus starts using the devils name in place of where one would use Gods name.

### 12.2.6 Sloth

Sloth in conjunction with the other sins, works to muffle the spiritual senses so we first become slow to respond to God and then drift completely into the slumber of complacency to the demonic ways. This is the sixth sin in the death of Faustus ... Faustus has become numb to his own sub consciousness; he no longer abides by what he does. Even in the scene where he signs the contract with the devil, his blood congeals and he does not understand why. His own body is fighting the deadly deed he was attempting to do.

### 12.2.7 Lechery

Also known as greed is the seventh sin. Faustus also displays greed in act one when he states he has not accomplished greatness. Faustus wants to gain glory; he has expectations of others to get him his glory. Faustus uses Mephistophilis to gain glory ... and he does not acknowledge that the demon is responsible for all the tasks he performs, but states it is his gift of the dark arts.

## Self Assessment

Notes

Multiple Choice Questions:

11. Pride creates Doctor Faustus' inability
  - (a) to repent
  - (b) to adjust in the new situation
  - (c) to dispel the Gospel
  - (d) to dispel the evil deeds.
12. Which of the following sin make Doctor Faustus to want more in his life?
  - (a) Pride
  - (b) Envy
  - (c) Gluttony
  - (d) Sloth.
13. Which of the following group is not Marlowe's deadly sins?
  - (a) Lechery, gluttony, and envy
  - (b) Wrath, sloth, and pride
  - (c) Repent, sloth, and gluttony
  - (d) Covetousness, envy, and gluttony.

Fill in the blanks:

14. Doctor Faustus wanted more in his life and envied the ..... of others.
15. Gluttony is temperance in accepting the ..... of pleasures, and preserves of the natural balance.
16. Faustus demonstrates covetousness in various scenes, when he evokes the .....
17. Despite his agreement with the ....., Faustus is a free individual.

State whether the following statements are true or false:

18. Doctor Faustus wanted to command the demons to control the world to his accord.
19. Faustus displays Lechery in act one when he states he has not accomplished greatness.
20. By making a deal with the devil, Faustus trades his soul for satisfaction, and a greater field of study.

### 12.3 Summary

- The Seven Deadly Sins, when mentioned, conjure up ancient tales of dark deeds and dark characters, like Faustus and Mephistopheles.
- Doctor Faustus supposedly sold his soul to the devil, the evil Mephistopheles and, in so doing, made himself prey to all types of corruption and degradation.
- In his descent into wickedness, the ruined Faustus committed all of these deadly sins: pride, envy, gluttony, lust, anger, greed, and sloth.
- These sins were considered deadly because they led Faustus, or any man or woman who would commit them onto a path from which there was no return.

Notes

- Pride is the exaggerated opinion of one's worth in comparison to God and others and a willful oblivion to one's flaws.
- Envy is the unhealthy longing for the possessions, abilities, or status of another.
- Gluttony is excessive indulgence in the pleasures of food and drink.
- Lust is extreme desire for sexual and sensual gratification.
- Anger is manifested by fits of wrath and rage due to intolerance of others.
- Greed is an insatiable desire to acquire material goods.
- Sloth is an almost pathological laziness which hinders productivity and good health.
- Anyone possessing some of the deadly sins was considered evil and anyone who possessed all of them was utterly doomed.
- In Romans, Paul indicates that the Gospel reveals the righteousness of God.
- The Gospel is the Good News that Jesus Christ died for our sins and rose again; Jesus paid the price.
- God has promised to make us pure and white and whole; this cleansing and purification was provided through, His Son, Jesus Christ.
- Marlowe has ordered seven cardinal sins in his play Doctor Faustus, viz. pride, covetousness, envy, wrath, gluttony, sloth, and lechery.
- Faustus is proud of his knowledge. Pride, creates Doctor Faustus' inability to repent, therefore ultimately resulting in his death. An eternity in hell becomes Doctor Faustus' fate, a fate determined by his own irrational decisions. By making a deal with the devil, Faustus trades his soul for satisfaction, and a greater field of study.
- Throughout the twenty-four year period in which Faustus has power and knowledge, his pride is constant and emerges in several scenes. In these examples, Doctor Faustus clearly regards himself on a higher level than hell and its devils.
- It is the extreme pride of Doctor Faustus that leads him to believe that he is more deserving of the special dish than the Pope. Faustus also reacts in the same manner with the horse-courser.
- Despite his agreement with the devil, Faustus is a free individual. However, Faustus was too stubborn and overcome by his pride to realize his freedom, and therefore does not repent.
- The level of pride that Faustus contains at the end of the play is still abundant, and at this point, it is too late for him.
- With the closing of the play as Doctor Faustus is sent to hell, there are many ironic details evident. The main one is that despite his great knowledge and power, Faustus makes the most unwise decision.
- Faustus demonstrates covetousness in various scenes, when he evokes the devils magic, the want of a wife, and the overall actions of his character portray his pursuit of knowledge and glory.
- Doctor Faustus wanted more in his life and envied the powers of others. Therefore he wanted to command the demons to control the world to his accord.
- Often wrath is our first reaction to the faults of others. Faustus demonstrates his impatience with the way he treats the people around him, his servants (demonic and human), as well as other characters.
- Faustus demonstrates gluttony when he evokes the use of the dark arts. He is attempting to go beyond his earthly knowledge while disturbing the natural balance of Gods laws and expectations.

- Sloth is the sixth sin in the death of Faustus ... Faustus has become numb to his own sub consciousness; he no longer abides by what he does.
- Faustus also displays greed in act one when he states he has not accomplished greatness. Faustus wants to gain glory; he has expectations of others to get him his glory.

## 12.4 Keywords

<i>Pride</i>	: It is excessive belief in one's own abilities, that interferes with the individual's recognition of the grace of God. It has been called the sin from which all others arise. Pride is also known as vanity.
<i>Envy</i>	: It is the desire for others' traits, status, abilities, or situation.
<i>Gluttony</i>	: It is an inordinate desire to consume more than that which one requires.
<i>Sloth</i>	: It is the avoidance of physical or spiritual work.
<i>Gospel</i>	: It is the good news that Jesus Christ died for our sins and rose again.
<i>Lust</i>	: It is an inordinate craving for the pleasures of the body.
<i>Anger</i>	: It is manifested in the individual who spurns love and opts instead for fury. It is also known as wrath.
<i>Greed</i>	: It is the desire for material wealth or gain, ignoring the realm of the spiritual. It is also called Avarice or Covetousness.
<i>Virtuous nature</i>	: Conforming to moral and ethical principles; morally excellent; upright nature.
<i>Betrayal</i>	: To deliver or expose to an enemy by treachery or disloyalty.
<i>Shrewdness</i>	: Astute or sharp in practical matters.
<i>Regicide</i>	: A person who kills a king or is responsible for his death, especially one of the judges who condemned Charles I of England to death.
<i>Prophecies</i>	: Something that is declared by a prophet, especially a divinely inspired prediction, instruction, or exhortation.
<i>Contrivance</i>	: Something contrived; a device, especially a mechanical one.
<i>Timidity</i>	: Lacking in self-assurance, courage, or bravery.
<i>Imbecility</i>	: An instance or point of weakness; feebleness; incapability.
<i>Superstition</i>	: A belief or notion, not based on reason or knowledge, in or of the ominous significance of a particular thing, circumstance, occurrence, proceeding, or the like.
<i>Obscenity</i>	: The character or quality of being obscene; indecency; lewdness.

## 12.5 Review Questions

1. Give a brief view of ancient tales of dark deeds and dark characters.
2. Mention the characteristics that are considered to be the seven deadly sins.
3. What are Marlowe's cardinal sins?
4. Write short notes on the following:
  - (a) Greed is an insatiable desire
  - (b) Pride is cause of one's fall
  - (c) Gluttony preserves the natural balance.

Notes

5. Explain the following in context of Doctor Faustus play:  
(a) Wrath (b) Envy (c) Lechery
6. Illustrate that Pride is the exaggerated opinion of one's worth in comparison to God.
7. Explain the fact that Doctor Faustus wanted more in his life and envied the powers of others.
8. It is the extreme pride of Doctor Faustus that leads him to believe that he is more deserving of the special dish than the Pope. Explain.

**Answers: Self Assessment**

- |                  |                |                    |
|------------------|----------------|--------------------|
| 1. (a)           | 2. (b)         | 3. (c)             |
| 4. soul          | 5. deadly sins | 6. character       |
| 7. wrong         | 8. False       | 9. True            |
| 10. True         | 11. (a)        | 12. (b)            |
| 13. (c)          | 14. powers     | 15. natural limits |
| 16. devils magic | 17. devil      | 18. True           |
| 19. True         | 20. True       |                    |

**12.6 Further Readings**



*Books*

Solomon Schimmel. 1997. *The Seven Deadly Sins: Jewish, Christian, and Classical Reflections on Human Psychology*. Oxford University Press, USA.

Tydemann, William. 1984. *Doctor Faustus : Text and Performance*. Macmillan, Basingstoke, England.



*Online links*

<http://www.deadlysins.com/sins/index.htm>

<http://www.allaboutgod.com/seven-deadly-sins.htm>

<http://www.enotes.com/faustus/q-and-a/analyze-how-dr-faustus-guilty-seven-cardinal-sins-86739>

<http://www.gradesaver.com/dr-faustus/study-guide/section3/>

## Unit 13: Doctor Faustus: Characterization and Faustus Character

Notes

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Notes

## Objectives

After studying this unit, you will be able to:

- Enumerate the characterization of the play Doctor Faustus;
- Illustrate that Doctor Faustus is the central character of the play;
- Describe that Doctor Faustus is a tragic hero with admirable aspirations;
- Examine that Doctor Faustus is a character with dual attitude;
- Elaborate that Doctor Faustus is an unholy and arrogant soul ;
- Explain that Doctor Faustus is a brilliant man.

## Introduction

Christopher Marlowe based his play *Doctor Faustus* on stories about a scholar and magician, Johann Faust, who allegedly sold his soul to the devil to gain magical powers. Born in 1488, the original Faust wandered through his German homeland until his death in 1541. In 1587, the first story about his life appeared in Germany, translated into English in 1592 as *The History of the Damnable Life and Deserved Death of Doctor John Faustus*. Scholars believe Marlowe heard or read the story of Johann Faust and composed *Doctor Faustus* sometime between 1588 and 1592. Most critics believe that Marlowe wrote the play's tragic beginning and end, while his collaborators wrote much of the comical middle sections. The character of Doctor Faustus and Demon so brilliantly depicted that during the 17th century audiences believed that the devil actually appeared among them. This unit elaborates the characterization of the play Doctor Faustus at length. More emphasis is given on the analysis of the Doctor Faustus' character.

## 13.1 Characterization of the Play – Character List

### 13.1.1 Faustus

A brilliant man, who seems to have reached the limits of natural knowledge. Faustus is a scholar of the early sixteenth century in the German city of Wittenburg. He is arrogant, fiery, and possesses a thirst for knowledge. As an intellectual, Faustus is familiar with things (like demon summoning and astrology) not normally considered academic subjects by today's universities. Faustus decides to sell his soul to the devil in exchange for earthly power and knowledge and an additional 24 years of life. He proceeds to waste this time on self-indulgence and low tricks.



Task

Elucidate that Doctor Faustus is the absolute center of the play, which has few truly developed characters.

### 13.1.2 Mephostophilis

From the Hebrew, mephitz, destroyer, and tophel, liar. A devil of craft and cunning. He is the devil who comes at Faustus' summoning, and the devil who serves Faustus for 24 years. In lore, Mephostophilis (also spelled Mephistopheles, or Mephostophilis, and also called Mephisto) seems to be a relative latecomer in the recognized hierarchy of demons. He possibly was created for the Faustus legend.



*Notes* In Marlowe's play, Mephostophilis has layers to his personality. He admits that separation from God is anguish, and is capable of fear and pain. But he is gleefully evil, participating at every level in Faustus' destruction. Not only does Mephostophilis get Faustus to sell his soul; he also encourages Faustus to waste his twenty-four years of power.

### 13.1.3 Wagner

Wagner is the servant to Faustus. He steals Faustus' books and learns how to summon demons. At the end of the play, he seems concerned about his master's fate.

### 13.1.4 Good Angel and Evil Angel

Personifications of Faustus' inner turmoil, who give differing advice to him at key points. Their characters also reflect Christian belief that humans are assigned guardian angels, and that devils can influence human thoughts.

### 13.1.5 Cornelius

Friend to Faustus, who teaches him the dark arts. He appears only in Act One.

### 13.1.6 Lucifer

Satan. "Lucifer" original meant Venus, referring to the planet's brilliance. In Christian lore, Lucifer is sometimes thought to be another name of Satan. Some traditions say that Lucifer was Satan's name before the fall, while the Fathers of the Catholic Church held that Lucifer was not Satan's proper name but a word showing the brilliance and beauty of his station before the fall. He appears at a few choice moments in Doctor Faustus, and Marlowe uses "Lucifer" as Satan's proper name.

### 13.1.7 Belzebug

One of Lucifer's officers. A powerful demon.

### 13.1.8 Clown/Robin

Robin learns demon summoning by stealing one of Faustus' books. He is the chief character in a number of scenes that provide comic relief from the main story.

### 13.1.9 Dick

A friend of Robin's. He is one of the characters peopling the few comic relief scenes.

### 13.1.10 Rafe

A horse ostler, or groomer, and friend to Robin. With the Clown, he summons Mephostophilis, who is none too pleased to be called.

### 13.1.11 Vintner

A wine merchant or a wine maker. This Vintner chases down Robin and Rafe after they steal a silver goblet from him.



Notes

**13.1.12 Carter**

A man who meets Faustus while carting hay to town. Faustus swindles him.

**13.1.13 Horse-Courser**

A man who buys Faustus' horse. Faustus swindles him.

**13.1.14 Hostess**

An ale wench. She treats Robin and his friends kindly.

**13.1.15 The Pope**

Yeah, that Pope. In a move that would have pleased his Protestant audience, Marlowe depicts him as cruel, power-mad, and far from holy. Faustus plays some cheap tricks on him.

**13.1.16 The Miscellaneous Characters**

**Bruno**

A man who would be Pope, selected by the German emperor and representing the conflicts between Church and state authority.

**Raymond**

King of Hungary. He serves the Pope.

**Charles**

The German Emperor. Faustus performs at his court.

**Martino**

Knight in the court of the German Emperor. Friend to Benvolio and Frederick. When Benvolio seeks revenge against Faustus, Martino decides to help out of loyalty.

**Frederick**

Knight in the court of the German Emperor. Friend to Martino and Benvolio. When Benvolio seeks revenge against Faustus, Frederick decides to help out of loyalty.

**Benvolio**

Knight in the court of the German Emperor. Friend to Martino and Frederick. When Faustus humiliates him, he seeks revenge.

**Saxony**

A man attending at the court of the German Emperor.

### Duke of Vanholt

Notes

A nobleman. Faustus performs illusions at his court.

### Duchess of Vanholt

A noblewoman. Faustus fetches her grapes in January.

**Spirits in the shapes of Alexander the Great, Darius, Paramour, and Helen**

Faustus' illusions.

### An Old Man

A holy old man, he tries to save Faustus by getting him to repent, and for his good deed, Faustus initially thanks him. But later, Faustus sends devils to harm the Old Man.

### Self Assessment

Multiple Choice Questions:

- Which of the following statements about Mephostophilis is incorrect?
  - He is the first in the recognized hierarchy of demons
  - He was created for the Faustus legend
  - He serves Faustus for 24 years
  - He is a devil of craft and cunning.
- Which of the following statements about characterization of Doctor Faustus is correct?
  - Wagner is the devil of Faustus
  - Good Angel and Evil Angel are personifications of Faustus inner turmoil
  - Lucifer refers to the Planet's brilliance
  - Robin learns demon summoning by stealing one of Faustus' books..
- Lucifer originally meant Venus also refers to
  - another name for demon
  - another name for god
  - the planet's brilliance
  - father of Catholic Church.

Fill in the blanks:

- Raymond is the King of ..... who serves the Pope.
- Bruno, a man who would be Pope, selected by the German .....
- Martino, knight in the court of the German Emperor is friend to ..... and Frederick.
- When Faustus humiliates Benvolio, he seeks .....

State whether the following statements are true or false:

- Faustus performs illusions at Duke of Vanholt court.
- Hostess treats Robin and his friends badly.
- Carter meets Faustus while carting hay to town.

## 13.2 Character of Doctor Faustus

### 13.2.1 Central Character of the Play

Faustus is the central character of the play. The attention of the audience is certainly focused upon him. Faustus was born of poor parents in Rhode in Germany. Like so many outstanding men who were humbly born, it was through learning that he was able to rise above his lowly beginnings. He was brought up by relatives who sent him to the university at Wittenberg. There he excelled in the study of divinity and was awarded his doctorate. He was so outstanding in scholarship and in learned argument that he grew proud of himself and his powers.

### 13.2.2 Doctor Faustus – A Brilliant Man

At the beginning of the play, he is no longer content with the pursuit of knowledge. He has studied all the main branches of learning of his time and is satisfied by none of them. He demands more from logic than the ability it gives one in debate. Medicine has brought him fame and riches but confers upon him only human powers. The study of law is for slaves and leads to nothing significant. Divinity is preferable to all of these but cannot get beyond sin and death. It is magic that promises to open up new worlds of power and to make man into a god.

### 13.2.3 Doctor Faustus – A Tragic Hero with Admirable Aspirations

Aristotle stated that the tragic hero is a predominantly good man, whose undoing is brought about by some error of human frailty, "the stamp of one defect." The audience sees three such defects in Faustus that lead to his ultimate domination by Mephistophilis: his pride, his restless intellect and his desire to be more than man (to possess the power and the insight of a god.) Any one of these three defects would have been sufficient to ensure his downfall in terms of the theory of tragedy. In his pride, he is guilty of hubris, a quality which in Greek tragedy was certain to arouse the wrath of the gods. His desire to be equated with God is a sin in Christian terms as well.



*Task* "Aristotle stated that the tragic hero is a predominantly good man, whose undoing is brought about by some error of human frailty." Illustrate this statement in context of Doctor Faustus.

In some ways, Faustus' aspirations are admirable. It was the glory and the ambition of the Renaissance man to have an "aspiring mind." Faustus, on one level, represents the new man emerging from the womb of the middle Ages. The authority of the Church, which had limited the thought of the middle Ages, was lessening. There was a movement of power from the Church to the State, which meant, to a limited extent, the transfer of power to the individual man. The classical spirit was certainly a source of influence for Marlowe and his fellow dramatists. The Greek attitude to their gods was very different from that of the medieval Church. The Greeks encouraged a spirit of inquiry in their thought that was quite foreign to the attitude of the medieval Church.

### 13.2.4 Doctor Faustus – A Character with Dual Attitude

This is the key to much of the duality of Faustus' thoughts and attitudes. He looks sometimes backwards to the medieval world, and sometimes forward to the modern world. Above all, he is a Renaissance figure, adventurously surveying a world whose horizons were widening every day as a result of voyages and exploration. Faustus is full of excitement for geographical discovery. The

Renaissance men were in love with life and its possibilities. They lived dangerously but wholeheartedly. In other words, they were secular. Fundamentally, Faustus' choice is that of a Renaissance man, not a medieval man. He sacrifices eternity for twenty-four years of full life in the here and now. That is the basic conflict in the mind of Faustus, a man caught between two worlds.

## Self Assessment

Multiple Choice Questions:

11. What proves that the character of Doctor Faustus is central of the play?
  - (a) The attention of audience is focused upon him
  - (b) He was born of poor parents
  - (c) He was tragically treated in the play
  - (d) He excelled in the study of divinity.
12. The character of Doctor Faustus is a tragic hero because
  - (a) he was predominantly a bad man
  - (b) Mephistophilis had ultimate domination on him
  - (c) he was a sufferer of Mephistophilis excesses
  - (d) he has admirable aspirations.
13. Which of the following best analyse the character of Doctor Faustus?
  - (a) A tragic hero with limited aspirations
  - (b) A brilliant man with admirable aspirations
  - (c) A character with dual attitude
  - (d) A central character of the play but with bad attitude.

Fill in the blanks:

14. Faustus was born of poor parents in ..... in Germany.
15. At the beginning of the play, Doctor Faustus is no longer content with the ..... of knowledge.
16. Aristotle stated that the tragic hero is a predominantly ..... man.
17. Doctor Faustus desire to be equated with God is a ..... in Christian terms as well.

State whether the following statements are true or false:

18. Doctor Faustus looks sometimes forward to the medieval world, and sometimes backward to the modern world.
19. It was the glory and the ambition of the Renaissance man to have an aspiring mind.
20. Doctor Faustus was brought up by relatives who sent him to the university at Wittenberg.

## 13.3 Summary

- Faustus is a brilliant man, who seems to have reached the limits of natural knowledge.
- Faustus is a scholar of the early sixteenth century in the German city of Wittenburg. He is arrogant, fiery, and possesses a thirst for knowledge.
- As an intellectual, Faustus is familiar with things (like demon summoning and astrology) not normally considered academic subjects by today's universities.

Notes

- Mephostophilis is a devil of craft and cunning.
- He is the devil who comes at Faustus' summoning, and the devil who serves Faustus for 24 years.
- He is considered to be a latecomer in the recognized hierarchy of demons.
- Wagner is the servant to Faustus who steals Faustus' books and learns how to summon demons.
- Good Angel and Evil Angel is the personifications of Faustus' inner turmoil, who give differing advice to him at key points.
- Lucifer thought to be another name of Satan originally meant Venus, referring to the planet's brilliance.
- Robin learns demon summoning by stealing one of Faustus' books. He is the chief character in a number of scenes that provide comic relief from the main story.
- Bruno is a man who would be Pope, selected by the German emperor and representing the conflicts between Church and state authority.
- Martino, knight in the court of the German Emperor is friend to Benvolio and Frederick.
- Faustus is the central character of the play.
- The attention of the audience is certainly focused upon him. Faustus was born of poor parents in Rhode in Germany. He was brought up by relatives who sent him to the university at Wittenberg.
- He excelled in the study of divinity and was awarded his doctorate. He was so outstanding in scholarship and in learned argument that he grew proud of himself and his powers.
- At the beginning of the play, Doctor Faustus is no longer content with the pursuit of knowledge. He has studied all the main branches of learning of his time and is satisfied by none of them. He demands more from logic than the ability it gives one in debate.
- Medicine has brought Doctor Faustus fame and riches but confers upon him only human powers.
- The study of law is for slaves and leads to nothing significant.
- Divinity is preferable to all of these but cannot get beyond sin and death.
- It is magic that promises to open up new worlds of power and to make man into a god.
- Aristotle stated that the tragic hero is a predominantly good man, whose undoing is brought about by some error of human frailty.
- The audience sees three such defects in Faustus that lead to his ultimate domination by Mephostophilis: his pride, his restless intellect and his desire to be more than man.
- In his pride, Doctor Faustus is guilty of hubris, a quality which in Greek tragedy was certain to arouse the wrath of the gods. His desire to be equated with God is a sin in Christian terms as well.
- Faustus, on one level, represents the new man emerging from the womb of the middle Ages. The authority of the Church, which had limited the thought of the middle Ages, was lessening. There was a movement of power from the Church to the State, which meant, to a limited extent, the transfer of power to the individual man.
- The classical spirit was certainly a source of influence for Marlowe and his fellow dramatists. The Greek attitude to their gods was very different from that of the medieval Church.
- Doctor Faustus looks sometimes backwards to the medieval world, and sometimes forward to the modern world. Above all, he is a Renaissance figure, adventurously surveying a world whose horizons were widening every day as a result of voyages and exploration. Faustus is full of excitement for geographical discovery.

**13.4 Keywords**

- Arrogant** : Making claims or pretensions to superior importance or rights; overbearingly assuming; insolently proud.
- Fiery** : Consisting of, attended with, characterized by, or containing fire.
- Astrology** : The study that assumes and attempts to interpret the influence of the heavenly bodies on human affairs.
- Self-indulgence** : Indulging one's own desires, passions, whims, etc., especially without restraint.
- Tophel** : Lime, a place in the wilderness of Sinai, now identified with Tafyleh or Tufileh, on the west side of the Edomitish mountains.
- Gleefully** : Full of exultant joy; merry; delighted.
- Demon** : A person considered extremely wicked, evil, or cruel.
- Slaves** : A person who is the property of and wholly subject to another; a bond servant.
- Divinity** : The quality of being divine; divine nature.
- Voyage** : A course of travel or passage, especially a long journey by water to a distant place. Or a passage through air or space, as a flight in an airplane or space vehicle.
- Exploration** : An act or instance of exploring or investigating; examination.

**13.5 Review Questions**

- Which character in the play do you most admire. Sustainiate your answer.
- Illustrate that Doctor Faustus is a brilliant man.
- Mention few characters of Doctor Faustus proving him a tragic hero with admirable aspirations.
- Give a critical view of the following characters in the play Doctor Faustus:
  - Mephostophilis
  - Bruno
  - Spirits in the shapes of Alexander the Great, Darius, Paramour, and Helen.
- Explain the following in context of the character of Doctor Faustus:
  - Central character of the play
  - A brilliant man
  - A character with dual attitude
- Elucidate that Doctor Faustus is central character of the play with dual attitude.
- Evaluate the the conflict between good and evil in context of the character of Doctor Faustus.
- Illustrate the character of Doctor Faustus as a divided nature of man.

**Answers: Self Assessment**

- |            |            |             |
|------------|------------|-------------|
| 1. (a)     | 2. (b)     | 3. (c)      |
| 4. Hungary | 5. emperor | 6. Benvolio |
| 7. revenge | 8. True    | 9. False    |
| 10. True   | 11. (a)    | 12. (b)     |

Notes

- |          |           |             |
|----------|-----------|-------------|
| 13. (c)  | 14. Rhode | 15. pursuit |
| 16. good | 17. sin   | 18. False   |
| 19. True | 20. True  |             |

### 13.6 Further Readings



Books

Solomon Schimmel. 1997. *The Seven Deadly Sins: Jewish, Christian, and Classical Reflections on Human Psychology*. Oxford University Press, USA.

Tydemann, William. 1984. *Doctor Faustus : Text and Performance*. Macmillan, Basingstoke, England.



Online links

<http://www.gradesaver.com/dr-faustus/study-guide/character-list/>

<http://www.sparknotes.com/lit/doctorfaustus/canalysis.html>

<http://www.enotes.com/faustus/other-characters>

<http://us.penguinroup.com/static/pdf/teachersguides/faustus.pdf>

## Unit 14: Doctor Faustus: A Tragedy and all Concepts of Tragedy

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### Objectives

After studying this unit, you will be able to:

- Elucidate that Doctor Faustus is a tragedy;
- Explain the element of Christian Morality in Doctor Faustus;
- Examine the elements of classical tragedy in Doctor Faustus;
- Illustrate the elements of Aristotle’s tragedy in Doctor Faustus.

### Introduction

Doctor Faustus is a tragedy based upon a traditional morality story. The thing that makes Doctor Faustus a tragedy is the ending where Faustus ends up damned. In effect he has learned nothing because he knows the consequences of his actions and all goes as he planned. As Homer Simpson said “There’s no moral to it. It’s just a bunch of stuff that happened.” Faustus makes his bed and lies in it. In effect Faustus is an anti-hero.

In the original morality story Faust is saved by the power of love and penitence. The moral is that even a fallen man can be saved by the power of God if he repents and feels love. How nice. Goethe’s version of Faust plays out very much as a morality play because it retains the traditional ending.

This unit elaborates the tragic features of Doctor Faustus at length. More emphasis is given to justify that it is a tragedy in Christian and Classical terms. All concepts of tragedy in context to Doctor Faustus have also been dealt with in this unit.



### 14.1 Doctor Faustus – A Tragedy: Tragedy in Christian Terms

Doctor Faustus has elements of both Christian morality and classical tragedy. On the one hand, it takes place in an explicitly Christian cosmos: God sits on high, as the judge of the world, and every soul goes either to hell or to heaven. There are devils and angels, with the devils tempting people into sin and the angels urging them to remain true to God. Faustus's story is a tragedy in Christian terms, because he gives in to temptation and is damned to hell. Faustus's principal sin is his great pride and ambition, which can be contrasted with the Christian virtue of humility; by letting these traits rule his life, Faustus allows his soul to be claimed by Lucifer, Christian cosmology's prince of devils.



*Task*

Doctor Faustus is a tragedy in Christian terms. Explain.

Yet while the play seems to offer a very basic Christian message – that one should avoid temptation and sin, and repent if one cannot avoid temptation and sin – its conclusion can be interpreted as straying from orthodox Christianity in order to conform to the structure of tragedy. In a traditional tragic play, as pioneered by the Greeks and imitated by William Shakespeare, a hero is brought low by an error or series of errors and realizes his or her mistake only when it is too late. In Christianity, though, as long as a person is alive, there is always the possibility of repentance – so if a tragic hero realizes his or her mistake, he or she may still be saved even at the last moment. But though Faustus, in the final, wrenching scene, comes to his senses and begs for a chance to repent, it is too late, and he is carried off to hell. Marlowe rejects the Christian idea that it is never too late to repent in order to increase the dramatic power of his finale, in which Faustus is conscious of his damnation and yet, tragically, can do nothing about it.

In the Elizabethan age there was a strictly dichotomised attitude towards right and wrong, and the framework of Christian morality was one by which most people aimed to live: religion was of much more central importance than it is now. Abandoning God and turning to the path of sin would be seen as a shocking and unforgiveable crime, as would experimenting with black magic and forbidden knowledge. Elizabethan audiences would be more familiar with the concepts of sinful distraction and the soul-poisoning influences of the Seven Deadly Sins. Elizabethan audiences firmly believed in the Christian cosmology of angels and devils. Following are the influences of Christianity on the play:

- The play takes place in an explicitly Christian cosmos of angels and devils.
- Although Faustus' journey ends in damnation, the essential message of the play upholds the Protestant belief: that the journey to spiritual redemption is a personal one requiring no intermediary. People damn themselves through their own actions but they can repent.
- Faustus is not a typical Elizabethan thinker because he rejects 'good' knowledge and yearns for knowledge 'more than heavenly power permits'.
- The play contains Medieval and Renaissance concepts of Hell. Hell is shown as a physical place, but there is also the interesting idea that Hell has no location and may be defined as the absence of God.
- Faustus expresses atheistic beliefs ('I think hell's a fable') and turns his back on the redemptive power of God. On the surface the play has a Christian moral, as Faustus is damned for abandoning God. However there are reasons to be suspicious, as Marlowe was widely believed to be an atheist. There is a lot of blasphemy in the play, as well as powerful sacrilege hidden in the Latin phrases.
- Marlowe uses the scenes in Rome to satirise institutions sacred to the Catholic Church. The Pope is represented as a greedy, power-mad fool, and the power-struggle between Rome and

Germany is treated as a joke by Faustus and Mephistophilis. The pomp and ceremony of the Catholic Church is also ridiculed.

Notes

## Self Assessment

Multiple Choice Questions:

1. Doctor Faustus has elements of
  - (a) both Christian morality and classical tragedy
  - (b) Aristotlean tragedy
  - (c) both classical tragedy and Aristotlean tragedy
  - (d) only Christian morality.
2. Which of the following is an example of Christian morality?
  - (a) Men sits on high, though God is the judge of the world
  - (b) The devils tempting people into sin and the angel urging them to remain true to God
  - (c) Faustus allows his soul to be claimed by Lucifer
  - (d) Avoid temptation and sin and do not repent if indulge in temptation.

Fill in the blanks:

3. Doctor Faustus has elements of both ..... and classical tragedy.
4. In the Elizabethan age there was a strictly dichotomised attitude towards ..... and wrong.
5. The play contains Medieval and Renaissance concepts of .....

State whether the following statements are true or false:

6. Faustus's story is a tragedy in Christian terms, because he gives in to temptation and is damned to hell.
7. Faustus expresses atheistic beliefs and turns his back on the redemptive power of God.
8. Faustus's principal sin is his great pride and repent.

## 14.2 Elements of Classical Tragedy in Doctor Faustus

Despite its pantheon of gods, the classical world believed in humanity. The ancient Greeks extolled the perfection of the human body and the clarity of human thought. The medieval church held the opposite view, reason was suspect and flesh was the devil's snare.

Another concept derived from the classical past, though it was present in the Middle Ages too, was the literary doctrine of 'imitation.'

Theoretically, then, it was the task of the writer to translate for present readers the moral vision of the past, and they were to do this by "imitating" great works, adapting them to a Christian perspective. Of course Renaissance literature reflects the idea that such "imitation" was to be neither mechanical nor complete: writers were to capture the spirit of the originals, mastering the best models, learning from them, and then using them for their own purposes.

Another medieval dramatic form emerged in the 14th century and flourished in the 15th-16th centuries, a form which has more direct links with Elizabethan drama. This is the morality play, which differs from the miracle play in that it does not deal with a biblical or pseudo-biblical story but with personified abstractions of virtues and vices that struggle for man's soul. Simply put,

Notes

morality plays dealt with man's search for salvation. This was usually done by reminding them of their mortality, and of the dangers of hell.



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

Morality plays held several key elements in common:

- The hero represents Mankind or Everyman.
- Among the other characters are personifications of virtues, vices and death, as well as angels and demons who battle for the possession of the soul of man.
- The psychomachia, the battle for the soul, was a common medieval theme and bound up with the whole idea of medieval allegory, and it found its way into medieval drama--and even into some Renaissance drama, as Doctor Faustus indicates.
- A character known as the vice often played the role of the tempter in a fashion both sinister and comic.

Certain themes found a home in the morality plays:

- The theme of the Seven Deadly Sins, which was a common place of medieval art and literature;
- The theme of Mercy and Peace pleading before God for man's soul against Truth and Righteousness.

Originally, because of their roots in religious drama and their didactic purpose, moralities were serious in tone and style, but the increasing secularization of the plays led to the incorporation of elements derived from popular farce, a process encouraged by the presentation of the Devil and his servant the Vice as boisterous mischief-makers. These characters soon became figures of amusement rather than of moral edification.

Characterization was also crude and naïve, and there was little attempt to portray psychological depth. But over time, the moralities began to show signs of increasingly sophisticated analysis of characters. From about the mid-sixteenth century, under increasing pressure from religious authorities, the popularity of the moralities began to wane, but they continued to be a major influence on mainstream drama.



*Task* Characterization was crude and naïve, and there was little attempt to portray psychological depth. Explain.

Doctor Faustus contains references to classical mythology, and draws parallels between the downfall of its central character and similar famous Falls (Icarus, Lucifer). It also contains sections in Latin and Greek which further reference classical times and ideas. The story itself is an example of imitation, a dramatic retelling of the Faust legend which had developed in the Middle Ages.

### **14.3 Elements of Aristotle's Tragedy in Doctor Faustus**

The classic discussion of Greek tragedy is Aristotle's Poetics. He defines tragedy as "the imitation of an action that is serious and also as having magnitude, complete in itself." He continues, "Tragedy

is a form of drama exciting the emotions of pity and fear. Its action should be single and complete, presenting a reversal of fortune, involving persons renowned and of superior attainments, and it should be written in poetry embellished with every kind of artistic expression. The writer presents "incidents arousing pity and fear, wherewith to interpret its catharsis of such emotions."

The basic difference Aristotle draws between tragedy and other genres, such as comedy and the epic, is the "tragic pleasure of pity and fear" the audience feel watching a tragedy. In order for the tragic hero to arouse these feelings in the audience, he cannot be either all good or all evil but must be someone the audience can identify with; however, if he is superior in some way(s), the tragic pleasure is intensified. His disastrous end results from a mistaken action, which in turn arises from a tragic flaw or from a tragic error in judgment. Often the tragic flaw is hubris, an excessive pride that causes the hero to ignore a divine warning or to break a moral law. It has been suggested that because the tragic hero's suffering is greater than his offence, the audience feels pity; because the audience members perceive that they could behave similarly, they feel pity. A tragic hero has the potential for greatness but is doomed to fail. He is trapped in a situation where he cannot win. He makes some sort of tragic flaw, and this causes his fall from greatness. Even though he is a fallen hero, he still wins a moral victory, and his spirit lives on. The tragic hero

- Born into nobility
- Responsible for their own fate
- Endowed with a tragic flaw
- Doomed to make a serious error in judgement
- Fall from great heights or high esteem
- Realize they have made an irreversible mistake
- Face and accept death with honor
- Meet a tragic death
- The audience is affected by pity and/or fear

Doctor Faustus has many instances of Aristotelean tragedy as depicted below:

- Faustus is a great figure of learning who is undone by a serious error in judgement. His tragic flaw is pride, called hubris by Aristotle.
- Faustus is arguably responsible for his own fate.
- Faustus' end is tragic, but just; there is no other fair outcome to his actions. The end of the play brings a process of catharsis for the audience, as our pity and fear for Faustus is released when we see justice being done.
- Faustus is not born into nobility.
- Faustus never realises he is the cause of his own downfall, trying to blame external forces to the very end.
- Faustus does not face and accept death with honour, but struggles to come to terms with his own mortality.
- There is some suggestion of the workings of fate in Faustus' death: 'heaven conspired his overthrow.'

In the Epilogue there is a balance between the traditions of an Aristotelian tragic hero and the didactic element of a morality play.

- The low comedy scenes focus on the interactions between stock characters which broadly fall into the categories of the Masters and the Servants (Wagner/Faustus = Masters, Robin/Dick = servants).
- These scenes also involve bawdy humour and visual humour: low comedy.

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- However the comic sub-plot merges with the main plot and serious characters also act in a way that might be associated with low comedy.

### Self Assessment

Multiple Choice Questions:

9. Despite its pantheon of gods, the classical world believed in
  - (a) humanity
  - (b) god
  - (c) knowledge
  - (d) supernatural power.
10. The basic difference Aristotle draws between tragedy and other genres is
  - (a) the pleasure of emotions, the audience feel
  - (b) tragic pleasure of pity and fear, the audience feel watching a tragedy
  - (c) the tragic flaw, the audience feel
  - (d) the protagonist responsible for its own feet.

Fill in the blanks:

11. The hero represents ..... or everyman.
12. The classic discussion of Greek tragedy is ..... .
13. Faustus' end is ....., but just; there is no other fair outcome to his actions

State whether the following statements are true or false:

14. The ancient Greeks extolled the perfection of the human body and the clarity of human thought.
15. Doctor Faustus doomed to make a serious error in judgement.
16. Faustus is born into nobility.

### 14.4 Summary

- Doctor Faustus has elements of both Christian morality and classical tragedy.
- In the Elizabethan age there was a strictly dichotomised attitude towards right and wrong, and the framework of Christian morality was one by which most people aimed to live: religion was of much more central importance than it is now.
- Abandoning God and turning to the path of sin would be seen as a shocking and unforgiveable crime, as would experimenting with black magic and forbidden knowledge.
- The play takes place in an explicitly Christian cosmos of angels and devils.  
Although Faustus' journey ends in damnation, the essential message of the play upholds the Protestant belief: that the journey to spiritual redemption is a personal one requiring no intermediary. People damn themselves through their own actions but they can repent.
- The play contains Medieval and Renaissance concepts of Hell. Hell is shown as a physical place, but there is also the interesting idea that Hell has no location and may be defined as the absence of God.
- Marlowe uses the scenes in Rome to satirise institutions sacred to the Catholic Church. The Pope is represented as a greedy, power-mad fool, and the power-struggle between Rome and Germany is treated as a joke by Faustus and Mephostophilis.

- Despite its pantheon of gods, the classical world believed in humanity. The ancient Greeks extolled the perfection of the human body and the clarity of human thought. Another concept derived from the classical past, though it was present in the Middle Ages too, was the literary doctrine of ‘imitation.’
- Morality plays held several key elements in common such as The hero represents Mankind or Everyman; personifications of virtues, vices and death, as well as angels and demons who battle for the possession of the soul of man; the battle for the soul, was a common medieval theme and bound up with the whole idea of medieval allegory; a character known as the vice often played the role of the tempter in a fashion both sinister and comic.
- Doctor Faustus contains references to classical mythology, and draws parallels between the downfall of its central character and similar famous falls.
- The classic discussion of Greek tragedy is Aristotle’s poetics. He defines tragedy as “the imitation of an action that is serious and also as having magnitude, complete in itself.”
- The basic difference Aristotle draws between tragedy and other genres, such as comedy and the epic, is the “tragic pleasure of pity and fear” the audience feel watching a tragedy. In order for the tragic hero to arouse these feelings in the audience, he cannot be either all good or all evil but must be someone the audience can identify with.

## 14.5 Keywords

<b>Tragedy</b>	: A dramatic composition, often in verse, dealing with a serious or somber theme, typically that of a great person destined through a flaw of character or conflict with some overpowering force, as fate or society, to downfall or destruction.
<b>Hell</b>	: The place or state of punishment of the wicked after death; the abode of evil and condemned spirits; Gehenna or Tartarus.
<b>Heaven</b>	: The abode of God, the angels, and the spirits of the righteous after death; the place or state of existence of the blessed after the mortal life.
<b>Devil</b>	: A subordinate evil spirit at enmity with God, and having power to afflict humans both with bodily disease and with spiritual corruption.
<b>Angel</b>	: One of a class of spiritual beings; a celestial attendant of God. In medieval angelology, angels constituted the lowest of the nine celestial orders.
<b>Sin</b>	: Any act regarded as such a transgression, especially a willful or deliberate violation of some religious or moral principle.
<b>Temptation</b>	: The act of tempting; enticement or allurement. Or something that tempts, entices, or allures.
<b>Soul</b>	: The principle of life, feeling, thought, and action in humans, regarded as a distinct entity separate from the body, and commonly held to be separable in existence from the body; the spiritual part of humans as distinct from the physical part. Or the spiritual part of humans regarded in its moral aspect, or as believed to survive death and be subject to happiness or misery in a life to come.
<b>Pride</b>	: A high or inordinate opinion of one’s own dignity, importance, merit, or superiority, whether as cherished in the mind or as displayed in bearing, conduct, etc.
<b>Ambition</b>	: An earnest desire for some type of achievement or distinction, as power, honor, fame, or wealth, and the willingness to strive for its attainment.
<b>Cosmology</b>	: The branch of philosophy dealing with the origin and general structure of the universe, with its parts, elements, and laws, and especially with such of its characteristics as space, time, causality, and freedom.
<b>Repent</b>	: To feel sorry, self-reproachful, or contrite for past conduct; regret or be conscience-stricken about a past action, attitude, etc.

Notes

### 14.6 Review Questions

1. Explain that the play Doctor Faustus takes place in an explicitly Christian cosmos of angels and devils.
2. Mention four influences of Christianity on the play Doctor Faustus.
3. Mention four instances of Aristotelean tragedy in the play Doctor Faustus?
4. Write short notes on the following:
  - (a) Faustus as Tragic hero
  - (b) Faustus as Tragedy in Christian terms
  - (c) Elements of classical tragedy in Doctor Faustus.
5. Explain the following in context of Doctor Faustus play:
  - (a) Pride
  - (b) Sloth
  - (c) Gluttony
6. Illustrate that Doctor Faustus is a tragedy in Christian terms.

### **Answers: Self Assessment**

- |            |             |                         |
|------------|-------------|-------------------------|
| 1. (a)     | 2. (b)      | 3. Christian morality   |
| 4. right   | 5. Hell     | 6. True                 |
| 7. True    | 8. False    | 9. (a)                  |
| 10. (b)    | 11. mankind | 12. Aristotle's Poetics |
| 13. tragic | 14. True    | 15. True                |
| 16. False  |             |                         |

### 14.7 Further Readings



*Books*

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Tydemann, William. 1984. *Doctor Faustus : Text and Performance*. Macmillan, Basingstoke, England.



*Online links*

<http://www.sparknotes.com/lit/doctorfaustus/study.html#explanation1>

[http://www.thestudentroom.co.uk/wiki/Revision:Dr\\_Faustus\\_-\\_Contextua l](http://www.thestudentroom.co.uk/wiki/Revision:Dr_Faustus_-_Contextua_l)

<http://www.freeessays123.com/essay20873/discussdoctorfaustusasatragedy.html>

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## Unit 15: Ben Jonson: Introduction of the Text

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### Objectives

After studying this unit, you will be able to:

- Illustrate the sources of the text of *Volpone*;
- Examine that *Volpone* is a comedy play;
- Describe that *Volpone* is a classical fable;
- Illustrate that the play was admired for its balance of scathing satire against human greed with classical restraint and formalism.

### Introduction

*Volpone* has long been a popular choice as a set text for students. Written by Ben Jonson, it was first produced in 1606 and billed as a comedy, although it also includes elements of tragedy and even animal fable (*Volpone* is Italian for 'fox'). In essence, it's a dark satire on greed and lust, and remains Jonson's most performed work.

The action takes place in seventeenth-century Venice, over the course of one day. The chief characters are *Volpone*, a rich libertine and conman, and *Mosca*, his self-seeking servant. They cause chaos with an audacious fraud designed to part the city's wealthiest from their fortunes. The tale twists and turns, as all the characters attempt to deceive each other, until the whole scheme finally collapses, with disastrous consequences for *Volpone*.

This unit elaborates the text of Ben Jonson's *Volpone*. It illustrates that *Volpone* is a classical drama. It has been justified that *Volpone* is a classical comedy and examples have also been cited to prove it a classical fable in this unit.



## Notes

**15.1 Sources of the Text**

*Volpone* was first performed in 1605. Since there were no reviews, the audience's exact reaction cannot be known. But we do know from letters and diaries that Jonson was not popular with audiences. His plays provided morals and tended to preach to the audience, something they resented. William Shakespeare's plays were much more popular, since they set out to entertain, and this fact was not lost on Jonson, who is credited with being privately annoyed at Shakespeare. *Volpone* is considered Jonson's most popular work, since it is the one most frequently staged.

Jonson was a serious classicist who modeled his plays on classic Roman and Greek tragedies. Jonson thought that the poet had a moral function to educate, and the purpose of *Volpone* is to teach lessons about greed. The topic is quite serious, although this is comedy, and there are many moments of humor in the play, especially when Volpone is feigning illness and lies disguised. This play is, in many ways, a play within a play. Volpone and Mosca are actors playing roles throughout, but they are also directors leading the three fortune hunters, Corvino, Voltore, and Corbaccio, through their performances. Jonson differed from other playwrights of the period in that he did not use old stories, fables, or histories as the sources for his plays. Instead, Jonson used a plot "type" as the source for most of his plays. In *Volpone*, the plot is the familiar one of a swindle. The action is set in Venice, which many Englishmen thought was a center of debauchery and sin. Jonson's characters are not well defined, nor do they have any depth. Instead, they are "types" familiar to the audience: the dishonest lawyer, the jealous old husband married to a beautiful young girl, and the miserly old man who cannot be satisfied until he can amass even more money.

**Characters and Summary**

This plot closely parallels Horace's satire on legacy hunters but dramatizes it with characters whose flattened, comic/satiric personas represent various types of human personality as they are distorted by greed, lust, and sheer perversity. Jonson alerts us to the symbolic order of the action's meaning by means of the names he assigns the primary characters: Volpone (fox – deceiver), Mosca (fly – parasite), Voltore (vulture – scavenger/lawyer), Corbaccio (crow – wealthy but still greedy man), and Corvino (raven, another scavenger – the wealthy merchant who can't get enough). These characters all seek to be named Volpone's heir in order to gain his treasure, but they offer him gifts to achieve that honor, and he (though nowhere near death) strings them along, more in love with his delight in deceiving them than even his beloved gold. A love plot is attached to this legacy-hunt, involving Corvino's wife (Celia) and Corbaccio's son (Bonario), but one of the play's puzzles is that they are such relatively lifeless, though moral, characters. Below these levels, three more sets of characters populate the stage. Nano (a dwarf), Castrone (an eunuch), and Androgyno (a hermaphrodite) join Mosca as Volpone's courtiers, Sir Poltic Would-be and his wife are deceived by Peregrine (the young English man on the Continental tour), and the elders of Venice alternately try to profit from and to bring justice to the confusion (Commendatori [sheriffs], Mercatori [merchants], Avocatori [lawyers, brothers of Corvino], and Notario [the court's registrar]).



*Notes* The plot in *Volpone* is that the conspirators try to deceive Volpone, but he's really deceiving them, until his agent (Mosca) deceives him (and them) and they bring him to the court, which they all try to deceive, until they are unmasked.

**15.2 Text as a Classical Fable**

There is a "fable" running throughout the play, through the associations the characters' names create with animals. It is very simple and tells the tale of a cunning "Fox" (*Volpone* in Italian),

circled by a mischievous “Fly” (Mosca in Italian), who helps the Fox trick several carrion-birds—a vulture (Voltore), a crow (Corvino) and a raven (Corbaccio) into losing their feathers (their wealth). The animal imagery emphasizes the theme of “parasitism” in the play, where one life form feeds off of another. And it should also be remembered that fables are tales with simple moral messages, told for a didactic purpose. Though much more complex, *Volpone*, at its heart shares the same purpose, making the use of “fable-like” symbolism appropriate and helpful in understanding the meaning of the play.

*Volpone* also relies on medieval beast fables, especially one entitled “*The Fox Who Feigned Death*.” Although the characters in *Volpone* are not animals, their names and costumes suggest animals. Suggesting that the characters are animals satirizes human nature in general and shows the bestiality of the characters’ behavior.

Taken on one level, the main plot of *Volpone* is a fable; each character are each personifications of different animals, in a story that has a direct moral message. “*Volpone*” means “Fox” in Italian, and “*Mosca*” means “Fly”. In many of Jonson’s plays, a name gives a strong indication as to the nature of a character, and this play is no different; *Volpone* is the “cunning” Fox, who appears wounded; “*Mosca*” is the parasitical, insect-like creature, circling around the Fox, and occasionally feeding off of him (gold, in this metaphor, takes the place of *Volpone*’s flesh). *Voltore*, *Corbaccio* and *Corvino* act like the carrion birds they are named after (the vulture, the crow and the raven, respectively), by circling around the Fox and waiting for him to die. But the Fox is craftily faking his wounds, and the Fly helps him, and the birds end up losing their feathers (their wealth). This simple fable helps clearly enunciate the meaning of the play and it also suggests that the main characters in the play are somewhat “beastly”; they are acting out animal instincts, and not listening to the voice of conscience and reason; in short, they are not fully human.



**Task** Elucidate that the main plot of *Volpone* is a fable.

## Self Assessment

Multiple Choice Questions:

- Which of the following statements about *volpone* is incorrect?
  - There are various views noted in letters and diaries
  - Volpone* was first performed in 1605
  - There were no review on its first performance
  - It was not popular with audience.
- The successful characterization of *Volpone* lies
  - in the fact that characters represents various types of human personality
  - in the fact that the character has symbolic order of the actions’s meaning
  - in the fact that all characters in the persuit of deceiving other is deceived himself
  - in the fact that all characters have lust for wealth.
- Volpone* relies on medieval beast fables especially one titled
  - The Hare and the Tottoise*
  - The Rabbit and the Lion*
  - The Fox Who Feigned Death*
  - The Crow and the Fox*.

Notes

Fill in the blanks:

4. Jonson was a serious ..... who modeled his plays on classic Roman and Greek tragedies.
5. There is a ..... running throughout the play, through the associations the characters' names create with animals.
6. The main plot of *Volpone* is a .....
7. The topic of *Volpone* is quite serious, although this is .....

State whether the following statements are true or false:

8. *Volpone* is considered Jonson's most popular work.
9. The action of *Volpone* is set in Venice, which many Englishmen thought was a center of debauchery and sin.
10. Corvino a scavenger is the poor merchant who can't get enough.

### 15.3 Text as a Classical Drama

While *Volpone* was set in Venice, London audiences were well able to recognise its themes. For his realism, Jonson was attacked at the time as "a mere Emperick, one that gets what he hath by observation." But four centuries on, his ability to capture social contradictions and present them in a captivating form continues to resonate.



*Notes* Through the play *Volpone*, considered by some his masterpiece, Jonson portrays with a black humour a society in which the pursuit of wealth and individual self-interest have become primary. Venice was regarded as the epitome of a sophisticated commercial city and virtually all the characters are revealed as corrupt or compromised.

*Volpone* means "fox" in Italian. Jonson based his story around medieval and Aesopian tales in which a fox pretends to be dead in order to catch the carrion birds that come to feed on its carcass. In the play, *Volpone* is a single and aging Venetian "magnifico" who has devised a trick to fleece his neighbours while simultaneously nourishing his sense of superiority over his hapless victims. For three years he has pretended to be dying, so as to encourage legacy hunters to bring gifts in the hope of being named as his beneficiary.

With the aid of his servant Mosca, *Volpone* strings along his suitors—*Voltore*, *Corbaccio* and *Corvino*—extracting their wealth by feeding their avarice. (*Voltore*, *Corbaccio* and *Corvino* are the Italian names for vulture, crow and raven.) *Voltore*, a lawyer, offers *Volpone* a platter made of precious metal. *Corbaccio*, a doddering gentleman, is talked into disinheriting his son *Bonario* in favour of *Volpone*, while *Corvino*, a miserly merchant and hugely jealous husband, is driven by greed to offer his young wife *Celia* to bed and comfort the supposedly dying *Volpone*.

Here *Volpone*, a rogue whose victims trap themselves by their own weaknesses (and are therefore deserving of their respective fates) becomes overwhelmed by his own passions. Definitely not at death's door and completely obsessed, he tries to force himself onto *Celia* and is only stopped by the lucky appearance of *Bonario*. The two innocents bring charges in court against the old man. But countercharges of adultery and fornication against *Celia* and *Bonario* are laid by the three legacy hunters who are desperate to defend what each considers his own future wealth.

*Volpone* revels in these ever-widening displays of degradation. He decides to stage his own death so he can witness their frenzy when they see him bequeathing his wealth to *Mosca*. However, after

Mosca begins preparing the elaborate funeral, he ceases to acknowledge his former master. As the heir to Volpone's great wealth, Mosca is transformed in the eyes of the courtroom judges – who are as self-serving as the rest – from a lowly servant into an eligible young man to whom they might marry their daughters.



*Task* Illustrate that Volpone is a rogue whose victims trap themselves by their own weaknesses.

Desperate not to be outfoxed by his servant, Volpone reveals himself, thus exposing his own and everyone else's guilt. He is stripped of his wealth, which is given to charity, and sentenced to prison, while Mosca is condemned to the galleys for passing himself off as a person of breeding. Voltore, the advocate, is debarred from the court and Corbaccio's wealth is transferred to his son Bonario. Corvino is paraded through Venice as an ass, while his wife Celia is sent home to her family with triple her dowry.

Jonson skillfully manipulates the audience so that it identifies with Volpone and his brazen schemes. The old magnifico's zest is infective and the audience is swept along with his machinations only to find itself, along with the anti-hero, hovering at the edge of criminality. In this way, the author tries to confront us with the dangers of unrestrained self-interest and with what Jonson considers to be a necessary sense of social responsibility.



*Did u know?* One element of Volpone that comes from classical (specifically Roman) drama is the theme of legacy hunting.

The unities of time and place in Volpone also come from classical drama. The unity of time requires that the events of the plot occur over no more than one 24-hour day. The unity of place requires that the action occur in only one setting. To what extent does Volpone observe each of these unities?

The third classical unity, called unity of action, requires that a play develop one and only one plot. Volpone does not observe unity of action, however, because it has both a main plot and a subplot. The main plot concerns Volpone's gulling (tricking) of the legacy hunters.

## 15.4 Text as a Comedy

### Comedy of Humor

The comedy of humours is comedy based on the exaggeration of the greek explanation for health – the body was balanced by the four humours black bile, yellow bile/cholor, blood and phlegm. If any of these were out of balance, the body and the personality were influenced.

Volpone is lustful – sin of melancholia (too much black bile) and deceitful – sin of sanguine (too much blood) Mosca is covetous – sin of choleric (too much cholor/yellow bile)

In ancient and medieval medicine, it was believed that the four basic fluids of the body (blood, phlegm, choler/yellow bile, melancholy/black bile) directly affect a person's physical condition, and these fluids were called humors. When the humors are in a balanced state, the person will remain in a good temper. If, any of the humors gets imbalanced, the person also becomes abnormal physically and psychologically. For example, dominance of blood makes human sanguine (happy, generous), phlegm makes human phlegmatic (cowardly, pale), choler makes choleric (hot tempered, impatient, vindictive), black bile makes pensive, sentimental, melancholic.

## Notes

The conception of the humor of the medieval age has a great impact on Ben Jonson's *Volpone*, especially on the character development. Actually, *Volpone* is, to many extents, based upon the humor theory. That's why it is considered as a comedy of humor. Jonson tries to show using the above notion that, if somebody lacks any character trait or contains too much of that particular trait, she/he is considered to be abnormal because of her/his imbalanced features. If a person does contain all the traits in a measured or balanced state, then she/he can be considered normal.

In *Volpone*, *Volpone*, *Mosca*, *Corvino*, *Corbaccio*, *Voltore*, *Sir Politic-Would-Be* and his wife, all of them do have imbalance in their characters, and this imbalance make the play a comedy since these abnormal characters pave the way to make the plot satiric and at a time amusing. Each character is peculiar and singular in his/her own way. It is necessary to keep in mind that, a comedy of humor always deals with the characters more than anything else.

Jonson indirectly hints that, the mental imbalance is more dangerous than physical imbalance as he shows that, the characters – *Nano*, *Castrone* and *Androgyno* – being physically abnormal, are better creatures than the earlier ones.

## Dark Comedy

In *Volpone* all of the characters are equally greedy. So the audience does not get angry for *Volpones* victimising them. They deserve their end. This play ends with punishment not just ridicule and this ending makes it dark comedy.

In fact comedy should have a happy ending but in this play we see that people are punished at the end of the play, thus it doesn't have a satisfactory ending for a comedy so we can say that it is a dark comedy because Ben Jonson was the great comic and satiric writer of the English Renaissance. He also protested in *Volpone* the inhumanity of greedy people such as greedy lawyers. In *Volpone* Ben Jonson celebrates the joy of a good trick. He emphasizes the fun and the humour of deceit but he does not overlook its nastiness, and in the end he punishes the deceivers.

According to Wittenburg there are 4 types of love in the play:

- Sexual love (between *Volpone* and *Lady Would Be*)
- Self Love (*Mosca* and the others loving themselves)
- Love of money
- True Love (Between *Bonaria* and *Celia*)

People are weak about money and they can do everything for it. The love of money is shown as the root of all evil. The reputation of Venice as a worldly, commercial and cosmopolitan place darkens the comedy.

According to Watson with *Volpone* or the fox Jonson turned to his satirical talent and developed his own species of satiric comedy. *Volpone* is the first and the greatest of a series of comedies which show Jonson's characteristic mixture;

- of savagery and humour
- of moral feeling of the monstrous absurdities of human nature *Volpone* cunningly mixes a number of genres and ideas well known to Renaissance audience: *Volpone* can be read as:
  - a moral example
  - a best fable: It is a short tale in which the principle actors are of animals, as their names reveal.
  - a satiric play (there is satire on English life in general)
  - a humour play

However, unlike in the conventional comedy, good does not necessarily triumph at the end, for even the state itself is shown to be easily corrupted. Volpone's avarice seems to be epidemic and good characters like Celia and Bonaria stand at the mercy of evil. As Watson explains the play is optimistic. A principal theme is the way that greed can make people gullible. In playing their trick, which focuses on exposing the greed of others, Volpone and Mosca also expose their own selfishness and greed (which is greater than that of victims). The setting is Renaissance Italy, accepted by the English imagination of the time as the proper home of vice.

## Self Assessment

Multiple Choice Questions:

11. Volpone was set in
  - (a) Venice
  - (b) Scotland
  - (c) Wittenberg
  - (d) Newhempshire.
12. Which of the following statement substantiate that *Volpone* is a dark comedy ?
  - (a) All characters are cheated
  - (b) All the characters are equally greedy
  - (c) All characters have lust for power
  - (d) All characters are deceiving and being deceived.
13. The comedy of humours is comedy based on
  - (a) lust of the Volpone
  - (b) sin of choleric in Mosca
  - (c) the exaggeration of the Greek explanation for health
  - (d) ancient system of medicine.

Fill in the blanks:

14. At the time of opening of Volpone Jonson was attacked as a meere .....
15. Volpone means ..... in Italian.
16. Volpone is a single and aging ..... magnifico.
17. In *Volpone* all of the characters are equally .....

State whether the following statements are true or false:

18. In fact comedy should have a happy ending but in Volpone people are punished at the end of the play.
19. A comedy of humor always deals with the characters more than anything else.
20. Desperate not to be outfoxed by his servant, Volpone hide himself.

## 15.5 Summary

- *Volpone* was first performed in 1605. Since there were no reviews, the audience's exact reaction cannot be known. But we do know from letters and diaries that Jonson was not popular with audiences.

Notes

- Jonson’s plays provided morals and tended to preach to the audience, something they resented.
- Jonson was a serious classicist who modeled his plays on classic Roman and Greek tragedies.
- Jonson thought that the poet had a moral function to educate, and the purpose of *Volpone* is to teach lessons about greed. The topic is quite serious, although this is comedy, and there are many moments of humor in the play, especially when Volpone is feigning illness and lies disguised.
- The play *Volpone* is, in many ways, a play within a play. Volpone and Mosca are actors playing roles throughout, but they are also directors leading the three fortune hunters, Corvino, Voltore, and Corbaccio, through their performances.
- The plot on *Volpone* closely parallels Horace’s satire on legacy hunters but dramatizes it with characters whose flattened, comic/satiric personas represent various types of human personality as they are distorted by greed, lust, and sheer perversity.
- Jonson alerts us to the symbolic order of the action’s meaning by means of the names he assigns the primary characters: Volpone (fox – deceiver), Mosca (fly – parasite), Voltore (vulture – scavenger/lawyer), Corbaccio (crow – wealthy but still greedy man), and Corvino (raven, another scavenger – the wealthy merchant who can’t get enough).
- There is a “fable” running throughout the play, through the associations the characters’ names create with animals. It is very simple and tells the tale of a cunning “Fox” (Volpone in Italian), circled by a mischievous “Fly” (Mosca in Italian), who helps the Fox trick several carrion-birds – a vulture (Voltore), a crow (Corvino) and a raven (Corbaccio) into losing their feathers (their wealth).
- Volpone also relies on medieval beast fables, especially one entitled *The Fox Who Feigned Death*.
- The main plot of *Volpone* is a fable; each character are each personifications of different animals, in a story that has a direct moral message.
- *Volpone* is a classical drama. For his realism, Jonson was attacked at the time as a mere Empyrick, one that gets what he hath by observation.
- Jonson skillfully manipulates the audience so that it identifies with Volpone and his brazen schemes.
- The comedy of humours is comedy based on the exaggeration of the greek explanation for health – the body was balanced by the four humours black bile, yellow bile/cholor, blood and phlegm. The instances of humor are Volpone is lustful – sin of melancholia (too much black bile) and dectieful – sin of sanguine (too much blood) Mosca is covetous – sin of choleric (too much cholor/yellow bile).

## 15.6 Keywords

- Black Comedy** : Comedy that employs morbid, gloomy, grotesque, or calamitous situations in its plot.
- Fable** : A short tale to teach a moral lesson, often with animals or inanimate objects as characters; the fable of the tortoise and the hare; Or a story not founded on fact. Or a story about supernatural or extraordinary persons or incidents; legend.
- Unencumbered** : Not impeded, slowed down, or retarded; free to move, advance, or go forward. Or having few or no burdens or obligations.
- Erudition** : Knowledge acquired by study, research, etc.

## 15.7 Review Questions

Notes

1. Give a brief view of the sources of text of *Volpone*.
2. Evaluate that the characterization of Volpone is symbolic order.
3. Explain that the text of Volpone is a classical drama
4. Write short notes on the following in context of Volpone:
  - (a) Dark Comedy
  - (b) Comedy of Humor
  - (c) Classical Fable.
5. Explain the following in context of Volpone:
 

(a) Pity	(b) Deceit	(c) Humor
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## Answers: Self Assessment

- |               |               |          |
|---------------|---------------|----------|
| 1. (a)        | 2. (b)        | 3. (c)   |
| 4. classicist | 5. fable      | 6. fable |
| 7. comedy     | 8. True       | 9. True  |
| 10. False     | 11. (a)       | 12. (b)  |
| 13. (c)       | 14. Empryrick | 15. fox  |
| 16. Venetian  | 17. greedy    | 18. True |
| 19. True      | 20. False     |          |

## 15.8 Further Readings



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**Unit 16: Volpone: Satire and all its**  
**Detailed Analysis and Comedy**

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Notes

## **Objectives**

After studying this unit, you will be able to:

- Explain that the play is a work of serious intellectual and moral weight;
- Illustrate the problem of protagonist – the play is a comedy, and protagonist in comedies should generally end up happily;
- Summarize the series in all the acts;
- Analyse the satire scene by scene and act by act;
- Examine the construction of the scenes of the play;
- Explain the ironies used in the play.

Notes

## Introduction

In *Volpone*, Jonson sets out to undermine the notion of avarice and vice by showing men who 'possess wealth, as sick men possess fevers.'

*Volpone* takes place in Venice during the seventeenth century. *Volpone* is a Venetian nobleman who is already very rich but his sole desire is to accumulate more wealth. His ruling passion is avarice and he makes gold his religion. The first scene of the play introduces *Volpone* and his lackey, Mosca entering the shrine where *Volpone* keeps his gold: "Open the shrine, that I may see my saint".

*Volpone* is twisting values. Gold and avarice are often perceived as the root of all evil, but here in the very first lines of Jonson's play, *Volpone* is addressing gold as the root of all that is good. He goes on to express how gold has become his God, and is indeed perceived as his religion. The lexis used is that of religious adoration, and his "shrine", the place where his evil intentions are being planned, is described as the "blessed room".

This unit elaborates the satire of avarice in Ben Jonson's *Volpone*. More emphasis is given on its detailed analysis scene by scene and act by act.

## 16.1 Prologue

The play is dedicated to the universities of Oxford and Cambridge, both of which had recently awarded Jonson honorary doctorates at the time of the play's writing. He briefly discusses the moral intentions of the play and its debt to classical drama. In the argument, Jonson provides a brief summary of the play's plot in the form of an acrostic on *Volpone*'s name. The prologue then introduces the play to the viewing audience, informing them that "with a little luck," it will be a hit; Jonson ends by promising that the audience's cheeks will turn red from laughter after viewing his work.

### 16.1.1 Analysis

These opening parts of the play, before we are introduced to the action, may seem superfluous. But they help us understand the play in several ways. First, in the banal sense; the Argument, as Jonson terms it, provides in brief encapsulated form the premise of the play, a premise that will be fully introduced in the first scene.

The dedication, however, gives us a clue as to Jonson's intentions in writing *Volpone*. First of all, he is intent on writing a "moral" play. By taking to task those "poetasters" who have disgraced the theatrical profession with their immoral work, Jonson highlights the moral intentions of his play. His play will make a moral statement. And it will do so in line with the traditions of drama followed by classical dramatists, that is, the dramatists of ancient Greece. This connection to the past further indicates that the play we are about to read (or see) is a work of serious intellectual and moral weight.



*Notes* Jonson is boastful – this play was written in five weeks, says Jonson, all the jokes are mine, I think it's going to be a huge hit, and you are all going to laugh hysterically until your cheeks turn red.

The Prologue sets a boisterous tone that the rest of the play will follow. So in these opening passages, Jonson begins to mix a serious intellectual and moral message with a boisterous, light-hearted and entertaining tone, reinforcing the explicit promise he makes in the Prologue "to mix profit with

your pleasure.” In other words, says Jonson, Volpone will be a work that will educate you but also entertain you at the same time.

Notes

## 16.2 Act I

### 16.2.1 Scene I

The scene is Volpone’s house, in the Italian city of Venice, in the spring of 1606. It is morning, and Volpone, whose name in Italian means “the great Fox,” enters. He is a Venetian magnifico, or nobleman and accompanying him is his parasite Mosca, best thought of as a personal assistant/manservant/lackey. Volpone asks Mosca to unveil the shrine where Volpone keeps his treasure. Volpone talks at length about the beauty and ethereal qualities of his gold. Then he and his parasite—whose name means “Fly”—discuss the way in which he earned his treasure: without hard work, presumably through cons. They also discuss the liberal way in which Volpone spends his treasure. He also describes the current con he is running; since he is childless, he has no heirs, and since he is extremely wealthy (from his previous cons), there is great interest into whom his estate will go to when he dies. So Volpone is pretending to be gravely ill and near death, prompting three notable citizens who consider themselves potential heirs to shower him with gifts in the hopes that he will make one of them his principal heir.

### Analysis

The construction of the first scene of the play is straight forward. It reveals the conceit (premise or situation) of the comedy and firmly establishes Volpone as the protagonist of the play. We find out that Volpone is rich, adores money, but takes more pleasure in gaining money than in having it, “Yet I glory/More in the cunning purchase of my wealth/Than in the glad possession.” The “cunning” here arises from the fact that Volpone has gained his wealth not through honest work and toil (or, as Mosca adds, through the vicious practices of money-lending), but instead through cons, such as the one he now plays on his potential heirs. We also learn from Mosca that he is a man who “knows[s] the use of riches.” Mosca’s description of “Candian wines” and “sumptuous hangings” imply that Volpone is a hedonist, someone controlled by his animal desires for pleasure, as does Volpone’s own penchant for hyperbole, or poetic exaggeration, as when he claims that his gold shines brighter than the sun.



*Notes* The satire of greed and obsession with money is the play’s main theme, and we are introduced to it immediately through the first speech.

It is an act of blasphemy, full of religious terms—“sacred,” “relic,” “heaven,” “saint,” and “Hail.” When Volpone tells the treasure that “even hell is made worth heaven” with it, he explicitly values the worth of gold as higher than the worth of spiritual redemption and excellence—in short, gold, not God, has supreme importance for him. The substitution of money for God in the context of a prayer would have been shocking to an Elizabethan audience, though it has lost much of that sensational effect today. But the speech still reverses our expectations, by associating sacred, religious language with money usually thought to be profane. As such, it is an example of situational irony, where the audience’s expectations in a given situation reversed from the norm; in other words, we expect prayer to be sacred, but Volpone makes it crass and profane.



*Example:* In situational irony a pickpocket who, in the act of picking someone’s pocket, has his pocket picked himself; the thief’s role is reversed from perpetrator to victim, and instead of gaining from the action, loses by it.

## Notes

The use of irony is a key element of satire in general; and used appropriately, irony is perfectly suited to Johnson's intention to convey a moral message in an entertaining fashion.



*Caution* Irony, like a good joke, involves a reversal of the listener or reader's expectations; so irony is often funny. But irony can also have a serious purpose.

The use of irony is almost always a form of attack on a certain viewpoint or way of life, by showing its inherent contradictions; and if it aims to show us that certain behavior or viewpoints are present in the thoughts and actions of everyday people in society at large, then it makes a pointed commentary on contemporary society. In other words, any thief who believes that stealing is the right way to make money can be made to look ridiculous by losing his money to theft. And a commonly held belief or way of behaving can be made to look ridiculous by showing that, in certain circumstances, it has disastrous consequences. So it is not surprising that irony is omnipresent in *Volpone*; not only does Jonson use situational irony to convey his message; he also uses verbal irony and dramatic irony. Verbal irony is very close to sarcasm; something is expressed whose actual meaning is the opposite of the literal meaning of the words; the difference between the two is that verbal irony is usually more subtle, relying on ambiguities in certain words and context to tip off the listener or reader to the actual meaning. Dramatic irony is the ironic effect created.



*Example:* When someone doesn't know something you do, and says something that's normally reasonable but in the context quite stupid or funny; in other, the words or actions of a character take on a meaning different from the one they intend because of circumstances or information that character does not know.

### 16.2.2 Scene II

Nano (a dwarf), Castrone (a eunuch), and Androgynio enter. They are here to entertain Volpone, with Nano leading the way. In a pleasant little fable, Nano relates that the soul now in Androgynio's body originated in the soul of Pythagoras. Mosca admits that he, in fact, wrote the entertainment, after Volpone says he was pleased with it. Nano then sings a song praising Fools, such as himself, who make their living by entertaining at the tables of the rich. A knock is heard at the door; Mosca says that it is Signior Voltore, a lawyer and one of Volpone's would-be "heirs." Mosca goes to see him into the house and comes back to announce that he has brought a huge piece of gold plate with him as a gift. Volpone is excited; his con is working, and he quickly prepares to put on the act of being sick, by getting into his night-clothes and dropping ointment in his eyes. He notes that he has been fooling these would-be heirs for three years, with various faked symptoms such as palsy (tremors), gout (joint-aches), coughs, apoplexy (breathing problems) and catarrhs (vomit).

#### Analysis

The entrance of Volpone's bizarre "family" of children is the entrance of the grotesque in the play; all three are "freaks" of one sort or another; Castrone the eunuch, Nano the dwarf, and Androgynio the hermaphrodite. Grotesque figures are often used as personified abstractions, stock and usually comic characters that represent an "inner" ugliness of some sort that the play intends to comment upon. This interpretation is supported by their names—Nano, Castrone and Androgynio simply mean "dwarf", "eunuch," and "hermaphrodite"—and by the fact they speak in heroic couplets, as opposed to the central characters who speak in unrhymed iambic pentameter, also known as blank verse. What their grotesquerie represents is an inner grotesqueness in Volpone. The three are not only his servants, but also because they are in a very important sense his family; by his own admission, he has "no wife, no parent, no child, no ally." Furthermore, Volpone's choice to surround himself with individuals, such as Castrone and Androgynio, with "reproductive deformities" highlights

and makes more strange his own lack of children, making the failure to reproduce seem more an essential part of his character, rather than an accident of fate. Thus, the lack of the basic human drive to reproduce seems, and certainly would seem to Elizabethan audiences, an indication that Volpone is something less than human, probably due to his inverted system of values.

In case we forget that this is a comedy, the scene also sets a lighthearted, erudite tone, for the play and helps highlight several of Volpone's redeeming qualities that make him a sympathetic protagonist. Nano traces a lineage for Androgyn's soul in rhyming couplets, thus demonstrating a gift for rhetoric similar to the one his master displayed in the first scene. Using this device, Jonson also manages to incorporate a great number of names from classical, which signify his allegiance to classical literature. Volpone, like most of Jonson's plays, follows the unities of classical drama: the unity of time, the unity of place and unity of action. Very few dramatists stuck to these rules perfectly, and Jonson is no exception; though the play conforms to the first two unities fairly well, it completely ignores unity of action with an entire subplot centering around the traveler Peregrine and the knight Sir Politic Would-be. Nano's song about "fools" refers directly to himself.



*Notes* Volpone calls him his "fool," but indirectly to Volpone; for "fool" is an Elizabethan word for "court jester" or "joker"; his defining characteristic is "wit" and "merry making." Fools, in this sense, can be thought of as the earliest professional comedians, pointing out the folly of the ruling classes for their own amusement; because he is a source of laughter, and not serious attack, "he speaks truth, free from slaughter," in other words, without fear of repercussions. He is thus also isolated from normal society, not subject to the usual laws of decorum and propriety that govern others; this distance and outsiders' perspective, as well as the freedom to speak his mind, gives him a moral superiority, especially in an age of hypocrisy, where truth-telling is in short supply.

### 16.2.3 Scene III

Voltore the lawyer – whose name means "vulture" in Italian – enters with Mosca, and Mosca assures him that he will be Volpone's heir. Voltore asks after Volpone's health, and Volpone thanks him for both his kindness and his gift of a large piece of gold plate. The magnifico then informs the lawyer that his health is failing, and he expects to die soon. Voltore asks Mosca three times whether he is Volpone's heir before he is finally satisfied with Mosca's answer, at which point he rejoices. He asks why he is so lucky, and Mosca explains that it is partly due to the fact that Volpone has always had an admiration for lawyers and the way they can argue either side of a case at a moment's notice. He then begs Voltore not to forget him when the lawyer inherits Volpone's money and becomes rich. Voltore leaves happy, with a kiss for Mosca, at which point Volpone jumps out of bed and congratulates his parasite on a job well done. But the game quickly starts again, as another would-be heir arrives, identified only as "the raven."

### 16.2.4 Scene IV

"The raven" turns out to be Corbaccio, an elderly man, who, according to Mosca, is in much worse health himself than Volpone pretends to be. Corbaccio offers to give Volpone a drug, but Mosca refuses out of fear that the drug may be Corbaccio's way of speeding up the dying process. Mosca excuses his refusal by saying that Volpone simply does not trust the medical profession in general, to which Corbaccio agrees. Corbaccio then inquires after Mosca's health; as Mosca lists off the ever-worsening symptoms, Corbaccio marks his approval of each one, except when he mishears one of Mosca's replies and gets worried that Volpone might be improving. But Mosca assures him that Volpone is, in fact, getting worse and is in fact nearly dead. This cheers up Corbaccio greatly, who

Notes

remarks that Volpone is even sicker than he is and that he is certain to outlive; he remarks that it makes him feel twenty years younger. Corbaccio expresses curiosity about Volpone's will, but Mosca replies it has not yet been written. The old man asks what Voltore was up to at Volpone's house; when Mosca answers truthfully – that he gave Volpone a piece of gold plate in the hopes of being written into his will – Corbaccio presents a bag of cecchines (Venetian coins) intended for Volpone. Mosca then explain how Corbaccio can be certain of being Volpone's heir; by leaving the bag of cecchines, but also by writing Volpone as his sole heir. Mosca says that when Volpone then writes his own will, his sense of gratitude will compel him to make Corbaccio his sole heir. Corbaccio soon leaves, and Volpone mocks him afterward mercilessly for trying to inherit money from a sick, dying man when he, himself, is on the brink of death.

**Analysis of Scene III and IV**

Through the device of Volpone's con, Jonson makes his satiric commentary on greed, using dramatic irony, situational irony, verbal irony, and repetition. Dramatic irony is a literary device often used in tragedies; a central character behaves in a certain way in ignorance of key facts about a situation; we, however, know the behavior is incorrect and feel tension because of our inability to stop it. But as Jonson demonstrates, dramatic irony can also be an effective tool for satire and comedy. Each "legacy hunter" is pursuing what, in the world of seventeenth-century Venice, was a sound business strategy: find a dying magnifico and ingratiate yourself with him, using expensive gifts (gifts that would be yours again when you inherited his estate anyways). As Mosca points out to Volpone before Voltore's entrance, "if you died today, What large return would come of all his ventures." It is sound strategy, if Volpone is really ill. But since Volpone is not ill (and since we know this) the behavior of each character seems ridiculous. Like the thief who is the victim of thieving, each character attempts to deceive themselves into money, by pretending they care about Volpone's health, but they are instead deceived out of their own. And we know they are all lying, because though each character reiterates the same well wishes, they also celebrate being named his heir or, like Corbaccio, express approval over his long list of worsening "symptoms." It is clear that their concern is not that Volpone gets better, but that he gets worse; and what is amusing is that their hypocrisy is being exposed by someone even more adept at lying than they are.

Volpone and Mosca are conscious, too, of the "moral" aspect of their game; and they emerge, by contrast to the three legacy hunters, as eminently likable. They are no worse than the legacy hunters; if Volpone is deceitful and immoral in his pursuit of personal gratification, then no less so are they; and if Mosca is servile and obsequious toward Volpone, well, they are too. And Volpone and Mosca are better, in that their motivations are purer; not money for money's sake, but money for the sake of pleasure, or for the sake of the pleasure of getting it—they both enjoy their machinations immensely. The repetition of would-be heirs, from different walks of life (lawyer, merchant, and nobleman), indicate that greed is a characteristic of the society as whole; again, Volpone is valorized because he is the only honest about his greed. Volpone and Mosca are also both conscious of the various ironies of the game, and comment upon them. Volpone remarks on the situational irony of Corbaccio's attempt to become his heir when Corbaccio is in fact the one who is near death. And Mosca's speech to Voltore about how much Volpone admires the "legal profession" is an example of verbal irony, in that Mosca gives a speech in praise of lawyers which actually insults them, as the things Volpone supposedly "admires" are essentially the ability to deceive and equivocate; it is also dramatic irony because Voltore doesn't know that Volpone is a deceiver himself and therefore would probably admire this deceitfulness. This consciousness draws us closer to Volpone and Mosca, because we share it too; it makes us their co-conspirators, as does the frequent use of asides, or comments made directly to the audience, which set-up a conspiring atmosphere between the characters and the play's spectators. Volpone and Mosca play the role of a "fool", by Nano's definition, well. They too, make a living from their wit, and their way with words. They also possess an outsider's viewpoint on society; the knowledge that Volpone is not, in fact, ill, separates both them and us from Corvino, Corbaccio, and Voltore. And, like the fool, they do not harm the people they mock; the three prospective heirs are not made impoverished by their deceit, and no innocents are hurt.

### 16.2.5 Scene V

### Notes

The final would-be heir now appears. He is a merchant named Corvino, and his names mean “crow” in Italian. He brings a pearl as his gift; Mosca then lets him know that Volpone has been saying his name constantly; though he is so ill he can barely recognize anyone and is unable to say anything else. Corvino hands over the pearl, and Mosca then informs him he took it upon himself to write up a will, interpreting Volpone’s cries of “Corvino” as indicating the Fox’s desire to have Corvino be his heir. Corvino hugs and thanks Mosca for his help, then asks whether or not Volpone saw them celebrating. Mosca assures him Volpone is blind. Corvino is worried that the sick man might hear them talking this way, but Mosca assures him he is dead by hurling abuse in his ear; he then asks Corvino to join in, which the merchant does gladly. But when Mosca suggests that Corvino suffocate Volpone, Corvino backs off and begs Mosca not to use violence. Corvino then leaves, and pledges to share everything with Mosca when he inherits Volpone’s fortune, but Mosca notes that one thing Corvino will not share: his wife. When Corvino is gone, another caller arrives: it is Lady Politic Would-be, the wife of the English knight Sir Politic Would-be, but Volpone does not want to talk-or do anything else-with her, so she is not let in. Mosca explains that Lady Politics’ reputation for promiscuity is overblown, unlike Corvino’s wife; she is not beautiful enough to be promiscuous. According to Mosca, Corvino’s wife is perhaps the most beautiful woman in all of Italy. Volpone is inflamed by Mosca’s description, and vows to see her. Mosca explains that she is never let out of the house by the insanely jealous Corvino, and is kept guarded by ten spies. Volpone nevertheless is resolved to see her, so he decides to go in disguise-but not too well disguised, since this might be his first introduction to the beautiful Celia.

### Analysis

The final scene is in many ways a conclusion of the scenes with Voltore and Corbaccio. Corvino is not particularly different from the first two characters in terms of his intentions in the scene, or in the way he is thoroughly gulled by Volpone and Mosca. Volpone “What a rare punishment/Is avarice to itself,” thus noting the poetic justice of their act, the way it is a perfect retribution for the prospective heirs. Though that last quotation can also be considered an instance of foreshadowing. Volpone will be punished himself in Act V, also as a result of his own greed; as Jonson wishes to convey an unambiguous moral message in the play, in the end all greed will be punished, even that of the likeable Volpone. A couple of other developments combine to presage future plot developments in the play. First, there is Mosca’s suggestion that Corvino kill Volpone. It is out of keeping with what Mosca has said before in terms of its violence; and though it is taken as a joke by Volpone, it does raise some doubts about Mosca’s loyalty, and also serves to initially associate Corvino with violence—an association that will be strengthened in the following acts. This scene also introduces Corvino’s, who will be Volpone’s love interest in the play. The love interest gives the plot added impetus; if the play focused entirely around Volpone’s con-game, it would in the end prove tiresome; but we instead end the Act with a determined Volpone vowing to introduce himself to a beautiful woman, a source of suspense (especially to anyone with a romantic streak). Taken on one level, the main plot of Volpone is a fable; each character are each personifications of different animals, in a story that has a direct moral message. “Volpone” means “Fox” in Italian, and “Mosca” means “Fly”. In many of Jonson’s plays, a name gives a strong indication as to the nature of a character, and this play is no different; Volpone is the “cunning” Fox, who appears wounded; “Mosca” is the parasitical, insect-like creature, circling around the Fox, and occasionally feeding off of him (gold, in this metaphor, takes the place of Volpone’s flesh). Voltore, Corbaccio and Corvino act like the carrion birds they are named after (the vulture, the crow and the raven, respectively), by circling around the Fox and waiting for him to die. But the Fox is craftily faking his wounds, and the Fly helps him, and the birds end up losing their feathers (their wealth). This simple fable helps clearly enunciate the meaning of the play and it also suggests that the main characters in the play are somewhat “beastly”; they are acting out animal instincts, and not listening to the voice of conscience and reason; in short, they are not fully human.



Notes

## **16.3 Act II**

### **16.3.1 Scene I**

The scene is the public square outside Corvino's home, slightly later in the day. Sir Politic Would-be, the English knight residing in Venice, and Peregrine, an English traveler who has just arrived in Venice, are strolling together. Sir Politic explains that it was his wife's wish that the two should go to Venice, for she desired to pick up some of the local culture. He asks Peregrine for news from the home country, and says that he has heard many strange things from England; for example, a raven has been building a nest in one of the king's ships. Having decided that Sir Politic will believe anything anyone tells him, as his name indicates, Peregrine proceeds to let him tell some more improbable stories for his and the audience's amusement, including the one about Mas' Stone, the supposed drunken illiterate who Politic is convinced was a dangerous spy. According to Politic, Stone had secret messages smuggled out of the Netherlands in cabbages. To see just how much Politic will pretend to know, Peregrine mentions a race of spy baboons living near to China. Politic, of course, says he has heard of them, and calls them "the Mameluchi", another name for the Mamelukes. Peregrine says, sarcastically, that he is fortunate to have run into Sir Politic, because he has only read books about Italy, and needs some advice on how to negotiate his way through Venetian life. Sir Politic seems to be agreeing when Peregrine interrupts him, asking him to identify the people entering the square.

### **Analysis**

This scene introduces us to the Sir Politic Would-be subplot of *Volpone*. The subplot is a key component of Elizabethan drama; it is a secondary storyline which, like a variation on a theme, should take up the themes of the main story, or related themes, and treats them in a slightly different way, either with a different tone or with a different emphasis. The subplot usually often revolves around a central character that plays a less central role in the main plot. *Volpone* has been criticized for the fact that the central characters in its subplot—Sir Politic, Lady Politic and Peregrine—play almost no role in the central plot. But the satirical intent of the two plots and their light-hearted tone are similar, as are their focus on gullibility. In the main plot, the gullibility of the main characters is inspired by their greed. In the subplot instead of satirizing greed, Jonson attacks another selfish virtue, that of vanity. Sir Politic considers himself wise and learned, and wants everyone to see him that way; he speaks confidently of knowing the ways of Venetians, even though he has only lived in Venice a short while. His name gives us the central indication of his vice, that he "would be politic," or knowledgeable, if he could; his desire to appear so at all costs makes him agree to anything anyone says as if he knew it already, before trying to add his own bit of (usually incorrect) insight to the statement. His situation is ironic (situationally) because in trying so hard to appear knowledgeable, he in fact appears gullible and stupid to anyone who meets him for even the briefest period of time—such as Peregrine.

The Sir Politic subplot is also directed to a specific segment of Jonson's audience, namely Italo-phile Englishmen like himself, for whom a very serious issue at the time was whether or not Englishmen in love with the grandeur of Italian civilization should take the risk of traveling to Italy. The "risk" involved was not that of disease or death, but of "moral degeneration"; Italy was seen as a corrupt and decadent place, full of liars, swindlers, and immoral hedonists, and Englishmen who traveled there risked bringing the moral contagion of vanity and deceit back to the mother country, as if introducing a previously unknown disease to their homeland. Indeed, Venice was the corrupt, decadent city; as we can see from the main plot, where every single character is engaged in some form of deceit, Jonson's portrayal of Venetian life fully buys into the stereotype, and the play's setting probably lent it a great deal of believability in the eyes of its English audiences. Sir Politic functions serves, then, as an example of all Englishmen who go to Italy and are corrupted by its decadent ways. The satire leveled against his vanity is also leveled against his desire to talk and act

like Italians (in the eyes of Jonson's compatriots, they were just about the same thing). Peregrine, on the other hand, is a model of how one should behave in Italy; his name, which comes from the Latin for "wanderer", indicates that he is just passing through this foreign land. Furthermore, he has been instructed well by "he that cried Italian" to him, in other words his tutor, who instructed him using a "common grammar." This was probably one of the travel books then widely available, published by educated Italo-philes, giving instructions on how to go to Italy without being corrupt; they were full of various bits of helpful advice such as "never let a Venetian know where you live, or any other important facts about you"; and they were seen as a kind of inoculation, if you will, against whatever "virus" the Italians had that made them so mean.

### 16.3.2 Scene II

Mosca and Nano enter the square, disguised; they serve as the advance scout party for Volpone. They establish themselves beneath the window of Corvino's house. Sir Politic identifies the oncoming crowd as the surrounding party for a mountebank, a Renaissance Italy version of the nineteenth century American medicine-show men, hucksters who sold fake potions to cure all and any ailments; they would "mount a bank" (embankment) in order to speak to the public. He then informs Peregrine that, contrary to popular belief, the Italian mountebanks are not all liars, but are in fact very learned men and excellent physicians. Volpone enters, followed by a crowd. Disguised as Scoto Mantua, Italian mountebank extraordinaire, he takes his place underneath Corvino's window with Mosca and Nano (who mounts on his shoulders) and engages on a long history of Scoto's fictional life, detailing the difficulties he has faced thanks to the rumor-mongering of Alessandro Buttone, a fellow mountebank, who has spread the vicious lie that Scoto was imprisoned for poisoning the cook of Archbishop Bembo, as well as the extreme popularity of the new potion he is selling. He of course lists the numerous illnesses the potion is supposed to cure, sings a wonderful song about its medicinal qualities, discusses how cheap his potion is, sings another song, before trying to convince everyone that they should buy it, immediately, at a special discount price of six pence. He then asks everyone to toss him their handkerchiefs so that he can rub some of his oil on them. The lovely Celia, watching above, tosses down her handkerchief, and Scoto/Volpone engages on a long tribute to her beauty, grace, and elegance.

### 16.3.3 Scene III

Corvino enters, and he is enraged by his jealousy. He beats Volpone and the crowd away, referring to them by the names of various characters from the *Comedia dell'Arte*: Flaminio, the lover (Volpone); Franciscina, the serving-maid (Celia); and himself as Pantalone di bisognioni, a stock buffoon character, often portrayed as a cuckold. Politic watches the events with shock, Peregrine with amusement. They leave, and Peregrine remarks that he will stay close to the hyper-gullible English knight for the sheer amusement it brings him.

### Analysis to Scene II and III

An essential part of Volpone's character is his fascination with disguises. Volpone assumes at least three separate disguises over the course of the play, if we count "ill Volpone" as being a disguise. He also assumes the disguise of Scoto and that of a sergeant in the final act. Furthermore, his thoughts are often obsessed with disguises, and he sees disguise – and acting – as a source of pleasure in its own right. This enthusiasm for disguise has connotations both good and bad. On the one hand, his delight in constantly assuming new identities emphasizes Volpone's energy and imagination. But on the other hand, not having a fixed identity makes him appear unstable, irresponsible and untrustworthy. His love for pretending to be others sums up and connects the central traits that define-energy, imagination, and moral corruption.

## Notes

But at least at this point, we should share Volpone's pleasure in his inventiveness. Especially so at this stage of the play, where his tricks are as yet harmless. After all, this is a play we are reading; dramatic art itself is partly based on the basic pleasure to be found in make-believe, something Volpone seems to feel especially keenly. But there is a conflict here, especially in the fact that Volpone is so entertaining in his deceit emphasizes the connection between stagecraft and lying and establishes a conflict between stagecraft and truth. Disguise can be used both to conceal and reveal, while it may conceal the external facts of a person's identity, it can reveal aspects of their inner nature which are usually invisible. We might think that as Scoto Mantua, Volpone is deceiving everyone to an even greater extent than he is when pretending to be ill. But Volpone himself said that his disguise would have to "maintain his own shape"; that is, it would have to maintain some truth about his personality, since he counted this event as his introduction to Celia. So in a perfect example of situational irony, he chooses Scoto Mantua, the mountebank—the man whose profession it is to deceive—as a representation of his true, inner self.



*Notes* This play is a fiction; the characters do not exist, and the actors who play them are all in disguise. They all pretend to be someone else. But they do so in order to convey a truth, the truth of Jonson's moral message: that greed and vanity are present everywhere and that they are demeaning and ridiculous vices, worthy of contempt, no matter how attractive they may appear, and that people should look beyond shiny, golden exteriors to the inner decadence they may contain.

Scoto delivers his lines in prose, not verse. This could be both because Scoto is a "low", comic character, or because he represents a direct authorial presence in the play. The only other part of the play in prose is Jonson's initial dedication, also written in his own voice. And Scoto also makes several references to Jonson's life. Like Scoto, over the course of eight months Jonson had been slandered in public and arrested; in Jonson's case, it was for participation in a play, *Eastward Ho*, that had been seen as mocking the king. Thus, Scoto seems to be something of a self-portrait. And this self-portrait Jonson paints of himself, as a carnival huckster/chemist, suggests that he viewed his art as being similar to the art of both; that he took deceit, lies, and human vices, and, like the alchemist, transformed these valueless things into something valuable—a work of art that could entertain, as well as instruct.

#### 16.3.4 Scene IV

Volpone returns to his home, moaning about how beautiful Celia is, and how sick he is with love for her. Mosca listens to him and promises that he will make Celia Volpone's lover, if only he has enough patience. Volpone is pleased by Mosca's determination; he then asks him whether or not he was good in his performance as Scoto. Mosca assures him the entire audience was fooled.

#### 16.3.5 Scene V

The scene is within Corvino's house. Corvino berates Celia for tossing her handkerchief to Scoto Mantua. He feels he has been made a fool of in public and accuses his wife of harboring a desire to be unfaithful to him and of making excuses in order to meet with her paramours. She begs him not to be jealous and protests that she never makes such excuses, that she hardly even leaves the house, even to go to Church—but this is not enough for Corvino. From now on, he says, she will never be allowed out of the house, never allowed to go within two or three feet of a window, and forced to do everything backward—dress backward, talk backward, walk backward. If she fails to obey, he threatens that he will dissect her in public as an example of a woman without virtue.

### 16.3.6 Scene VI

### Notes

Mosca arrives at Corvino's house, and Corvino assumes he brings good news: news of Volpone's death. But Corvino says that, on the contrary, Volpone has recovered – thanks to the medicinal oil of Scoto Mantua. Corvino is frustrated. Not only that, adds Mosca, but he has now been charged by the doctors with the task of finding a woman to sleep with Volpone in order to further aid his recovery. Corvino suggests a courtesan (prostitute), but Mosca rejects the idea; prostitutes are too sly, too experienced, and they might trick both of them out of any inheritance. Rather, he suggests that a woman of virtue is required, someone whom Corvino can command. Volpone's parasite further mentions that one of the doctors offered his own daughter. Boldened by this, Corvino decides that Celia will sleep with Volpone and declares this to Mosca. Mosca congratulates Corvino on ensuring that he will be named heir.

### 16.3.7 Scene VII

After Mosca leaves, Corvino finds his wife crying. He consoles her, telling her that he is not jealous and was never jealous. Jealousy is unprofitable, he says, and he promises that she will find just how un-jealous he is at Volpone's house, cryptically alluding to his decision to prostitute her.

### Analysis of Scenes IV to VII

Celia provokes what can be termed "grotesque" reactions from both Volpone and Corvino, and we can compare and contrast these reactions better understand each character. Volpone used religious imagery in the description of gold, but now he has found a new "better angel" in Celia. And the "gold, plate, and jewels," which Volpone addressed in tones of worship at the beginning of the play, Volpone gives to Mosca so that he can use them to woo Celia; the all-important gold has been subordinated to her conquest. His desire for her is instinctual, not refined or rational, and we are now merely seeing the lustful, hedonist side of Volpone that was only hinted at in previous passages. For the language in which Volpone describes his love for Celia is grotesque; it is the language of sickness, not love. He feels a fever, a "flame", trapped inside his body. "My liver melts," he exclaims, and Mosca describes his situation as a "torment." That the "sick" Volpone now suffers from a lovesickness is another example of situational irony, and, through this irony, Jonson demonstrates that Volpone's light-hearted, lustful ways are not as innocent as they may appear, since they can easily develop into an unhealthy, and unnatural, sexual obsession (remember from Act I that the grotesque can serve as an indication of something unnatural, hidden underneath the surface of a character or situation).

Corvino also has a pathological, grotesque response to Celia's body. Corvino's description of the handkerchief-tossing incident is rife with intense, sensual imagery suggesting that Corvino may be in the grip of some sort of sexual psychosis; he feverishly describes "itching ears," "noted lechers," "satyrs," "hot spectators," "the fricace" (a type of massage), before he verbally imagines Celia and Scoto Mantua engaged in the act of intercourse. By contrast with Corvino, Volpone's earlier outburst seems tame. Corvino ends his first diatribe with a threat of murder, indicating that sex and violence are thus firmly linked in his psyche. Like Volpone, Celia's body causes a sickness in him, except that his sickness is characterized by violence and rage whereas Volpone's is characterized by physical agony. Corvino's grotesque sexual obsession is firmly linked to his sense of property, for he considers Celia to be his property. When he says, "I will make thee an anatomy,/Dissect thee mine own self and read a lecture/Upon thee to the city and in public," the vocabulary of science – "anatomy," "science," and "lecture" – serves to convey the grotesque image; this language strongly associated with the rising bourgeois merchant class of Jonson's day. And when he threatens to kill her entire family as retribution for her supposed infidelity, he uses the language of law: those murders would be "the subject of my justice." Corvino's rage is that of a merchant who feels that he is being ripped off, whose property has been stolen and who wants the thief put to death. To put it in psychological

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terms, it is that of a sociopath who feels his power threatened; Corvino lashes out in a sadistic and brutal manner in order to maintain control.

So this scene serves to link Corvino's materialistic values to grotesque, unnatural and violent sexual obsession. But more than that, it also shows the fundamental hypocrisy of those values, through irony. When Mosca tests which impulse is stronger in Corvino – his sexual jealousy or his desire for material possession – he quickly discovers that it is the latter. To lose Celia to a lover would send Corvino into a murderous rage, and he condemns her for her perceived infidelity using moral concepts such as "justice"; but to use her in order to gain Volpone's fortune is "nothing." The justice of the situation is determined, it seems, by whether or not Corvino makes a profit, not on any moral issue, and the virtue of his wife for a vast amount of fortune is a more than equitable trade. Corvino's reversal is an example of situational irony, which reveals Corvino's talk of justice to be hypocritical, a means of exercising power over people, like Celia, who care about such things.

## 16.4 Act III

### 16.4.1 Scene I

The scene is Volpone's house. This scene consists entirely of a soliloquy by Mosca. He enters, and expresses fear at his growing narcissism. This increasing self-love is the result of the successful way he is helping Volpone conduct his con-game. He then discusses what it is to be a "parasite," presenting it as an "art" in which most of the world, in fact, takes part: "All the world is little else, in nature,/ But parasites or sub-parasites."

### 16.4.2 Scene II

Corbaccio's son Bonario, enters. Mosca begs to talk to him, but he scorns him, deriding him for being a parasite. Mosca pleads with him not to be so harsh and asks for his pity. Bonario responds to Mosca's plea. But then Mosca informs Bonario that his father has disinherited him. The son does not believe it at first, but Mosca asks him to follow his lead. He promises to let Bonario see his father Corbaccio in the act of disinheriting him. They exit the stage together.

### Analysis to Scenes I and II

Mosca opens the act with a soliloquy. The soliloquy is an opportunity for villains to speak their plans and heroes to voice their doubts, and it gives the playwright an opportunity for characterization, defining the character's motivations, problems, and quirks. In the case of Mosca, this soliloquy is especially important in terms of characterization. This is the first time in the play we see Mosca without Volpone, and most of the things Mosca has said up to this point have been clever lies told in order to benefit his master. Mosca has remained a very shadowy, elusive character. Jonson does use the speech for this purpose, but he does it obliquely. And initially he uses the speech to foreshadow later developments in the play. Mosca is growing increasingly independent in the play; we just saw him arrange Volpone's seduction of Celia by himself, and now we have him alone, on stage. Jonson hints that this increasing independence will be a problem for Volpone. "I fear" are the first words of the Act, and he worries that he is growing too strong, too confident, too in love with himself: "I could skip/Out of my skin now, like a subtle snake,/I am so limber."



*Notes* The snake, a symbol of temptation, signals danger; and the imagery of transformation, of slipping out of one's skin, indicates that Mosca is becoming less satisfied with his identity as a lackey to Volpone.

This line later developments in Act V, where there is a reversal of fortune between Mosca and Volpone, and Mosca “slips out of his skin” to become a nobleman. Mosca only refers to himself indirectly, through an abstract discussion of parasitism. The word “parasite” had a slightly different meaning for Jonson than it does today; the “parasite” was a stock character of Greek and Roman comedies, similar to the “Fool” character, except that they were buffoons instead of witty. These characters were usually pathetic, and poor: they performed tricks, told stories, and generally debased themselves in order to feed at the table of the rich. Parasitism, in this sense, seems to be a trait that defines Mosca completely; he is dependent on Volpone for his life and for his food (a true parasite), and he expresses this dependence, at least in public, with displays of servility and pathos. In Act I, scene ii, he is so gushing toward Volpone that the Fox, embarrassed, asks him to stop, and his pathetic display in front of Bonario again reinforce this impression. But when Mosca talks about how “all the wise world is little else, in nature, but parasite or sub-parasites,” he begins to overturn this image. He identifies the true parasite as being strong, quick, agile, inventive and able to fake any emotion in a second if necessary; being a parasite is a mark of being wise, and not being a “clot-pole,” forced to work the earth to make one’s living. He is superior to those he feeds on, not inferior.

People that are called “parasites,” like Mosca, play the same game as everyone else, but just play it better, with more cunning, which demonstrated in his dealings with Bonario. They show weakness in order to hide their true strength; the goal of the game is to feed off the wealth and livelihood of others without doing any real work yourself, except the work involved in keeping them credulous. This statement of moral equality – “we are all parasites” – clearly refers not only to the legacy hunters, but to Volpone as well; it is indicative that Mosca considers himself less and less a subordinate to Volpone and more of an equal. Mosca gradually develops into an antagonist for Volpone. But his honesty, his resourcefulness, and the correctness of his appraisal of the situation – everyone in the play does in fact attempt to live off of the work of others – make him a sympathetic character. This creates a tension in the play, as to who we are to side for in the battle, who is the protagonist and who is the antagonist. In the end, the answer will seem to be neither, as both characters are punished for their actions. But as we will see, there are problems in the way Jonson brings this result about.



*Task* Mosca gradually develops into an antagonist for Volpone. But his honesty make him a sympathetic character, illucidate this antagonism.

### 16.4.3 Scene III

Volpone, his dwarf, his eunuch, and his hermaphrodite enter. Volpone notes that Mosca is late in returning home. To quell his boredom, he asks Nano to entertain him, which he does by discoursing on how fools create more laughter with their faces than with their brains. A knock is heard at the door; Volpone assumes it must be Mosca. Nano goes out to see who it is, and returns to announce that it is a “beauteous madam.” Volpone realizes that it is Lady Politic Would-be. He reluctantly tells Nano to let her in.

### 16.4.4 Scene IV

Lady Politic Would-be enters into an anteroom with Nano and asks him to tell Volpone she has arrived. She fusses over her own appearance, noting her dress does not show her neck enough but that she is still dressed well. She berates Volpone’s servant women for not dressing appropriately and not making themselves up in an appropriate way. Finally, she begins to speak to Volpone. Volpone informs her that he had a strange dream the previous night, that a “strange fury” entered his house and tore his roof off with her voice. She ignores the obvious reference to herself and begins a (very one-sided) conversation, advising Volpone on what medicines he should take to cure

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his bad dream, discussing the various Italian poets and their relative strengths and weaknesses, before giving a brief lecture on the value of philosophy when dealing with mental disturbances. By the end of the scene, Volpone is begging to be rescued.

### 16.4.5 Scene V

Volpone's prayers to be rescued from Lady Politic are answered when Mosca finally returns. Volpone demands that he find a way to get rid of Lady Politic. Mosca quickly decides to tell Lady Politic that he recently saw Sir Politic rowing upon the waters of Venice in a gondola with a courtesan. Sir Politic was actually conversing with Peregrine, the young English traveler, but Lady Politic believes Mosca completely and runs off to search for her husband with the dwarf. Mosca then informs Volpone that Corbaccio is about to arrive, so as to make Volpone his heir; Volpone thanks Mosca for his help and lies down to rest.

### Analysis to Scenes III to V

Lady Politic Would-be was identified by her husband, Sir Politic, as the reason the couple came to Venice in the first place, and she serves as his female counterpart in her vanity, continuously minding her appearance and her clothes. She has a bad "reputation." She is the female example of why English people should never go to Italy unprepared, and the moral decadence they can fall into once they reach there. She also embodies the dangers of becoming too engrossed in Italian culture; "I have read them all", she says, after listing off seven Italian poets after Volpone mentions a poet who lived in Plato's time and said that the highest grace of women is silence (quoting the poet Sophocles, who lived in Ancient Greece, like Plato, not Renaissance Italy). She discusses the poet Aretine openly, who is well known for his erotic and obscene poems. To Volpone and the Elizabethan audience, she has obviously missed the benefit of poetry, which is to learn handy maxims such as that woman should be quiet.



*Task* English people should never go to Italy unprepared, illustrate this statement in context to Lady Politic.

The idea of satirizing a woman for talking too much and fussing over her appearance are considered are fairly tired clichés and are also sexist. After all, Volpone and Mosca talk a great deal, and no one thinks they should be quiet. There is no threat to Volpone's reputation because of his desire to sleep with Celia. But though it perpetuates some negative stereotypes about women, the conversation's comedy is also based on a trait she shares in common with her husband; she desires to be seen as knowledgeable, to fit in and impress others, and like with her husband, this desire backfires completely. Both because of the fact she talks so much that those around her feel exhausted, intimidated and painfully bored; also because of her obliviousness to those feelings of scorn and contempt and to the fact that she knows much less than she says.



*Example:* Her mistake in not realizing that Plato lived nearly two thousand years before any of the poets she names; her inability to pick up on the fact that Volpone's praising of Sophocles' quote is a hint that she should be silent herself; or her failure to realize that when Volpone talks about his "dream" of having his house torn apart by a "strange fury", that he is referring to her. The tone of the scene is farcical-like a farce, it is dominated by extreme, exaggerated, over-the-top behavior from the characters for humorous effect. The extremely light-hearted tone of this scene contrasts with the seriousness of the next few scenes, emphasizing the upcoming shift in tone toward seriousness.

### 16.4.6 Scene VI

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Mosca and Bonario enter. Mosca tells Bonario to hide so that he can watch his father disinherit his son and make Volpone his heir. Bonario agrees but, after Mosca leaves, says that he still can't believe that what Mosca says is true.

### 16.4.7 Scene VII

Mosca, Corvino, and Celia enter. Mosca tells Bonario that Corbaccio will soon arrive. Celia begs not to be forced to sleep with Volpone. Corvino tells her that his decision is final, and that he does not want any protest in terms of "honour"; "honour", according to Corvino, does not exist in reality, and the loss of it cannot harm anyone. Mosca informs Volpone that the pair has arrived; Volpone professes himself past the point of no return but thanks Corvino greatly, implying that Corvino will be his heir. Celia begs a final time to be spared having to sleep with Volpone, but Corvino insists, and threatens to drag her through the streets and – ironically – proclaim her a whore if she does not comply. The act, he says, is not important, since Volpone is old, and will not take much advantage of her; in any case and it will benefit him greatly in financial terms. As soon as Volpone and Celia are alone, Volpone leaps off of his bed, and begins his seduction. He tells Celia that she is heavenly to him, and that he is a far more worthy lover than is Corvino. He details all the sensuous pleasures she will have if she becomes his lover. But Celia is unmoved; she refuses his advances, asking him to stop, offering to never speak of what happened. Volpone is enraged by her refusal, and tells her that if she won't make love to him willingly, then he will take her by force. She cries out to God; Volpone tells her she does it in vain, but just at that moment, Bonario jumps out from behind his hiding place and rescues Celia, spiriting her away. Volpone laments that his con has been exposed.

### Analysis to Scenes VI and VII

Throughout the play up to this point, Volpone has seemed both a likeable and sympathetic protagonist and a sociopath. He exposes moral folly, but his glee in doing so can at times seem malicious. And he also makes no pretensions that morality is his main motivation. Instead, the money he gains from his con is a means to an end, and the end is the satisfaction of his appetites and desires. This section of the play emphasizes that Volpone will satisfy these desires at any cost, even if it hurts innocent people, such as Bonario and Celia. These scenes, especially Act III Scene VII, thus form a turning point in the main plot's storyline and in our perception of Volpone. Alone with Celia for the first time, his "seduction speech" firmly unites the contradictory parts of his character through his description of his love for her.



*Task* Volpone satisfy his appetites and desires of gaining money from his cons at any cost, even if it hurts innocent people. Justify this statement.

In this passage, Volpone articulates what amounts to an alternate conception of morality and sacredness hinted at earlier in the play, a conception where the highest form of spiritual fulfillment is attained through the satisfaction of every conceivable desire for pleasure. The imagery Volpone employs in his seduction speech is rich in both hyperbole and religious imagery; Celia's love is compared to "heaven," "a plot of paradise." But Volpone's picture of paradise is sensual; he offers to Celia a catalogue of an extravagant feast, from pearls dissolved in wine to "the heads of parrots" and "the tongues of nightingales." It is also a bath in flowers, "unicorn milk," "panther's breath" and "Cretan wines." He also emphasizes the disposability of this paradise; pearls are dissolved, and jewels lost, without a second thought. It seems that as soon as one pleasure is expended, the next one is pursued.



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Volpone's use of allusion in his catalogue of famous lovers throughout history serves a two-fold purpose: it widens and elevates his discussion, giving him and Celia immediate historic significance through association with these names, while at the same time making explicit Volpone's desire to make love to Celia in a stylish, erudite way. Jonson uses alliteration to heighten the poetic quality of the speech, and at one point Volpone bursts into song. He conveys the sensuousness of the imagined feast through the sensuousness of his language. And his catalogues of sensual delights and romantic disguises provide a feast of imagery for the reader, underscoring Volpone's imaginativeness and liveliness in our minds. He is "hot," not "frozen and impotent." His paradise is that of an imaginative hedonist, continually and consistently searching for pleasure and new forms of pleasure. And as Voltore, Corbaccio, and Corvino are, he too is greedy, except his greed is for pleasure and is presented in such a seductive way that it seems very attractive – the key word is "seems."

Against this hedonism, this greed for pleasure, Celia and Bonario are posited as the twin voices of moral criticism, representing both the codes of religion and those of honor. They serve as foils to Volpone, exposing his ruthlessness; even though neither are guilty of any moral transgression; he will hurt them if necessary in order to gratify himself. Whereas Corvino's ugliness seems to stem from disrespect for honor, Jonson seems to attribute Volpone's ruthlessness to a lack of religious feeling. Celia tries to appeal to whatever trace of "holy saints, or heaven" Volpone has within him; her complete lack of success implies that he has none. And when Celia cries out to God for help as Volpone prepares to rape her, Volpone says she cries "In Vain," just before Bonario leaps out to save Celia. That moment is a direct refutation, on the part of Bonario and Celia, of Volpone's inverted value-system, where he values immediate self-gratification, over God. This is the turning point of the play; it is at this moment that Volpone begins to lose control over the situation, after having lost control over himself.

#### 16.4.8 Scene VIII

Mosca enters; bleeding from a sword-wound that Bonario has given him on his way out. Volpone is concerned by the injury, but when Mosca blames himself for the disaster of Celia's escape and Bonario's discovery of Volpone's deceit, Volpone readily agrees. They briefly consider what they are going to do, with Mosca suggesting suicide. Then they hear a knock at the door; it is Corbaccio.

#### 16.4.9 Scene IX

Corbaccio enters, with Voltore following right behind. Mosca tells Corbaccio that his son was searching to kill him, in revenge for his disinheritance. Corbaccio accepts the lie readily and agrees to make Volpone his heir, asking Voltore if Volpone is going to die anytime soon so that he can inherit his money. Hearing this, Voltore becomes angry and accuses Mosca of double-dealing; who is going to be the heir, he demands, Voltore or Corbaccio? Mosca professes his loyalty to Voltore and then recounts the events that have just happened with a deceitful spin. Mosca tells Voltore that he had brought Bonario in to watch his father sign away his inheritance to Volpone, in the hopes that the enraged Bonario would kill his treacherous father, thus leaving the path open for Voltore to inherit the magnifico's wealth. But, lies Mosca, Bonario grew impatient waiting for his father, thus kidnapped Celia and made her "cry rape," in order to frame Volpone and thus make it impossible for him to inherit. Voltore, ever the lawyer, immediately takes Mosca's side, seeing the threat to his own interests, and he immediately demands that Mosca fetch Corvino and bring him to the Scrutineo.

#### Analysis to Scenes VIII and IX

When Volpone loses control with Celia, he breaks the implicit rules he seemed to be playing by initially, or at least may have fooled the audience into thinking he was playing by: that he was only out to deceive and hurt those who deceived and hurt themselves. But this has now been shown to

be false, the audience has shown itself to be “gulled” (fooled) by Volpone, and so we are now much less likely to take his side. Our loss of sympathy for Volpone and his loss of control over the situation lead to what can be termed as the “disestablishing” of Volpone as the play’s protagonist: he is no longer is the hero, or even the anti-hero, of the play, which he has been since the first scene. From his perspective within the play, he is no longer in control over his own life. Instead, the increasingly independent Mosca becomes a substitute protagonist, and Mosca’s “sidekick” role is assumed by Voltore. In Act V, Volpone seems to regain control over his life (and his role as protagonist), but this leads to a destructive confrontation between him and Mosca. The didactic element of Volpone becomes pronounced here. Jonson teaches us in this scene never to trust someone like Volpone, an energetic person with a gift for deceit, and he will attempt to show that, in the end, people like Volpone are always done in, usually by their own decision to trust someone.

## Self Assessment

Multiple Choice Questions:

- Which of the following statements is correct about the text of Volpone.
  - The opening part is superfluous
  - Dedication gives the information for the purpose of writing of this play
  - The prologue sets illogical tone
  - The work is of serious intellectual and immoral weight.
- The construction of first scene of the play volpone is
  - deceitful
  - straight forward
  - superfluous
  - of conceit situation.
- Through the device of Volpone’s con, Jonson makes his satiric commentary on
  - lust
  - desire for wealth
  - greed
  - situational irony.

Fill in the Blanks:

- When Volpone loses control with Celia, he breaks the ..... rules.
- The idea of satirizing a ..... for talking too much and fussing over her appearance are considered fairly tired clichés and are also sexist.
- Against the greed for pleasure, Celia and Bonario are posited as the twin voices of .....
- Mosca opens the act 3 with a .....

State whether the following statements are true or false:

- Lady Politic Would-be was identified by her husband, Sir Politic, as the reason the couple came to Venice.
- Volpone’s prayers to be rescued from Lady Politic are answered when Mosca finally hatch a conspiracy.
- This scene I of Act 2 introduces us to the Sir Politic Would-be subplot of Volpone.

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## **16.5 Act IV**

### **16.5.1 Scene I**

Sir Politic and Peregrine are walking along a canal, and Politic undertakes to teach Peregrine a thing or two about life in Venice. His two main points are that one should never tell the truth to strangers, and that one should always have proper table manners, which Politic then goes on to explain in full. Contradicting his first bit of advice, Politic then tells Peregrine about several moneymaking schemes he has in the works. To begin with, he plans to supply the State of Venice with red herrings, bought at a discount rate from a cheese vendor in another Italian state. He also has a plan to convince the Council of Venice to outlaw all timber-boxes small enough to fit into a pocket (in case a disaffected person might hide gunpowder in his or her tinderbox), and then supply the larger tinderboxes himself. His last great idea is a "plague-test," to be administered on ships arriving from the Middle East and other plague-infected areas so that they might not have to undergo the usual fifty or sixty days of quarantine. The plan involves blowing air through a ship from one side, while at the same time exposing the crew to thirty lives worth of onions cut in half from the other side; if the onion changes color, then the crew have the plague. Politic then makes an off-handed comment about how he could, if he wanted to, sell the entire state of Venice to the Turk. Just so Peregrine will know everything about his personal life, Politic lets him read his diary, which includes every single detail of Politic's day, including his decision to urinate at St. Mark's cathedral.

### **16.5.2 Scene II**

Lady Politic, Nano, and some serving women enter, looking for her husband. Sir Politic's wife complains that his unfaithfulness is ruining her complexion. They suddenly see Politic and Peregrine together. They meet, and Sir Politic introduces Peregrine to Lady Politic. But Lady Politic assumes that Peregrine must be the prostitute of whom Mosca was speaking, disguised as a man. She rails against her husband for his unfaithfulness, while he reacts with complete and utter incomprehension. Peregrine asks Lady Politic to forgive him for offending her, though he has no idea how he has. When he begins complimenting Lady Politic's beauty, she reacts with suppressed outrage.

### **16.5.3 Scene III**

Mosca enters and finds Lady Politic incensed over her husband's infidelity. She explains to him that she has found the prostitute he mentioned in Act III, and points out Peregrine. Mosca then explains that she is mistaken. The real prostitute (according to him) is currently at the Scrutineo (he is referring to Celia). Lady Politic then apologizes in a very sexually suggestive way. Peregrine is now incensed, for he thinks that Sir Politic is trying to prostitute him to Lady Politic, and vows that he will get revenge.

### **Analysis of Scene I-Scene III**

The moral satire of the play becomes somewhat submerged in the Fourth Act, as considerations of plot and tone become more important. Jonson frames the intense confrontation between Volpone, Celia, and Bonario with humorous scenes involving the Politic Would-bes. These scenes help keep the tone of the play somewhat light. We have further development of Sir Politic's character in Act IV, Scene I; he is not only now vain, he is also greedy. But he is greedy in a completely non-threatening way, and his plans are laughably far-fetched. In a way, he is a very sympathetic character, and he is always the one who pays the greatest price (in ridicule) for his vanity, such as when he has Peregrine read his journal for the day, one of the funniest sections of the play. Only someone with a great degree of self-obsession would record such gems as "I threw three beans over the threshold" and then "at St. Mark's, I urined," and to then expect others to find it interesting. But he doesn't seem to mind, because he doesn't seem to know, that people find his behavior ridiculous.

For her part, Lady Politic outdoes herself by taking Peregrine to be the courtesan described to her by Mosca and then coming on to Peregrine as soon as Mosca informs her that he is a man. Again, the tone of the play veers toward farce. Several plot considerations are satisfied in this part of the play as well. Jonson needed to bring the subplot towards a resolution, which he does by giving Peregrine a reason to be angry at Sir Politic: the lustful behavior of Sir Politic's wife. It seems something of a weak reason, especially by today's standards. We also see, in this section of the play, the increased importance of Mosca; Mosca is the one who sets-up Lady Politic Would-be to identify Celia. In fact, Mosca will come to dominate the act, along with Voltore.

#### 16.5.4 Scene IV

The scene is now set at the Scrutineo, the law courts of the Venetian state. Voltore, Corbaccio, Corvino, and Mosca enter. They are about to appear before the Scrutineo to answer the accusations of Bonario and Celia. Voltore is the one who will present the case, since he is a lawyer; Bonario expresses concern to Mosca that Voltore will now become co-heir because of this service to Volpone, but Mosca assures him there is nothing to worry about. He also worries that his reputation will be ruined in front of the Scrutineo. Mosca assures him that he has given Voltore a story to tell about the incident that will save Corvino's reputation. Mosca also lets Voltore know that he has another witness to appear if necessary, but he doesn't say who it is.

#### 16.5.5 Scene V

The four Avocatori (who serve as judges in the Venetian state) enter, along with Bonario, Celia, a Notario (Notary) and some Commandadori (guards). The Avocatori discuss how they have never heard anything as "monstrous" as the story Celia and Bonario have just told them: that Corvino agreed to prostitute his wife to Volpone in the hopes that Volpone would make him heir, that Volpone tried to rape Celia and that Corbaccio disinherited his son Bonario. They demand to know where Volpone is: Mosca replies that he is too ill to come, but the Avocatori insist that he come anyway and send some of the Commandadori to fetch him. Voltore then begins to speak to the Scrutineo. He tells a very different story from that told by Celia and Bonario. He claims that Celia and Bonario are lovers; that Bonario went to Volpone's house with the intent to murder Corbaccio for disinheriting him, but finding him absent, decided to attack Volpone instead; and that Celia's cries of rape were part of an attempt to frame Volpone devised by her and Bonario, in order to prevent Volpone from collecting his inheritance. Voltore then produces the "proofs" of his story. These consist in the testimony of Corbaccio and Corvino, who corroborate the story, with Corvino adding that he has seen Bonario and Celia making love with his own eyes, and that he has their love-letters in his possession (which in reality are forged). Mosca further adds that he was wounded while defending his master. Celia faints; Corvino accuses her of acting. The Avocatori begin to express doubts about Celia and Bonario's story. Then Mosca informs the court of his "surprise witness"; she is a "lady", who saw Celia in a gondola with her "knight". He leaves to fetch her, as the Avocatori express their shock at the turn of events.

#### 16.5.6 Scene VI

Mosca enters with his surprise witness, who is, of course, Lady Politic Would-be. She corroborates Mosca's claim, hurling abuse at Celia. She then apologizes profusely to the judges for disgracing the court; the judges attempt to assure her she has not, but can't get a word in edgewise. Voltore then produces his final "proof". Volpone enters, looking old and crippled; Voltore ironically comments that they can now see Celia and Bonario's rapist and criminal. Bonario suggests that Volpone is faking (which he is), and should be "tested", which Voltore takes to mean "tortured"; Voltore ironically suggests that torture might cure Volpone's illness. The Avocatori are convinced

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of Voltore's story, and demand that Bonario and Celia be taken away and separated. They apologize to Volpone for disturbing him, and express outrage at the "deceit" of Bonario and Celia. Mosca then congratulates Voltore on his work. He assuages Corvino, who is still worried that Voltore will get part of Volpone's fortune. And he demands that Corbaccio pay Voltore. Corbaccio and Voltore leave, and Mosca then assures Lady Politic Would-be that, due to her support today, she will in fact be made Volpone's principal heir.

### Analysis to Scene IV-Scene VI

The Fourth Act is marked by Volpone's near complete disappearance for the play; Mosca takes his place as the driving force behind the plot. Though Mosca has been central throughout the entire play, in the Fourth Act he truly becomes an independent character, arranging to have Lady Politic Would-be testify against Celia. Volpone's absence in the Act can be seen as a symbol of the growing distance between him and the audience; with his attempted rape, he gives up his claim to our sympathy, and this is symbolized by temporarily giving up his place in the play. Mosca fills the vacuum left by Volpone's absence; and his sidekick role is in turn taken up by Voltore. This shift in the focus of the play emphasizes Mosca's independence from Volpone; Mosca now can carry the plot by himself. And this increased independence from Volpone, in terms of the ability to drive the play forward, foreshadows the play's next Act, where Mosca will actually try to usurp Volpone's role in society. Mosca and Voltore's triumph over Celia and Bonario in *The Scrutineo* represents the triumph of stagecraft over truth. We can think of the *Scrutineo* as the stage on which they operate. The *Scrutineo* was the Venetian Senate-building; the Senate was the head governing body of the Venetian state. As already discussed, the Venetian state was a symbol of decadence and deceit; and the *Scrutineo*, as its center of power, would have had a very strong association with illusion and deceit. Furthermore, it is easy to imagine the scene being staged in such a way that the audience in the theatre could become part of the audience at the *Scrutineo*, thus making the audience direct spectators of the drama unfolding between the characters, and turning the *Scrutineo* into an actual theatre, with real patrons.



Task

Illustrate the Mosca's independence from Volpone and his role to carry the plot by himself.

The way Voltore and Mosca go about creating their illusion has similarities with the way playwrights go about creating theirs, using words and images in a dramatic manner. They do not simply tell a lie; they tell a story. Voltore weaves a tale for the Senate full of characters one might expect to find in a sensationalistic play; the treacherous wife (Celia), the murderous, deceitful, son (Bonario), the innocent, betrayed husband (Corvino) and the deceived father (Corbaccio). Corvino's frequent interjections of salacious details about Celia—"these eyes/Have seen her glued unto that piece of cedar/That fine well-timbered gallant" increases the dramatic tension of the scene, which culminates in a couple of surprising "plot twists": Lady Politic Would-be's condemnation of Celia and Volpone's sudden arrival, looking ill and impotent. The objections of Bonario and Celia are incorporated into Voltore's narrative, much like the villain into the plot of a play; Voltore uses verbal irony, a device Jonson loved, to ridicule Bonario's suggestion that Volpone be tested for deceit: "Best try him, then, with goads or burning irons;/Put him to the strappado: I have heard,/The rack hath cured the gout." Bonario's comment is framed as just the type of thing a murderous, sick individual like him would say—just the type of dialogue that he would speak. The audience of this play within the play is composed of the four Avocatori, and their increasing anger mirrors our increasing anger; except that we know their anger is based on false beliefs. When one judge observes that "'tis a pity two such prodigies should live," his statement is an example of dramatic irony. He intends to refer to Celia and Bonario, but we know that the statement much better describes Volpone and Mosca. A

careful reader would note, however, that in feeling angry at Volpone and Mosca, we are being drawn into a certain reality in much the same way that the four judges are – through images and words, arranged in a dramatic manner, good characters vying against evil ones, drawing our sympathy, making us involved in their struggle. It could make us very suspicious of the exercise of drama as a whole. Drama seems based on the very same methods of deceit used by Voltore and Mosca. But to say that Voltore and Mosca are dramatists is not to say that all dramatists are like Voltore and Mosca. Jonson, after all, acknowledges in his dedication that many dramatic poets rely on sensationalism to sell their plays, plays that harm the moral good of society. This scene can be viewed as an exercise in how to spot this sensationalism, how to differentiate between the good play and the bad play; plays that deceive and confuse; and plays, like Jonson's, that aim to tell the truth.

## **16.6 Act V**

### **16.6.1 Scene I**

Volpone returns home after the drama at the Scrutineo, tired. He declares that he has grown tired of his con and wishes it were over. Pretending to be sick in public has made some of the symptoms he has been falsely presenting, such as cramps and palsy (tremors), feel all too real. The thought that he might actually be getting sick depressed and frightens him; to banish it he takes two strong drinks and calls Mosca.

### **16.6.2 Scene II**

Volpone calls Mosca and informs him that he wants to be over with the con. They discuss how well the entire con went off and congratulate themselves on being so erudite, so brave, and so clever. Mosca advises that Volpone should stop his life of trickery here, for he will never outdo himself. Volpone seems to agree, and then begin discussing the matter of payment to Voltore for his services, something that Mosca insists on. But Volpone suddenly decides to carry out one final joke on the legacy hunters. He calls in Castrone and Nano, and tells them to run through the streets, informing everyone that Volpone is dead. He then tells Mosca to wear his clothes and to pretend that Volpone has named him the heir to the estate when the legacy hunters arrive, using an authentic will naming Mosca as heir. Mosca remarks on how distraught all four of the people involved in the deceit at the Scrutineo – Voltore, Corbaccio, Corvino, and Lady Politic – will be when they come to believe that Mosca has been chosen over them. Soon, Voltore arrives, and Volpone hides behind a curtain.

### **16.6.3 Scene III**

Voltore enters to find Mosca making an inventory. Thinking that the property is now his, he praises Mosca's hard work. He takes the will in order to read it. Corbaccio, clearly near death, is carried in by his servants. Corvino soon after enters, and soon Lady Politic Would-be enters too. All the while, Mosca continues to take an inventory of Volpone's property. All four characters then read the will; they understandably react with shock, and demand an explanation. Mosca replies to each of them in turn, reminding them in a short speech of the lies and other immoral acts each of them committed. Lady Politic apparently offered to provide Mosca with sexual favours in return for Volpone's estate. Corvino, of course, unjustly declared his wife an adulterer and himself a cuckold; Corbaccio disinherited his son. For Voltore, Mosca is somewhat sympathetic; he expresses sincere regret that Voltore will not be made heir. After Mosca is finished talking to a character, that character leaves. After Voltore leaves, Mosca and Volpone are again alone, and Volpone congratulates Mosca on a job well done. Volpone wants to gloat directly in the faces of the four dupes, so Mosca suggests that he disguise himself as a commandadore (a sergeant or guard), and approach them on the street. Volpone congratulates Mosca on his excellent idea.

Notes

**Analysis to Scene I-Scene III**

The intention of Jonson throughout the play has been to satirize greed in all its forms. At first, Volpone was the instrument of Jonson's satire; he turned the greed of the legacy hunters against itself, creating a situation where greed resulted in not only a complete loss of dignity on the part of the legacy hunters but also, ironically, the loss of the very thing they were seeking to gain: money. But now, Volpone has succumbed to his own form of greed; greed driven by his private desires and appetites for Celia. Because of this, he has defamed two innocent characters, Celia and Bonario. In the moral universe of Jonson's comedy, this transgression cannot go unpunished or uncommented upon; Celia and Bonario were guilty of nothing except dullness; their imprisonment is, to put it simply, "not funny". So Volpone is no longer the instrument of Jonson's satire. In fact, he is now made the target of it, and the attack proceeds, again, through irony.

A central motif in the final act is that of the disguise-made-reality; Volpone has convinced so many people of his lies that his falsehoods now come to stand in the public sphere as truth, with terrible consequences for Volpone. Volpone wishes to be done with his con-game clearly indicates his wish to be done with his con-game, but we receive indications that it will not be so simple, that the lies Volpone has told are too powerful and too widely accepted to simply disappear. He returns from the senate complaining of cramps and aches that roughly coincide with those he has been imitating; the "cramp" and the "palsy," which he had mocked Corbaccio for succumbing to in Act I. These may be indications of a guilty conscience; but they also stand as a metaphor for the way in which Volpone has successfully blurred the line between lies and reality. Again, we can use the metaphor of stagecraft here: in Act IV, Volpone crosses boundary between the "stage" and "reality," by carrying his "play" into the world and appearing sick in public. Ironically, it is at this moment that Volpone impulsively decides to kill himself off, and he does it using the medium of the playwright, the written word.

So when Volpone thinks he is writing himself out of his deceitful game, his "play," he is actually writing himself out of reality altogether. The "exit from reality" occurs when Volpone goes behind the arras, he for a moment becomes a member of the audience of Volpone, the drama written by Ben Jonson; in other words, he is a spectator, not a participant, in his own life. Mosca, at this stage, assumes Volpone's role both as the center of the play's action and as its moral voice; it is he who scolds each legacy hunter in turn for their hypocrisy. Volpone delights – almost sadistically in the vindictiveness with which Mosca reminds each character of the callous and immoral acts they committed in the pursuit of Volpone's treasure. But the irony of the situation is encapsulated by Volpone's statement "Rare, Mosca! How his villainy becomes him!" which foreshadows the events later in the act.

**16.6.4 Scene IV**

Peregrine enters, in disguise as a merchant. He is accompanied by three other merchants. They rehearse a scheme in which Peregrine has hatched to get his revenge on Sir Politic; Peregrine reminds everyone that his only aim is to frighten Sir Pol, not to injure him. The merchants hide, and Peregrine puts his plot into motion. Peregrine asks Sir Pol's serving-woman to tell the knight that "a merchant, upon urgent business." When Sir Pol comes out of his study, where he has been working on a letter of apology to his wife, Peregrine's disguise is successful; Sir Pol does not know he is talking to Peregrine. So Peregrine/the Merchant tells Sir Politic that the young man Sir Pol was speaking to earlier that day has told the State of Venice that Sir Pol wishes to sell Venice to the Turks. Sir Pol believes Peregrine immediately, and becomes terrified. After all, he did tell Peregrine he could sell Venice to the Turks; of course, he had been joking, but now it seems that Peregrine has understood things in a very wrong, and dangerous, way. Of course, Peregrine has told no such thing to anyone; but when the merchants knock on the door, Peregrine/the merchant tells Sir Pol it is the officers of the state come to arrest him.

Sir Pol decides, at Peregrine's suggestion that he will hide in a wine cask made of tortoise-shell; he quickly does so and asks Peregrine to tell his servant that his papers should be burnt. When the

merchants come in, they walk around the room; Peregrine “informs” them that he is a merchant, come to look upon a tortoise (actually Sir Pol hidden in a wine cask). The merchants express awe at the tortoise, and Peregrine/the Merchant tells them that the tortoise is strong enough for them to jump on. So they do. They then ask if the tortoise can move, and Peregrine informs them yes. So the tortoise does, and they remark that the tortoise has garters and gloves on. Pulling off the tortoise shell, they reveal Sir Politic. After laughing at his expense, Peregrine claims that he and Sir Politic are even, and apologizes for the burning of the knight’s papers that resulted from the joke. The merchants and Peregrine all leave Sir Politic to wallow in his own humiliation and self-pity. The abused Englishman asks his servant where Lady Politic is; she tells him that she has decided that she wishes to return home, for her health. Sir Politic whole-heartedly concurs with his wife’s plans.

### Analysis

Peregrine’s final scene with Sir Politic is in one sense pure farce, intended to make us laugh. But it also foreshadows more serious events about to occur in the play’s main plot, events central to the play’s moral satire and didactic purpose. Sir Politic disguises himself in front of the Mercatori, just as Volpone will disguise himself in front of the Avocatori during the final scene. Politic’s “unveiling” to the Mercatori will be echoed in Volpone’s own unveiling. And both characters are the victims of an ironic reversal of fortune; whereas Volpone is disinherited by the same trickery he used to disinherit others, Politic will now become “talk for ordinaries,” the butt of one of the many gossip tales he himself is so fond of telling. Whereas Volpone disguises himself as a commandadore, Politic disguises himself as a tortoise; as we know Jonson likes to identify characters with animals, the choice of tortoise here seems particularly apt, being a slow, dim-witted animal, not nearly as attractive as a Fox. And whereas Volpone will manage a Pyrrhic victory by exposing Mosca’s deception, Politic is merely jumped upon and abused by the Mercatori. Peregrine plays a parallel role to Mosca in the subplot, turning Sir Politic’s machinations against himself; but Peregrine is portrayed sympathetically. Whereas Mosca is eventually shamed in front of the Mercatori, and made to pay the harshest punishment than that handed out to Volpone. Politic’s situation is a farce, however, both because of the complete loss of dignity and humiliation to which he is subjected, and the fact that this loss of dignity is not in any real way harmful. But this is appropriate; in fact, if it results in him leaving Venice, it may very well be beneficial for him. Volpone’s will not be so lucky; Jonson’s satire will be much more harsh with him, his tone more severe. We can see that this is appropriate; Sir Politic has not, in fact, done harm to anyone, whereas Volpone has endangered the lives of two innocent people.

This scene also identifies Politic’s place within the beast-fable that has been an undertone throughout the play. If we remember from Act One, we have a Fox (Volpone), circled by a Fly (Mosca), and three carrion birds – the vulture (Voltore), the crow (Corvino) and the raven (Corbaccio). Politic, on the other hand, is a tortoise: a slow, dim-witted animal who carries its house on its back. Similarly, Politic is dim-witted, slow and English, no matter how hard he tries to be Venetian. He is thus a symbol of someone out of his element; amongst the cunning and carnivorous creatures of the main plot, the tortoise is no match, and will eventually retreat back into its shell, as Sir Politic seems ready to do at the end of the play. Thus, though Sir Politic is an object of fun, he is also an object of sympathy, especially for the English audiences of the play. Contrast this to the treatment the Venetians Volpone and Mosca will receive, and we begin to suspect that Sir Politic’s “English-ness” gives him a preferential status; as the character the audience probably identifies most closely with (by virtue of his nationality), he is portrayed as something of an innocent; it is the foreigners who are viewed as intentionally evil, and worthy of punishment.

### 16.6.5 Scenes V-IX

The scene is now Volpone’s house. Mosca and Volpone enter; Mosca is dressed as a clarissimo, or great nobleman, and Volpone wears a commandadore’s (sergeant’s) uniform. They briefly discuss



**Notes**

Volpone's plan to blatantly mock those he has duped. He leaves, and Mosca makes some cryptic comments to the effect that Volpone won't be regaining his own identity before he comes to terms with Mosca. He gives Nano, Castrone and Androgyno some money before telling them to find new work. Mosca again cryptically comments that he will either "gain" by Volpone, or "bury him."

**Scene VI**

The scene has now moved to a street, where Corvino and Corbaccio are disguised. Volpone enters in disguise. He begins asking the two what they have inherited from the dead magnifico, Volpone; they react to his questions with predictable annoyance. Volpone annoys them further by reminding them of what they did in their failed attempts to gain Volpone's inheritance; how Corbaccio signed his own son out of his will, and how Corvino prostituted his wife. They leave, and Volpone goes on to his next victim.

**Scene VII**

Voltore enters, walking down the street, completely disbelieving that he has lost the inheritance to Mosca, a parasite. Volpone comes up to him, and begins asking about one of his own properties, a small "bawdy-house." He implies that since Voltore is the old magnifico's heir, he is the one to talk to about purchasing this property and perhaps renovating it; it is, after all, nothing at all to someone of Voltore's newfound wealth and stature. Volpone's irony drives Voltore to frustration, and he leaves. Volpone returns to Corbaccio and Corvino.

**Scene VIII**

Corbaccio and Corvino enter, and watch Mosca pass by in his fine robes. They are infuriated, and even more so when Volpone arrives to continue taunting them. He now inquires whether the rumours about the parasite are true; knowing that they are, he proceeds to admonish Corbaccio and Corvino for having so handily been defeated by Mosca, and having lost their dignity in the process. Corvino then challenges Volpone to a fight, but Volpone wisely backs off.

**Scene IX**

Voltore makes a cryptic threat to Mosca: though he is in summer now, his "winter shall come on." Mosca tells Voltore not to speak foolishly. Volpone then arrives, and hoping to taunt Voltore further, asks him if he wants Volpone to beat Mosca, to avenge the terrible disgrace Voltore now suffers for being gulled by a parasite. Further adding insult to injury, he demands to know whether or not Mosca's inheritance is in fact a joke. After all, Volpone implies, a lawyer couldn't have been outsmarted by a parasite. Voltore leaves, tormented and humiliated.

**Analysis to Scene V-Scene IX**

The issue of social class had been treated indirectly in the play through the character of Mosca, forced to be Volpone's parasite due to his poverty; but Jonson deals with it explicitly here. The Elizabethans had a fairly rigid conception of social class, certainly by today's standards. Volpone remarks it is a pity that Mosca was not a born a clarissimo, because he plays the part so well; Mosca replies aside that he may very well keep his "made one", turning Volpone's comment into a piece of dramatic irony. Mosca puns on the word "made", hoping to be a self-"made" man, and achieving it through "manufacture" and "fabrication", two other senses of the word "made". This implies that Mosca's social status is now fake, artificial. So Volpone's lies have resulted in the destabilization of the social order. This destabilization is reinforced by the anger Voltore expresses about being

dispossessed by “a parasite! A slave!” talking to himself as he walks along the street, seemingly obsessed by it, almost driven to insanity. It is symbolized by Volpone’s own decision to effectively trade in his identity as a nobleman for one as a commandadore, all for the sake of the pleasure of taunting someone for having failed to inherit an estate-ironic (situationally), because he loses that very same estate in the process. In the Elizabethan world-view, the social order embodied in the class system is fundamentally linked to the order of the universe, making any destabilization in the class system profoundly disturbing and in need of rectification. But the attitude of the play towards class more complex and potentially contradictory; after all, the people mainly upset by Mosca’s inheritance are the legacy hunters, who are morally dubious; and Mosca behaves no differently than any of the characters of a higher class level than him. In short, it is difficult to determine whether Jonson endorses the Elizabethan idea of class, or actually criticizes it. Further indications will be given in the play’s final scenes; an essay written on this question would be a challenging but interesting one.

### 16.6.6 Scenes X-XII

The scene now shifts to the Scrutineo. The four judges, the notary, the guards, Bonario, Celia, Corvino and Corbaccio enter; we are witnessing the sentencing hearing for Bonario and Celia. As the judges prepare to declare the sentence, Voltore and Volpone enter, Voltore driven to distraction by Volpone’s teasing. He demands forgiveness from the judges, and from the “innocents” Bonario and Celia. He then begins to confess to the deceit that he and Mosca engineered earlier that day. Corvino interrupts him, asking the judges to ignore Voltore, claiming that the lawyer acts out of pure jealousy over the fact that Mosca has inherited Volpone’s fortune, now that Volpone is dead. Volpone’s “death” takes the judges by surprise. Voltore insists that he is telling the truth, and hands over what seems to be a handwritten confession to the judges. The judges decide to send for Mosca, but cautiously, since they now believe that he may be Volpone’s heir, and to insult would be a grave offence.

#### Scene XI

Volpone paces to and fro on the street. He realizes that his gloating has resulted in Voltore’s confession. He curses himself for his “wantonness,” his obsessive need to seek pleasure in everything, and hopes aloud that Mosca will help him out of this mess. He runs into Nano, Androgynio and Castrone, who tell him that Mosca told them to go play outside, and took the keys to the estate. Volpone begins to realize that Mosca may be looking to keep the estate for himself, and again curses his foolishness; he decides that he must try to must give Voltore “new hopes,” in other words convince the lawyer that he could still inherit the estate, because Volpone is still alive.

#### Scene XII

Back at the Scrutineo, the judges are thoroughly confused. Voltore and Celia maintain that Voltore is telling the truth, while Corvino continues to insist that Voltore is possessed by a demon. Volpone, still in disguise, enters, and informs the judges that the parasite (Mosca) will soon arrive, before turning to whisper in Voltore’s ear. He tells Voltore that Mosca has informed him (the guard Volpone pretends to be) that Volpone still lives, and that the faked death was a test to determine Voltore’s resolve; Voltore realizes with chagrin that he has failed. But Volpone suggests that if Voltore corroborates Corvino’s contention that he is possessed by falling to the ground and writhing on the floor, he may yet prove his loyalty; Voltore complies immediately. Volpone tells everyone to stand back, and ask them if they see the demon flying out of Voltore’s mouth (there is, of course, no demon; it is another one of Volpone’s tricks). Voltore then asks “Where am I?,” and claims that, though his confession is written in his handwriting, the contents of it are false. According to Voltore post-collapse, Mosca is just as innocent as Volpone – who, the lawyer goes on to assert, is not dead.

**Notes**

Everything seems to be going well for Volpone, until Mosca enters. For Mosca refuses to corroborate Voltore's claim that Volpone is alive. According to Mosca, the funeral preparations are underway as he speaks. Volpone is shocked. Mosca offers to help Volpone for half his fortune; Volpone says that he would rather "be hanged" than cut this deal. Volpone, still in disguise, asserts to the court that Volpone is alive, while under his breath acquiescing to Mosca's demand for half; but now Mosca will not accept even this offer. When Volpone insists that he is not dead, in direct contradiction of Mosca, he is taken away to be whipped for his insolence. Realizing that with a legal will in place, there is nothing else for him to do, Volpone reveals himself to the Senate. The judges realize that they have been deceived, and order Bonario and Celia to be let go. They condemn Mosca to life as a galley-slave for impersonating a nobleman of Venice, and send Volpone to prison. Voltore is disbarred, Corbaccio stripped of all his property (which is handed over to Bonario), and Corvino sentenced to public humiliation: he will be rowed through the canals of Venice, wearing donkey's ears. The scene ends with a polite request to the audience to show their appreciation for the play through their applause.

**Analysis to Scene X-Scene XII**

The way Jonson metes out punishment to his characters bears a resemblance to one of Lady Politic's less favorite Italian poets: Dante Alighieri. The greedy Corbaccio has his estate taken away from him, Corvino, who behaves like an ass during the entire play, is metaphorically transformed into one, and Volpone, who pretended to be bedridden in order to satisfy his insatiable lusts, will now be bedridden permanently, still unable to satisfy his desires for Celia (or anything else for that matter). This fitting of the punishment to the crime in a poetic, imaginative way is similar to Dante's device of *contrappasso* which he employs in *Inferno* (Hell), book one of his *Divine Comedy*. The punishments there, and here, are meant to capture the inner essence of the crime itself; in other words, Volpone's greed for pleasure and self-gratification made him a prisoner of his desires, bound to be frustrated in his attempts to achieve them, long before he was ever put into chains. The judge, after administering these punishments, emphasizes their didactic purpose: "Take heart, and love to study 'em," he says of the punishments, and his comparison of vices to "beasts" brings to mind the "fable" aspect of Volpone, congruent with the idea that the judge is giving us a tidy, neat moral to the story. But there are some problems with the ending of Volpone, which may serve to contradict the moral message that Jonson has fairly straightforwardly pursued up until now. There is the problem of the protagonist. This is a comedy, and protagonists in comedies should generally end up happily. The only characters who in fact end up happy are Celia and Bonario; but these characters are comparatively thin; we invest much less emotion in them than we do in Volpone, who seems a much more reasonable choice for protagonist. But then the ending is very severe for a comedy, because we are not really given full-blooded characters to sympathize with, and cheer on to a happy resolution. Such harshness is mandated by Jonson's purpose in writing the play, which was not only to entertain but also to educate. Though Jonson allows Volpone and Mosca the spotlight for most of the play, the final scene is meant to tell us that however interesting they may be, and however sympathetic they may appear, they are still worthy of the punishment they will eventually find. Volpone appears especially sympathetic towards the end of the play, when the only person he trusts betrays him. And he does manage the redeeming act of revealing himself, and thus saving Bonario and Celia, though this may be motivated more by a desire to get back at Mosca or to reassert his own identity as from any moral motivations. We can say that it in fact strengthens the moral message of the play that a sympathetic character gets punished for his vice, because our sympathy makes us identify with Volpone, and search for that vice within ourselves. But the unmitigated catastrophe of the situation for Volpone—he is going to jail for the rest of his life—has been said to give the play tragic undertones. Another problem arises with the judges themselves. They are given the job of handing out the punishments at the end of the play, distribution Jonson's poetic justice. But Jonson satirizes them thoroughly in their treatment of Mosca. While they think Mosca has money, they treat him with the utmost respect and courtesy, and one judge hopes to marry his daughter to

him. But as soon as it turns out that he has none, he is subjected to the worst punishment of any offender, "for being of no birth or blood." The 3rd judge becomes the victim of dramatic irony when he says that Volpone should be "taught [how] to bear himself/Towards a person of his [an equal or higher] rank." Rank assumes supreme importance at this stage of the play; but rank seems to be ultimately determined by money. Because of his harsh punishment and his conflict with Volpone in the final scene, Mosca is a chief candidate for the play's antagonist; but the behavior of the judges does not refute, but in fact confirms, Mosca's contention, in Act Three, that the "wise" world is "nothing but parasites". While the judges believe that they can possibly gain wealth from him, they treat him kindly; as soon as it is clear they cannot, they abuse him. Jonson's problem with the judges becomes clear; he wants his play to affirm the values cherished by Celia and Bonario, those of honor and religiosity. He desires his use of irony to be stable, irony employed against a certain set of values—those of Volpone—in favor of the values of Celia and Bonario; it is a conservative form of irony, in that it harkens back to an older idea of virtue, and attacks the modern ideas of Volpone. But the Venetian state, as he portrays it (and we know this closely mirrored his view of English society at the time) was run through with parasitism from top to bottom; everyone was a Mosca, in Jonson's eyes, or at least everyone who had influence, even symbols of wisdom such as the judges. But an ending where Celia and Bonario are punished and Volpone and Mosca escape free would have been contrary to the play's didactic purpose; showing virtue losing out to vice doesn't make virtue seem the more favorable option of the two. So Jonson is forced to compromise his unremittingly negative portrait of Venetian society in order to accommodate his need to have Celia and Bonario win out at the end. This compromise may explain a dissatisfaction produced by the ending, its feeling of being too artificial, and not "of a piece" with the rest of the play.

## Self Assessment

Multiple Choice Questions:

11. Sir Politic and Peregrine are walking along
  - (a) a canal
  - (b) along a courtyard
  - (c) along an avenue
  - (d) along a street.
12. The Fourth Act is marked by
  - (a) return of Mosca
  - (b) Volpone's near complete disappearance
  - (c) Mosca constructing a plot
  - (d) verdict of Scrutineo.
13. The issue of social class had been treated indirectly in the play through the character of
  - (a) Volpone
  - (b) Scrutineo
  - (c) Mosca
  - (d) Sir Politico.

Fill in the blanks:

14. Volpone's greed for ..... and self-gratification made him a prisoner of his desires.
15. Everything seems to be going well for Volpone, until ..... enters.

Notes

16. Voltore makes a cryptic ..... to Mosca: though he is in summer now.
17. A central motif in the final act is that of the ..... -made-reality.

State whether the following statements are true or false:

18. We can say that it in fact strengthens the moral message of the play that a sympathetic character gets punished for his vice.
19. After laughing at his expense, Peregrine claims that he and Sir Politic are even, and apologizes for the burning of the knight's papers.
20. Sir Pol decides, at Peregrine's suggestion that he will hide in a wine cask made of tortoise-shell.

### 16.7 Summary

- The play is dedicated to the universities of Oxford and Cambridge, both of which had recently awarded Jonson honorary doctorates at the time of the play's writing.
- Jonson briefly discusses the moral intentions of the play and its debt to classical drama.
- The opening parts of the play, before we are introduced to the action, may seem superfluous.
- The dedication, however, gives us a clue as to Jonson's intentions in writing *Volpone*. First of all, he is intent on writing a "moral" play. By taking to task those "poetasters" who have disgraced the theatrical profession with their immoral work, Jonson highlights the moral intentions of his play.
- The scene I of Act 1 is Volpone's house, in the Italian city of Venice, in the spring of 1606. It is morning, and Volpone, whose name in Italian means "the great Fox," enters.
- The construction of the first scene of the play is straight forward. It reveals the conceit (premise or situation) of the comedy and firmly establishes Volpone as the protagonist of the play.
- The use of irony is almost always a form of attack on a certain viewpoint or way of life, by showing its inherent contradictions; and if it aims to show us that certain behavior or viewpoints are present in the thoughts and actions of everyday people in society at large, then it makes a pointed commentary on contemporary society.
- In Scene II of Act 1 Nano (a dwarf), Castrone (a eunuch), and Androgyno enter.
- The entrance of Volpone's bizarre "family" of children is the entrance of the grotesque in the play; all three are "freaks" of one sort or another; Castrone the eunuch, Nano the dwarf, and Androgyno the hermaphrodite.
- In Scene III, Voltore the lawyer – whose name means "vulture" in Italian – enters with Mosca, and Mosca assures him that he will be Volpone's heir.
- Through the device of Volpone's con, Jonson makes his satiric commentary on greed, using dramatic irony, situational irony, verbal irony, and repetition. Dramatic irony is a literary device often used in tragedies; a central character behaves in a certain way in ignorance of key facts about a situation; we, however, know the behavior is incorrect and feel tension because of our inability to stop it.
- In scene V the final would-be heir now appears. He is a merchant named Corvino, and his names mean "crow" in Italian.
- The final scene is in many ways a conclusion of the scenes with Voltore and Corbaccio.
- The scene I of Act 2 introduces us to the Sir Politic Would-be subplot of *Volpone*. The subplot is a key component of Elizabethan drama; it is a secondary storyline which, like a variation on a theme, should take up the themes of the main story, or related themes, and treats them in a

slightly different way, either with a different tone or with a different emphasis.

Notes

- When Volpone loses control with Celia, he breaks the implicit rules he seemed to be playing by initially, or at least may have fooled the audience into thinking he was playing by: that he was only out to deceive and hurt those who deceived and hurt themselves.
- In scene I of Act IV, Sir Politic and Peregrine are walking along a canal, and Politic undertakes to teach Peregrine a thing or two about life in Venice. His two main points are that one should never tell the truth to strangers, and that one should always have proper table manners, which Politic then goes on to explain in full.
- In Scene II of Act IV, Lady Politic, Nano, and some serving women enter, looking for her husband. And in Scene III, Mosca enters and finds Lady Politic incensed over her husband's infidelity.
- The moral satire of the play becomes somewhat submerged in the Fourth Act, as considerations of plot and tone become more important. Jonson frames the intense confrontation between Volpone, Celia, and Bonario with humorous scenes involving the Politic Would-bes.
- The scene IV of Act IV is now set at the Scrutineo, the law courts of the Venetian state. The four Avocatori also appear in scene V. In Scene VI Mosca enters with his surprise witness, who is, of course, Lady Politic Would-be.
- The Fourth Act is marked by Volpone's near complete disappearance for the play; Mosca takes his place as the driving force behind the plot.
- The way Voltore and Mosca go about creating their illusion has similarities with the way playwrights go about creating theirs, using words and images in a dramatic manner.
- The way Jonson metes out punishment to his characters bears a resemblance to one of Lady Politic's less favorite Italian poets: Dante Alighieri. The greedy Corbaccio has his estate taken away from him, Corvino, who behaves like an ass during the entire play, is metaphorically transformed into one, and Volpone, who pretended to be bedridden in order to satisfy his insatiable lusts, will now be bedridden permanently, still unable to satisfy his desires for Celia. This fitting of the punishment to the crime in a poetic, imaginative way is similar to Dante's device of contrapasso which he employs in *Inferno* (Hell), book one of his *Divine Comedy*. The punishments there, and here, are meant to capture the inner essence of the crime itself; in other words, Volpone's greed for pleasure and self-gratification made him a prisoner of his desires, bound to be frustrated in his attempts to achieve them, long before he was ever put into chains.

## 16.8 Keywords

- Poetasters* : A derogatory term for an inferior playwright who have disgraced the theatrical profession with their immoral work.
- Hail* : A term used in medieval mystery plays to announce the presence of Christ.
- Profane* : Of low moral worth
- Dramatic irony* : It is the ironic effect created, when someone doesn't know something you do, and says something that's normally reasonable but in the context quite stupid or funny.
- Iambic pentameter* : A meter in which each line has ten syllables, or five pairs of syllables, the first syllable in each pair unstressed and the second stressed.
- Unity of time* : The audience and the characters must experience time at the same rate.
- Unity of place* : The play should have only one setting.

<b>Notes</b>	<b>Unity of action</b>	: The play should revolve around one action.
	<b>Dramatic irony</b>	: It is a literary device often used in tragedies, a central character behaves in a certain way in ignorance of key facts about a situation.
	<b>Stage craft</b>	: The art of putting on a show.
	<b>Soliloquy</b>	: It is a speech given by a character while alone on stage, spoken directly to the audience and it usually gives the audience direct access to the inner workings of the character's mind.
	<b>Avocatori</b>	: One who serve as judges in the Venetian state
	<b>Bawdy-house</b>	: A seedy night club or whorehouse.

### 16.9 Review Questions

1. In Volpone, Jonson sets out to undermine the notion of avarice. Explain
2. Mention four satiristic characters of Act II.
3. What are the main themes used in Act IV of the play Jonson?
4. Write short notes on the following scenes:
  - (a) Scene I of Act I
  - (b) Closing scene of the play
  - (c) The scene entrusted to to the punsihment of characters.
5. Explain the following in context of Volpone play:
  - (a) Morality
  - (b) Deceit
  - (c) Plot
6. The way Jonson metes out punishment to his characters bears a resemblance to one of Lady Politic's less favorite Italian poets: *Dante Alighieri*. Elucidate.
7. The moral satire of the play becomes somewhat submerged in the Fourth Act. Explain.
8. The main theme of the morality play is: Man begins in innocence, man falls into temptation, man repents and is saved or killed, in the context of this theme, explain the play Volpone.
9. The Fourth Act is marked by Volpone's near complete disappearance for the play. Evaluate.
10. Illustrate that throughout the play, Volpone has seemed both a likeable and sympathetic protagonist and a sociopath.

### **Answers: Self Assessment**

- |              |              |                    |
|--------------|--------------|--------------------|
| 1. (b)       | 2. (b)       | 3. (c)             |
| 4. implicit  | 5. woman     | 6. moral criticism |
| 7. soliloquy | 8. True      | 9. False           |
| 10. True     | 11. (a)      | 12. (b)            |
| 13. (c)      | 14. pleasure | 15. Mosca          |
| 16. threat   | 17. disguise | 18. True           |
| 19. True     | 20. True     |                    |

## 16.10 Further Readings

Notes



Books

Jonson, Ben; J. D. Rea (ed.). 1919. *Volpone*. New Haven: Yale University Press.

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Online links

<http://www.jstor.org/stable/432545?seq=11>

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## Unit 17: Volpone: Characterization and Plot Construction and Sub-plots

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## Objectives

After studying this unit, you will be able to:

- Enumerate the characterization of the play;
- Illustrate that Volpone is the manesake of the play;
- Explain that play's title character is its protagonist;
- Examine that the character is first an instrument and then a victim of Jonson's satire of money-obsessed society;
- Elaborate the plot and sub-plot construction in each act of the play.

## Introduction

Volpone, the play's title character is its protagonist. His name means 'The Fox' in Italian. Jonson used him as an instrument of satire of money-obsessed society, and he seems to share in Jonson's satiric interpretation of the events. He is lustful, raffish, and greedy for pleasure. He is a creature of passion, continually looking to find and attain new forms of pleasure, whatever the consequences may be. He is also energetic and has an unusual gift for rhetoric.

Mosca is Volpone's parasite, a combination of his slave, his servant and his lackey. He is the person who continually executes Volpone's ideas and the one who comes up with the necessary lie whenever needed. Mosca appears to be exactly what he is described as: a clinging, servile parasite, who only exists for Volpone and through Volpone.

The plot construction in the play closely parallels Horace's satire on legacy hunters but dramatizes it with characters whose flattened, comic/satiric personas represent various types of human personality as they are distorted by greed, lust, and sheer perversity. Jonson alerts us to the symbolic order of the action's meaning by means of the names he assigns the primary characters: Volpone (fox--deceiver), Mosca (fly--parasite), Voltore (vulture--scavenger/lawyer), Corbaccio (crow--wealthy but still greedy man), and Corvino (raven, another scavenger--the wealthy merchant who can't get enough). These characters all seek to be named Volpone's heir in order to gain his treasure, but they offer him gifts to achieve that honor, and he strings them along, more in love with his delight in deceiving them than even his beloved gold. A love plot is attached to this legacy-hunt, involving Corvino's wife (Celia) and Corbaccio's son (Bonario), but one of the play's puzzles is that they are such relatively lifeless, though moral, characters. Below these levels, three more sets of characters populate the stage. Nano (a dwarf), Castrone (an eunuch), and Androgyno (a hermaphrodite) join Mosca as Volpone's courtiers, Sir Poltic Would-be and his wife are deceived by Peregrine, and the elders of Venice alternately try to profit from and to bring justice to the confusion (Commendatori [sheriffs], Mercatori [merchants], Avocatori [lawyers, brothers of Corvino], and Notario [the court's registrar]).

**Notes**

In a nutshell, the plot is that the conspirators try to deceive Volpone, but he's really deceiving them, until his agent (Mosca) deceives him (and them) and they bring him to the court, which they all try to deceive, until they are unmasked.

Jonson uses all the characters as an instrument of satire of one kind or the other in his play. He compared all the characters to some animals as using their character. This unit elaborates the Jonson's satire for each character. More emphasis is given on the detailed analysis of its protagonist, the Volpone. The conspiratory to deceive and to be deceived is also beautifully ordained in the play and has been analysed in detail below.

### **17.1 Characterization of the Play – Character List**

Volpone, the Fox, a venetian magnifico is the main character of the play. Delighting in foxlike trickery, Volpone scorns the easy gain of cheating widows and orphans and the hard gain of labor. He chooses for his victims Venice's leading crooked advocate, its most greedy and dishonest merchant, and its most hardened miser. The joy of the chase of gold and jewels belonging to others is keener to him than the possession. Jonson uses the characters to make them instrument of his satire of greed and dishonesty.

#### **17.1.1 Volpone**

Volpone is the protagonist of the play. His name means "The Fox" in Italian. Jonson used him as an instrument of satire of money-obsessed society, and he seems to share in Jonson's satiric interpretation of the events. He is lustful, raffish, and greedy for pleasure. He is a creature of passion, continually looking to find and attain new forms of pleasure, whatever the consequences may be. He is also energetic and has an unusual gift for rhetoric. He worships his money, all of which he has acquired through cons, such as the one he plays on Voltore, Corbaccio, and Corvino. Volpone has no children, but he has something of a family: his parasite, Mosca, his dwarf, Nano, his eunuch, Castrone, and his hermaphrodite, Androgyno. Mosca is his only true confidante. Volpone hates to make money through honest labour or cold, he loves making it in clever, deceitful ways. This dynamic in his character shapes our reaction to him throughout the play. At times, this hedonism seems fun, engaging, entertaining, and even morally valuable, such as when he is engaged in the con on his fortune hunters. But his attempted seduction of Celia reveals a darker side to his hedonism when it becomes an attempted rape. The incident makes him, in the moral universe of the play, a worthy target of satire. Through the play, we learn that he is the one who makes the satire but the satire eventually turns back on him, when he becomes a victim of Mosca's "Fox-trap." The reason he is ensnared by Mosca is that he cannot resist one final gloat at his dupes, oblivious to the fact that in doing so, he hands over his entire estate to Mosca. This lack of rational forethought and commitment to his own sensual impulses is characteristic of Volpone. Therefore, he has three weaknesses that might make his 'plots' fail: the first is his lust for Celia, the second is his overconfident behavior, and the last is his complete trust in Mosca.

#### **17.1.2 Mosca**

Mosca is Volpone's parasite, a combination of his slave, his servant and his lackey. He is the person who continually executes Volpone's ideas and the one who comes up with the necessary lie whenever needed. In the opening acts, Mosca appears to be exactly what he is described as: a clinging, servile parasite, who only exists for Volpone and through Volpone. In other words, he exists to serve Volpone, and all that Volpone wants he wants. But in Act Three, we have the beginning of his assertion of self-identity, when he begins to grow confident in his abilities. But then this confidence again is left unvoiced, and Mosca seems to go back to being Volpone's faithful servant, helping him get out of the troublesome situation with Bonario and Celia. Mosca himself is possessed by greed, and he attempts to move out of his role as parasite to the role of great beast himself. But his attempt

fails, as Volpone exposes them both. Though initially (and for most of the play) he behaves in a servile manner towards Volpone, Mosca conceals a growing independence he gains as a result of the incredible resourcefulness he shows in aiding and abetting Volpone's confidence game. Mosca's growing confidence, and awareness that the others in the play are just as much "parasites" as he—in that they too would rather live off the wealth of others than do honest work—eventually bring him into conflict with Volpone, a conflict that destroys them both.

### 17.1.3 Voltore

One of the three legacy hunters or carrion-birds—the legacy hunters continually circle around Volpone, giving him gifts in the hope that he will choose them as his heir. Voltore is a lawyer by profession, and, as a result, he is adept in the use of words. Voltore is, like all the legacy hunters, named after a carrion-bird. In the case of Voltore, that bird is the vulture; for Corvino, it is the crow, and for Corbaccio, the raven. Voltore is the most pleasant of all the legacy hunters, for he is the least crass and the least obsessed with seeing Volpone die. His preferential status shows in Mosca's special regard for him: Mosca tries to make sure that Voltore gets enough payment for his services at the Scrutineo in Act IV. But Voltore comes to regret his actions at the Scrutineo. Of course, this regret only comes after he has been denied his inheritance, and it seems to stem directly from his bitterness at Mosca's leapfrogging over him on the social ladder. And when Volpone whispers to him that he might still get his inheritance, he stops confessing his lies to the Scrutineo and pretends that he was "possessed" by an evil demon. The verbal irony is that Voltore, in that statement and action, reveals his greed.

### 17.1.4 Corbaccio

Another "carrion-bird" circling Volpone, Corbaccio is actually extremely old and ill himself and is much more likely to die before Volpone even has a chance to bequeath him his wealth. He has a hearing problem and betrays no sign of concern for Volpone, delighting openly in (fake) reports of Volpone's worsening symptoms. He goes as far as to testify against his own son. He is finally punished, sent to a monastery, and forced to turn his estate over to his son, Bonario.

### 17.1.5 Corvino

A greedy, rich merchant and an extremely cruel and dishonorable character, Corvino is Celia's jealous husband. He frequently threatens to do disgusting acts of physical violence to her and her family in order to gain control over her. Yet he is more concerned with financial gain than with her faithfulness, seeing her, in essence, as a piece of property. Corvino is another one of the "carrion-birds" circling Volpone. Corvino is punished in the end for offering up his wife, which results in her returning to her father, with her dowry tripled. Corvino is the third of the "carrion-birds" circling Volpone.

### 17.1.6 Bonario

The son of Corbaccio. Bonario is an upright youth who remains loyal to his father even when his father perjures against him in court. His honesty and his desire to do right make him one of the more righteous characters in the play. He heroically rescues Celia from Volpone and represents bravery and honor, qualities which the other characters seem to lack. However, perhaps because he believes so strongly in good, he is too trusting of others and is exploited as a result.

### 17.1.7 Celia

Celia is the wife of Corvino, who is extremely beautiful, enough to drive both Volpone and Corvino to distraction. She is absolutely committed to her husband, even though he treats her horribly, and

Notes

has a faith in God and sense of honor, qualities which seem to be lacking in both Corvino and Volpone. These qualities guide her toward self-control. She's also known by her self-denial. This makes her a perfect foil for Volpone, since her self-control exposes his complete lack thereof, no more clearly than in Volpone's attempted seduction of her. The turning point of the play comes when she says "no" to Volpone's advances, thus denying him the lecherous pleasures he describes in his seduction speech. Celia seems willing to do anything to avoid dishonor, too ready to sacrifice herself to be believable. Her willingness to subject herself to Corvino's harsh dictates and abuse may make her seem more weak than strong. But she has an inner moral sense, indicated by the fact that she refuses Volpone against her husband's express wishes. Jonson again chooses a name with symbolic meaning for Celia: it derives from the Latin word *caelum*, meaning "sky" or "heaven."

### 17.1.8 Nano

A dwarf as his name in Italian indicates ("nano" means "dwarf") is one of the three servants whom Volpone keeps for entertainment. He keeps Volpone amused with songs and jokes written by Mosca. Their performances mostly involve slapstick humor, which serves as a commentary on Elizabethan theater. They also run errands for Volpone, for instance spreading the false news that he has died.

### 17.1.9 Castrone

An Eunuch, one of the three servants whom Volpone keeps for entertainment, who are also, allegedly, his illegitimate children. The only notable fact about Castrone is that his name means eunuch ("castrone" means "eunuch" in Italian). There is not much else to say about Castrone, as he has no speaking lines whatsoever.

### 17.1.10 Androgyno

"Androgyno" means "hermaphrodite" in Italian, and as in the case of Nano and Castrone, the name rings true. He is the third of Volpone's servant players. Androgyno apparently possesses the soul of Pythagoras, according to Nano, which has been in gradual decline ever since it left the ancient mathematician's body.

### 17.1.11 Sir Politic Would Be

Sir Politic an English knight who resides in Venice is a traveler from England who prides himself on knowing the ways of a gentleman. He is a know-it-all who in fact knows not very much at all. He puts tremendous stake in his reputation and in many ways acts as a foil for Volpone. Unlike Volpone's, however, Sir Politic's get-rich-quick schemes are not exploitative. Sir Politic represents the danger of moral corruption that English travelers face when they go abroad to the continent, especially to Italy. He occupies the central role in the subplot, which centers on the relationship between himself and Peregrine, another English traveler much less gullible than the good knight. Sir Politic is also imaginative, coming up with ideas for money making schemes such as using onions to detect the plague, as well as the idea of making a detailed note of every single action he performs in his diary, including his urinations.

### 17.1.12 Peregrine

A young gentleman English traveller who meets and befriends Sir Politic Would-be upon arriving in Venice. Like Sir Politic, Peregrine is a visitor from England who thus serves to connect the storyline to Jonson's home country. He is amused by the gullible Would-be, but is also easily offended, as

demonstrated by his adverse reaction to Lady Politic Would-be's suggestive comments. Peregrine also embodies the theme of Vengeance and symbolizes the Knowledge aspect of the Knowledge/Ignorance theme.

### 17.1.13 Avocatori

They are four magistrates or the judges from the Scrutineo. For representatives of order and justice, the Avocatori are dangerously gullible. They switch sides in the court case based not on concrete evidence but on their impressions of the defendants and the prosecutors. What's worse, the Avocatori are just as shallow and self-absorbed as the other characters in the play. Even when lives are at stake, the Avocatori are concerned only with marrying their daughters off to Mosca.

### 17.1.14 Lady Would Be

Lady Would-be, the Knight's wife, is the garrulous, vain, and jealous companion of Sir Politic. Though she is herself independent, Lady Would-be be grudges Sir Politic his freedom, becoming irrationally exasperated when Mosca tells her that Sir Politic is with another woman. We know also that Lady Would-be's greed rivals that of Corvino, Corbaccio, and Voltore since Mosca tells us that she offered him her body in order to be Volpone's heir.

The Lady Politic Would-be is portrayed as a would-be courtesan. She was the impetus for the Would-bes move to Venice, because of her desire to learn the ways of the sophisticated Venetians. She is very well read and very inclined to let anyone know this, or anything else about her. She is extremely vain.

### 17.1.15 Notario

The Notario are the Register or officer of the Scrutineo. The Notario acts something like a bailiff would in a modern court of law. He summons witnesses, swears them in, and, in general, runs errands for the Avocatori.

### 17.1.16 Commendatori

The Commendatori are the court officers who detain Corbaccio, Corvino, Voltore, Mosca, and Volpone once their punishments have been handed down. Also, Volpone disguises himself as a commendatore in order to taunt Corbaccio, Corvino, and Voltore in the streets.

### 17.1.17 Marcatori

They are three merchants and are Peregrine's accomplices in the practical joke he plays on Sir Politic. They pretend to be representatives of the Venetian state who have come to apprehend Sir Politic.

## Self Assessment

Multiple Choice Questions:

1. Volpone, the play's title character is its protagonist. His name means
  - (a) the Fox in Italian
  - (b) crow in Italian
  - (c) parasite in Italian
  - (d) greedy in Italian.

Notes

2. Jonson uses all the characters as an instrument of
  - (a) idisguise
  - (b) satire
  - (c) greed
  - (d) lust.
3. A dwarf as his name in Italian indicates
  - (a) Mosca
  - (b) Volpone
  - (c) Nano
  - (d) Androgyno.

Fill in the blanks:

4. Castrone is an ..... , one of the three servants whom Volpone keeps for entertainment.
5. Peregrine is a young gentleman English ..... who meets and befriends Sir Politic Would- be.
6. The Notario are the ..... or officer of the Scrutineo.
7. Mosca is Volpone's ..... , a combination of his slave, his servant and his lackey.

State whether the following statements are true or false:

8. Voltore is one of the three legacy hunters or carrion-birds continually circle around Volpone.
9. The Commendatori are the court officers who detain Corbaccio, Corvino, Voltore, Mosca.
10. Celia seems willing to do anything to avoid dishonor, too ready to sacrifice herself to be believable.

## **17.2 Plot Construction**

Volpone takes place in seventeenth-century Venice, over the course of one day. The play opens at the house of Volpone, a Venetian nobleman. He and his "parasite" Mosca – part slave, part servant, and part lackey – enter the shrine where Volpone keeps his gold. Volpone has amassed his fortune through dishonest means: he is a con artist and use his money extravagantly.

Just at the beginning, we see Volpone's latest con in action. For the last three years, he has been attracting the interest of three legacy hunters: Voltore, a lawyer; Corbaccio, an old gentleman; and Corvino, a merchant – individuals interested in inheriting his estate after he dies. Volpone is known to be rich, and he is also known to be childless, have no natural heirs. Furthermore, he is believed to very ill, so each of the legacy hunters lavishes gifts on him, in the hope that Volpone, out of gratitude, will make him his heir. The legacy hunters do not know that Volpone is actually in excellent health and merely faking illness for the purpose of collecting all those impressive "get-well" gifts.

### **17.2.1 Plot in First Act**

In the first act, each legacy hunter arrives to present a gift to Volpone, except for Corbaccio, who offers only a worthless (and probably poisoned) vial of medicine. But Corbaccio agrees to return later in the day to make Volpone his heir, so that Volpone will return the favor. This act is a boon to Volpone, since Corbaccio, in all likelihood, will die long before Volpone does. After each hunter

leaves, Volpone and Mosca laugh at each's gullibility. After Corvino's departure Lady Politic Would-be, the wife of an English knight living in Venice, arrives at the house but is told to come back three hours later. And Volpone decides that he will try to get a close look at Corvino's wife, Celia, who Mosca describes as one of the most beautiful women in all of Italy. She is kept under lock and key by her husband, who has ten guards on her at all times, but Volpone vows to use disguise to get around these barriers.

### 17.2.2 Plot in Second Act

The second act portrays a time just a short while later that day, and we meet Sir Politic Would-be, Lady Politic's husband, who is conversing with Peregrine, a young English traveler who has just landed in Venice. Sir Politic takes a liking to the young boy and vows to teach him a thing or two about Venice and Venetians; Peregrine, too, enjoys the company of Sir Politic, but only because he is hilariously gullible and vain. The two are walking in the public square in front of Corvino's house and are interrupted by the arrival of "Scoto Mantua," actually Volpone in disguise as an Italian mountebank, or medicine-show man. Scoto engages in a long and colorful speech, hawking his new "oil", which is touted as a cure-all for disease and suffering. At the end of the speech, he asks the crows to toss him their handkerchiefs, and Celia complies. Corvino arrives, just as she does this, and flies into a jealous rage, scattering the crows in the square. Volpone goes home and complains to Mosca that he is sick with lust for Celia, and Mosca vows to deliver her to Volpone. Meanwhile, Corvino berates his wife for tossing her handkerchief, since he interprets it as a sign of her unfaithfulness, and he threatens to murder her and her family as a result. He decrees that, as punishment, she will now no longer be allowed to go to Church, she cannot stand near windows (as she did when watching Volpone), and, most bizarrely, she must do everything backwards from now on—she must even walk and speak backwards. Mosca then arrives, implying to Corvino that if he lets Celia sleep with Volpone (as a "restorative" for Volpone's failing health), then Volpone will choose him as his heir. Suddenly, Corvino's jealousy disappears, and he consents to the offer.

### 17.2.3 Plot in Third Act

The third act begins with a soliloquy from Mosca, indicating that he is growing increasingly conscious of his power and his independence from Volpone. Mosca then runs into Bonario, Corbaccio's son, and informs the young man of his father's plans to disinherit him. He has Bonario come back to Volpone's house with him, in order to watch Corbaccio sign the documents (hoping that Bonario might kill Corbaccio then and there out of rage, thus allowing Volpone to gain his inheritance early). Meanwhile Lady Politic again arrives at Volpone's residence, indicating that it is now mid-morning, approaching noon. This time, Volpone lets her in, but he soon regrets it, for he is exasperated by her talkativeness. Mosca rescues Volpone by telling the Lady that Sir Politic has been seen in a gondola with a courtesan (a high-class prostitute). Volpone then prepares for his seduction of Celia, while Mosca hides Bonario in a corner of the bedroom, in anticipation of Corbaccio's arrival. But Celia and Corvino arrive first—Celia complains bitterly about being forced to be unfaithful, while Corvino tells her to be quiet and do her job. When Celia and Volpone are alone together, Volpone greatly surprises Celia by leaping out of bed. Celia had expected an old, infirm man, but what she gets instead is a lothario who attempts to seduce her with a passionate speech. Always the good Christian, Celia refuses Volpone's advances, at which point Volpone says that he will rape her. But Bonario, who has been witnessing the scene from his hiding place the entire time, rescues Celia. Bonario wounds Mosca on his way out. Corbaccio finally arrives, too late, as does Voltore. Mosca plots, with Voltore's assistance, how to get Volpone out of this mess.

### 17.2.4 Plot in Fourth Act

A short while later, in the early afternoon, Peregrine and Sir Politic are still talking. Sir Politic gives the young traveler some advice on living in Venice and describes several schemes he has under



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consideration for making a great deal of money. They are soon interrupted by Lady Politic, who is convinced that Peregrine is the prostitute Mosca told her about – admittedly, in disguise. But Mosca arrives and tells Lady Politic that she is mistaken; the courtesan he referred to is now in front of the Senate (in other words, Celia). Lady Politic believes him and ends by giving Peregrine a seductive goodbye with a coy suggestion that they see each other again. Peregrine is incensed at her behavior and vows revenge on Sir Politic because of it. The scene switches to the Scrutineo, the Venetian Senate building, where Celia and Bonario have informed the judges of Venice about Volpone’s deceit, Volpone’s attempt to rape Celia, Corbaccio’s disinheritance of his son, and Corvino’s decision to prostitute his wife. But the defendants make a very good case for themselves, led by their lawyer, Voltore. Voltore portrays Bonario and Celia as lovers, Corvino as an innocent jilted husband, and Corbaccio as a wounded father nearly killed by his evil son. The judge are swayed when Lady Politic comes in and (set-up perfectly by Mosca) identifies Celia as the seducer of her husband Sir Politic. Further, they are convinced when Volpone enters the courtroom, again acting ill. The judges order that Celia and Bonario be arrested and separated.



*Notes* At the Scrutineo, Voltore, Corbaccio, Corvino, and Mosca get their story straight. Though they side with Bonario and Celia at the opening of the case, the Avocatori eventually align themselves with Voltore, who argues that Bonario committed adultery with Celia and attempted to kill his father. Lady Would-be testifies that Celia seduced her husband. Bonario and Celia have no witnesses of their own, so they lose the case.

### 17.2.5 Plot in Fifth Act

In the final act, Volpone returns home tired and worried that he is actually growing ill, for he is now feeling some of the symptoms he has been faking. To dispel his fears, he decides to engage in one final prank on the legacy hunters. He spreads a rumor that he has died and then tells Mosca to pretend that he has been made his master’s heir. The plan goes off perfectly, and all three legacy hunters are fooled. Volpone then disguises himself as a Venetian guard, so that he can gloat in each legacy hunter’s face over their humiliation, without being recognized. But Mosca lets the audience know that Volpone is dead in the eyes of the world and that Mosca will not let him “return to the world of the living” unless Volpone pays up, giving Mosca a share of his wealth.

Meanwhile, Peregrine is in disguise himself, playing his own prank on Sir Politic. Peregrine presents himself as a merchant to the knight and informs Politic that word has gotten out of his plan to sell Venice to the Turks. Politic, who once mentioned the idea in jest, is terrified. When three merchants who are in collusion with Peregrine knock on the door, Politic jumps into a tortoise-shell wine case to save himself. Peregrine informs the merchants when they enter that he is looking at a valuable tortoise. The merchants decide to jump on the tortoise and demand that it crawls along the floor. They remark loudly upon its leg-garters and fine hand-gloves, before turning it over to reveal Sir Politic. Peregrine and the merchants go off, laughing at their prank, and Sir Politic moans about how much he agrees with his wife’s desire to leave Venice and go back to England.

Meanwhile, Volpone gloats in front of each legacy hunter, deriding them for having lost Volpone’s inheritance to a parasite such as Mosca, and he successfully avoids recognition. But his plan backfires nonetheless. Voltore, driven to such a state of distraction by Volpone’s teasing, decides to recant his testimony in front of the Senate, implicating both himself but more importantly Mosca as a criminal. Corvino accuses him of being a sore loser, upset that Mosca has inherited Volpone’s estate upon his death, and the news of this death surprises the Senators greatly. Volpone nearly recovers from his blunder by telling Voltore, in the middle of the Senate proceeding, that “Volpone” is still alive. Mosca pretends to faint and claims to the Senate that he does not know where he is, how he got

there, and that he must have been possessed by a demon during the last few minutes when he was speaking to them. He also informs the Senators that Volpone is not dead, contradicting Corvino. All seems good for Volpone until Mosca returns, and, instead of confirming Voltore's claim that Volpone is alive, Mosca denies it. Mosca, after all, has a will, written by Volpone and in his signature, stating that he is Volpone's heir. Now that Volpone is believed to be dead, Mosca legally owns Volpone's property, and Mosca tells Volpone that he is not going to give it back by telling the truth. Realizing that he has been betrayed, Volpone decides that rather than let Mosca inherit his wealth, he will turn them both in. Volpone takes off his disguise and finally reveals the truth about the events of the past day. Volpone ends up being sent to prison, while Mosca is consigned to a slave galley. Voltore is disbarred, Corbaccio is stripped of his property (which is given to his son Bonario), and Corvino is publicly humiliated, forced to wear donkey's ears while being rowed around the canals of Venice. At the end, there is a small note from the playwright to the audience, simply asking them to applaud if they enjoyed the play they just saw.

Notes

## Self Assessment

Multiple Choice Questions:

11. In the first act, each legacy hunter arrives to present a gift to
  - (a) Volpone
  - (b) Mosca
  - (c) Lady Politico
  - (d) Celia.
12. The third act begins with a soliloquy from
  - (a) Celia
  - (b) Mosca
  - (c) Volpone
  - (d) lady Politico.
13. In the final act, Volpone returns home tired and worried that he is actually
  - (a) cheated
  - (b) revealed
  - (c) growing ill
  - (d) revealed and punished.

Fill in the Blanks:

14. Volpone gloats in front of each legacy .....
15. At the end, there is a small note from the playwright to the .....
16. Volpone is dead in the eyes of the ..... and that Mosca will not let him return to the world of the living.
17. Volpone takes place in ..... Venice, over the course of one day.

State whether the following statements are true or false:

18. The judges order that Celia and Bonario be arrested and separated.
19. The third act begins with a soliloquy from Celia.
20. Just at the beginning, we see Volpone's latest con in action.

### 17.3 Summary

- Volpone, the play's title character is its protagonist. His name means 'The Fox' in Italian.
- Jonson used him as an instrument of satire of money-obsessed society, and he seems to share in Jonson's satiric interpretation of the events. He is lustful, raffish, and greedy for pleasure.
- Volpone is a creature of passion, continually looking to find and attain new forms of pleasure, whatever the consequences may be. He is also energetic and has an unusual gift for rhetoric.
- Mosca is Volpone's parasite, a combination of his slave, his servant and his lackey. He is the person who continually executes Volpone's ideas and the one who comes up with the necessary lie whenever needed.
- Mosca appears to be exactly what he is described as: a clinging, servile parasite, who only exists for Volpone and through Volpone.
- The plot construction in the play closely parallels Horace's satire on legacy hunters but dramatizes it with characters whose flattened, comic/satiric personas represent various types of human personality as they are distorted by greed, lust, and sheer perversity.
- Jonson alerts us to the symbolic order of the action's meaning by means of the names he assigns the primary characters: Volpone (fox--deceiver), Mosca (fly--parasite), Voltore (vulture--scavenger/lawyer), Corbaccio (crow--wealthy but still greedy man), and Corvino (raven, another scavenger--the wealthy merchant who can't get enough).
- These characters all seek to be named Volpone's heir in order to gain his treasure, but they offer him gifts to achieve that honor, and he strings them along, more in love with his delight in deceiving them than even his beloved gold.
- A love plot is attached to this legacy-hunt, involving Corvino's wife (Celia) and Corbaccio's son (Bonario), but one of the play's puzzles is that they are such relatively lifeless, though moral, characters. Below these levels, three more sets of characters populate the stage.
- In a nutshell, the plot is that the conspirators try to deceive Volpone, but he's really deceiving them, until his agent (Mosca) deceives him (and them) and they bring him to the court, which they all try to deceive, until they are unmasked.
- Jonson uses all the characters as an instrument of satire of one kind or the other in his play. He compared all the characters to some animals as using their character.
- Volpone, the Fox, a venetian magnifico is the main character of the play. Delighting in foxlike trickery, Volpone scorns the easy gain of cheating widows and orphans and the hard gain of labor.
- Volpone chooses for his victims Venice's leading crooked advocate, its most greedy and dishonest merchant, and its most hardened miser. The joy of the chase of gold and jewels belonging to others is keener to him than the possession.
- Jonson uses the characters to make them instrument of his satire of greed and dishonesty.

### 17.4 Keywords

- Magnifico* : A derogatory term for an inferior playwright who have disgraced the theatrical profession with their immoral work.
- Soliloquy* : It is a device often used in drama whereby a character relates his or her thoughts and feeling to him/herself and to the audience without addressing any of other characters and is delivered often when they are alone or think they are alone.



Notes

**Answers: Self Assessment**

- |             |                         |              |
|-------------|-------------------------|--------------|
| 1. (a)      | 2. (b)                  | 3. (c)       |
| 4. Eunuch   | 5. traveller            | 6. Register  |
| 7. parasite | 8. True                 | 9. True      |
| 10. True    | 11. (a)                 | 12. (b)      |
| 13. (c)     | 14. hunter              | 15. audience |
| 16. world   | 17. seventeenth-century | 18. True     |
| 19. False   | 20. True                |              |

**17.6 Further Readings**



*Books*

Jonson, Ben; J. D. Rea (ed.). 1919. *Volpone*. New Haven: Yale University Press.

Jonson, Ben; Michael Jamieson (ed.). 1966. *Volpone and Other Plays*. Penguin Books, New York.

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*Online links*

<http://www.scribd.com/doc/15730904/Character-Analysis-Volpone>

<http://www.sparknotes.com/drama/volpone/summary.html>

<http://www.enotes.com/volpone/characters>

<http://www.scribd.com/doc/15730904/Character-Analysis-Volpone>

## Unit 18: Richard Sheridan: The School for Scandal— Introduction to the Author and the Text

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### Objectives

After studying this unit, you will be able to:

- Illustrate the biographical sketch of Richard Sheridan;
- Elaborate the literary works of Richard Sheridan;
- Explain that *The School for Scandal* is a real comedy;
- Illustrate that the problem of anti-semitism runs throughout the play;
- Describe that the play appears artificial in the character's speech, dress and motivations;
- Discuss the nature of the drama.

### Introduction

Sheridan, Richard Brinsley Butler, dramatist and politician, born in Dublin; educated at Harrow; committed to literature, in 1773, settled down in London with his gifted young wife, Elizabeth Linley, and scored his first success with the "*Rivals*" in 1775. Following it up with the over rated "*Duenna*," aided by his father-in-law became owner of Drury Lane Theatre, which somewhat lagged till the production of his most brilliant satirical comedy, "*The School for Scandal*" (1777) and the "*Critic*" set flowing the tide of prosperity. Turning his attention next to politics he entered Parliament

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under Fox's patronage in 1780, and two years later became Under-Secretary for Foreign Affairs in Rockingham's Ministry. His great speech (1787) impeaching Hastings for his treatment of the Begums placed him in the front rank of orators. But although he sat for 32 years in Parliament, only once again reached the same height of eloquence in a speech (1794) supporting the French Revolution, and generally failed to establish himself as a reliable statesman. Meanwhile his theatrical venture had ended disastrously, and other financial troubles thickening around him, he died in poverty, but was accorded a burial in Westminster Abbey. This unit elaborates the details of his life since birth till his death.

*The School for Scandal* opened at the Drury Lane Theatre in London, England, in May of 1777. It was an enormous success. Reviews heralded the play as a "real comedy" that would supplant the sentimental dramas that had filled the stage in the previous years. While wildly popular in the eighteenth century, the play has not been as successful with contemporary audiences. One significant problem is the anti-semitism that runs throughout the play. Other factor that makes it unsuccessful with contemporary audiences is that the play appears artificial in the characters' speech, dress, and motivations.

This unit also elaborates the text, drawbacks and problems of the play in detail. More emphasis is given on the detailed analysis of the text.

## **18.1 Richard Sheridan – Introduction**

Sheridan, Richard Brinsley (1751–1816), the son of an Irish actor, Sheridan achieved fame as both dramatist and politician. Sheridan's major works were all produced before entering Parliament in 1780: *The Rivals* (1775), *The Duenna* (1775), *The School for Scandal* (1777), and *The Critic* (1779). Sheridan was a superb political orator, achieving fame during the campaign against Warren Hastings; one memorable speech, on 8 February 1787, lasted an astonishing 5 hours and 40 minutes. For all his ability, Sheridan never attained cabinet rank, and served only as under-secretary at the Foreign Office (1782), Treasury secretary (1783), and treasurer of the navy (1806-7). Mutual antagonism between Sheridan and Burke contributed to the disintegration of the Whig Party in the 1790s, with Sheridan flaunting his admiration for the French principles Burke despised. He died in straitened circumstances, caused partly by losses incurred from his involvement with Drury Lane theatre.

### **18.1.1 Biography**

#### **Birth**

Richard Brinsley Sheridan, (baptized November 4, 1751, Dublin, Ireland – died July 7, 1816, London, England) was born in Dublin, Ireland, on October 30, 1751. His father, Thomas, was an actor and theater manager; his mother, Frances, was the author of novels and plays. The family moved to London in 1758, and Sheridan was educated at Harrow (1762–1768). His first publication, a joint effort with a school friend, N.B. Halhead, was a metrical translation of Aristaenatus (1771). With this friend Sheridan also wrote his first play, a farce called *Jupiter*, which was rejected by both David Garrick and Samuel Foote.

#### **Childhood and the Family**

Sheridan was the third son of Thomas and Frances Sheridan. His grandfather Thomas Sheridan had been a companion and confidant of Jonathan Swift; his father was the author of a pronouncing dictionary and the advocate of a scheme of public education that gave a prominent place to elocution; and his mother gained some fame as a playwright.

The family moved to London, and Sheridan never returned to Ireland. He was educated (1762–68) at Harrow, and in 1770 he moved with his family to Bath. There Sheridan fell in love with Elizabeth

Ann Linley (1754–92), whose fine soprano voice delighted audiences at the concerts and festivals conducted by her father, Thomas. In order to avoid the unpleasant attentions of a Welsh squire, Thomas Mathews of Llandaff, she decided to take refuge in a French nunnery. Sheridan accompanied her to Lille in March 1772 but returned to fight two duels that same year with Mathews. Meanwhile, Elizabeth had returned home with her father, and Sheridan was ordered by his father to Waltham Abbey, Essex, to pursue his studies. He was entered at the Middle Temple in April 1773 but after a week broke with his father, gave up a legal career, and married Elizabeth at Marylebone Church, London.

## Marriage

In 1770 the Sheridans moved to Bath. There Richard, his brother Charles, and his friend Halhead were among the many who fell in love with a beautiful young singer, Elizabeth Linley. The most importunate of her admirers was a Capt. or Maj. Mathews. Terrified by his persecutions, she decided to seek shelter in a French convent, and Sheridan offered to protect her on her journey. In March 1772 they fled to France and were secretly married there. Leaving her at the convent, Sheridan returned to England and fought two duels with Mathews. Elizabeth was brought back to Bath by her father, and Sheridan was sent to London by his, but on April 13, 1773, they were allowed to marry openly and set-up house in London on a lavish scale with little money and no immediate prospects of any—other than his wife’s dowry. The young couple entered the fashionable world and apparently held up their end in entertaining.



*Notes* Though at first the young couple had nothing to live on except a small dowry, in January 1775 Sheridan solved the problem of their support with the production of *The Rivals* at Covent Garden. A comedy of manners that blended brilliant wit with 18th-century sensibility, it became and remained a great success. One measure of its popularity was that it gave a new word to the English language, “malapropism,” based on Mrs. Malaprop’s mistakes.

The year 1775 was a productive one for Sheridan. In May his farce, *St. Patrick’s Day*, or the *Scheming Lieutenant*, was performed, and in November Sheridan’s comic opera, *The Duenna*, was produced with the help of his wife’s father at Covent Garden. A son, Thomas, was also born to the Sheridans in 1775.

## Political Career

Sheridan had become Member of Parliament for Stafford in September 1780 and was undersecretary for foreign affairs (1782) and secretary to the treasury (1783). Later he was treasurer of the navy (1806–07) and a privy councillor. The rest of his 32 years in Parliament were spent as a member of the minority Whig party in opposition to the governing Tories.

Sheridan’s critical acumen and command over language had full scope in his oratory and were seen at their best in his speeches as manager of the unsuccessful impeachment of Warren Hastings, Governor General of India. Sheridan was recognized as one of the most persuasive orators of his time but never achieved greater political influence in Parliament because he was thought to be an unreliable intriguer. Some support for this view is to be found in his behaviour during the regency crisis (1788–89) following the temporary insanity of George III, when Sheridan acted as adviser to the unpopular, self-indulgent prince of Wales (George IV). He encouraged the prince to think that there would be a great majority for his being regent with all the royal powers simply because he was heir apparent. In the country at large this was seen as a move by Charles James Fox and his



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friends to take over the government and drive out Prime Minister William Pitt. Sheridan was also distrusted because of his part in the Whigs' internecine squabbles (1791–93) with Edmund Burke over the latter's implacable hostility to the French Revolution. He was one of the few members courageous enough openly to defend those who suffered for their support of the French Revolution. Indeed, Sheridan liked taking an individual stand, and, although he supported Fox in urging that the French had a right to choose their own way of government, he broke with Fox once the French became warlike and threatened the security of England. He also came out on the side of the Tory administration when he condemned mutineers who had rebelled against living conditions in the British Navy (1797). Much to Fox's disgust, Sheridan, although a Whig, gave some support to the Tory administration of Prime Minister Henry Addington, later 1st Viscount Sidmouth (1801–04).

In November 1806, Sheridan succeeded Charles James Fox as member for Westminster—although not, as he had hoped, as leader of the Whigs—but he lost the seat in May 1807. The Prince of Wales then returned him as member for the “pocket borough” of Ilchester, but his dependence on the prince's favour rankled with Sheridan, for they differed in their attitude on Catholic emancipation. Sheridan, who was determined to support emancipation, stood for election as member from Stafford again in 1812, but he could not pay those who had previously supported him as much as they expected and, as a result, was defeated.

### Last Years and Death

Sheridan's financial difficulties were largely brought about by his own extravagance and procrastination, as well as by the destruction of Drury Lane Theatre by fire in February 1809. With the loss of his parliamentary seat and his income from the theatre, he became a prey to his many creditors. His last years were beset by these and other worries—his circulatory complaints and the cancer that afflicted his second wife, Esther Jane Ogle. She was the daughter of the dean of Winchester and was married to Sheridan in April 1795, three years after Elizabeth's death. Pestered by bailiffs to the end, Sheridan made a strong impression on the poet Lord Byron, who wrote a Monody on the Death of the Right Honourable R.B. Sheridan (1816), to be spoken at the rebuilt Drury Lane Theatre.

## 18.1.2 Work Experience

### Playwright

When Sheridan settled in London, he began writing for the stage. Less than two years later of his marriage, in 1775, his first play, *The Rivals*, was produced at London's Covent Garden Theatre. It was a failure on its first night. Sheridan cast a more capable actor for the role of the comic Irishman for its second performance, and it was a smash which immediately established the young playwright's reputation and the favour of fashionable London. It has gone on to become a standard of English literature.

Shortly after the success of *The Rivals*, Sheridan and his father-in-law Thomas Linley the elder, a successful composer, produced the opera, *The Duenna*. This piece was accorded such a warm reception that it played for seventy-five performances.

In 1776, Sheridan, his father-in-law, and one other partner, bought a half interest in the Drury Lane theatre and, two years later, bought out the other half. Sheridan was the manager of the theatre for many years, and later became sole owner with no managerial role.

His most famous play *The School for Scandal* (Drury Lane, 8 May 1777) is considered one of the greatest comedies of manners in English. It was followed by *The Critic* (1779), an updating of the satirical Restoration play *The Rehearsal*, which received a memorable revival (performed with Oedipus in a single evening) starring Laurence Olivier as Mr. Puff, opening at the New Theatre on 18 October 1945 as part of an Old Vic Theatre Company season.

Having quickly made his name and fortune, in 1776 Sheridan bought David Garrick's share in the Drury Lane patent and in 1778 the remaining share. His later plays were all produced there. In 1778 Sheridan wrote *The Camp* which commented on the ongoing threat of a French invasion of Britain. The same year Sheridan's brother-in-law Thomas Linley, a young composer who worked with him at Drury Lane Theatre, died in a boating accident. Sheridan had a rivalry with his fellow playwright Richard Cumberland and included a parody of Cumberland in his play *The Critic*.



*Did u know?* On 24 February 1809 the Drury Lane Theatre burned down. On being encountered drinking a glass of wine in the street while watching the fire, Sheridan was famously reported to have said: "A man may surely be allowed to take a glass of wine by his own fireside."

### Playwright Works

- *The Rivals* (first acted 17 January 1775)
- *St Patrick's Day* (first acted 2 May 1775)
- *The Duenna* (first acted 21 November 1775)
- *A Trip to Scarborough* (first acted 24 February 1777)
- *The School for Scandal* (first acted 8 May 1777)
- *The Camp* (first acted 15 October 1778)
- *The Critic* (first acted 30 October 1779)
- *The Glorious First of June* (first acted 2 July 1794)

### Theatre

After his marriage Sheridan turned to the theatre for a livelihood. His comedy *The Rivals* opened at Covent Garden Theatre, London, in January 1775. It ran an hour longer than was usual, and, because of the offensive nature and poor acting of the character of Sir Lucius O'Trigger, it was hardly a success. Drastically revised and with a new actor as Sir Lucius, its second performance 11 days later won immediate applause. The situations and characters were not entirely new, but Sheridan gave them freshness by his rich wit, and the whole play reveals Sheridan's remarkable sense of theatrical effect. The play is characteristic of Sheridan's work in its genial mockery of the affectation displayed by some of the characters. Even the malapropisms that slow down the play give a proper sense of caricature to the character of Mrs. Malaprop.

Some of the play's success was due to the acting of Lawrence Clinch as Sir Lucius. Sheridan showed his gratitude by writing the amusing little farce *St. Patrick's Day; or, The Scheming Lieutenant* for the benefit performance given for Clinch in May 1775. Another example of his ability to weave an interesting plot from well-worn materials is seen in *The Duenna*, produced the following November. The characters are generally undeveloped, but the intrigue of the plot and charming lyrics and the music by his father-in-law, Thomas Linley, and his son gave this ballad opera great popularity. Its 75 performances exceeded the 62, a record for that time, credited to John Gay's *The Beggar's Opera* (1728), and it is still revived.

Thus, in less than a year Sheridan had brought himself to the forefront of contemporary dramatists. David Garrick, looking for someone to succeed him as manager and proprietor of Drury Lane Theatre,

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saw in Sheridan a young man with energy, shrewdness, and a real sense of theatre. A successful physician, James Ford, agreed with Garrick's estimate and increased his investment in the playhouse. In 1776, Sheridan and Linley became partners with Ford in a half-share of Drury Lane Theatre. Two years later they bought the other half from Willoughby Lacy, Garrick's partner.

In fact, Sheridan's interest in his theatre soon began to seem rather fitful. Nevertheless, he was responsible for the renewed appreciation of Restoration comedy that followed the revival of the plays of William Congreve at Drury Lane. In February 1777 he brought out his version of Sir John Vanbrugh's *The Relapse* (1696) as *A Trip to Scarborough*, again showing his talent for revision. He gave the rambling plot a neater shape and removed much indelicacy from the dialogue, but the result was disappointing, probably because of the loss of much of the earlier play's gusto.

What Sheridan learned from the Restoration dramatists can be seen in *The School for Scandal*, produced at Drury Lane in May 1777. That play earned him the title of "the modern Congreve." Although resembling Congreve in that its satirical wit is so brilliant and so general that it does not always distinguish one character from another, *The School for Scandal* does contain two subtle portraits in Joseph Surface and Lady Teazle. There were several Restoration models for the portrayal of a country girl amazed and delighted by the sexual freedom of high society. Sheridan softened his Lady Teazle, however, to suit the more refined taste of his day. The part combined innocence and sophistication and was incomparably acted. The other parts were written with equal care to suit the members of the company, and the whole work was a triumph of intelligence and imaginative calculation. With its spirited ridicule of affectation and pretentiousness, it is often considered the greatest comedy of manners in English.

Sheridan's flair for stage effect, exquisitely demonstrated in scenes in *The School for Scandal*, was again demonstrated in his delightful satire on stage conventions, *The Critic*, which since its first performance in October 1779 has been thought much funnier than its model, *The Rehearsal* (1671), by George Villiers, the 2nd Duke of Buckingham. Sheridan himself considered the first act to be his finest piece of writing. Although Puff is little more than a type, Sir Fretful Plagiary is not only a caricature of the dramatist Richard Cumberland but also an epitome of the vanity of authors in every age.

### Self Assessment

Multiple Choice Questions:

- Which of the following play earned Richard Sheridan the title of "the modern Congreve"?
  - The Critic*
  - The Rehearsal*
  - The School for Scandal*
  - The Relapse*.
- The School for Scandal* was first of all performed at
  - Drury Lane Theatre
  - Covent Garden Theatre
  - Westminster Theatre
  - Richmond Theatre.
- The Sheridan's first play "*The Rivals*" was produced at
  - Drury Lane Theatre
  - Covent Garden Theatre
  - Richmond Theatre
  - Westminster Theatre.
- Which of the following play was not a work of Richard Sheridan?
  - The School for Scandal*
  - St Patrick's Day*
  - The Glorious First of June*
  - The Rehearsal*.
- A Trip to Scarborough*, a play by Richard Sheridan was acted on
  - 24 February 1777
  - 17 January 1775
  - 8 May 1777
  - 15 October 1778.

Fill in the blanks:

Notes

6. After his marriage Sheridan turned to the theatre for a .....
7. Sheridan was recognized as one of the most persuasive ..... of his time.
8. Sheridan's financial difficulties were largely brought about by his own ..... and procrastination.
9. Sheridan was one of the orator who manages the unsuccessful impeachment of .....
10. What Sheridan learned from the Restoration dramatists can be seen in his play .....

State whether the following statements are true or false:

11. *The School for Scandal* does contain two subtle portraits in Joseph Surface and Lady Teazle.
12. *The Critic*, which since its first performance in October 1779 has been thought much funnier than its model, *The Rehearsal* (1671), by George Villiers.
13. After his marriage Sheridan turned to the theatre as he was very fond of play writing.
14. Richard Sheridan was intimately associated with Covent Garden Theatre.
15. Sheridan had become member of Parliament for Stafford in September 1780.

## 18.2 The School for Scandal – Introduction to the Text

The *School for Scandal* opened at the Drury Lane Theatre in London, England, in May of 1777. It was an enormous success. Reviews heralded the play as a “real comedy” that would supplant the sentimental dramas that had filled the stage in the previous years. While wildly popular in the eighteenth century, the play has not been as successful with contemporary audiences. The play suffered with anti-semitism and appears artificial in the characters’ speech, dress, and motivations.



Task

Elucidate that *The School for Scandal* is a sentimental drama.

### 18.2.1 A Real Comedy

A comedy is usually a light, rather amusing, play that deals with contemporary life and manners. Such a drama often has a satirical slant, but ends happily. Among the many sub-genre under comedy, we find the comedy of manners, which originated in France with Molière’s “*Les Precieuses Ridicules*” (1658). Molière saw this comic form as a way to correct social absurdities.

In England, the Comedy of Manners is represented by the plays of William Wycherley, George Etherege, William Congreve, and George Farquhar. This form was later classed “Old Comedy” but is now known as Restoration Comedy because it coincided with Charles II’s return to England. The main goal of these comedies of manners in the period of Restoration is to mock society, or in other ways lift up society for scrutiny, which could cause negative or positive results. In the end, if the playwright has been successful, the audience will leave the theater feeling good (or at least feeling something), having laughed at themselves and society.

The definition of comedy and the background of the Restoration Comedy helps explain the themes that run throughout these plays. One of the major themes is marriage and the game of love. However, if marriage is a mirror of society, the couples in the plays show something very dark and sinister about order. Many critiques of marriage that we see in the play are devastating, but the game of love is not much more hopeful. Although the endings are happy and the man invariably gets the woman (or at least that is the implication), we see marriages without love and love affairs that are rebellious breaks with tradition.

## Notes

However, as we look at the Restoration comedies that range from William Wycherley's play, "*The Country Wife*" (1675) to William Congreve's play, "*The Way of the World*" (1700), and further than that if we look at Aphra Behn's comedy of intrigue, "*The Rover*" (1702) and Richard Brinsley Sheridan's sentimental comedy, "*The School for Scandal*" (1777), which fall near the same period, we see how dramatically society has progressed. A dramatic change, in moral attitudes about marriage and love, has taken place.



*Notes* As we look at Richard Brinsley Sheridan's play "*The School for Scandal*" (1777), we see a decided swing away from most of the other plays discussed here. Much of this change is due to a falling away of the Restoration values. We have moved outside of the Restoration Period and into a very different kind of restoration, where a different morality comes into play.

Though, the *School for Scandal* witness a restoration of order, but here, the bad are punished and the good are rewarded, a trend which we saw just a hint of in a couple of the play, but not to this extent. Here, appearance doesn't fool anyone for long, especially when the long lost guardian, Sir Oliver, comes home to discover all. In the Cain and Abel scenario, Cain, a part played by Joseph Surface, is exposed as being an ungrateful hypocrite and Abel, a part played by Charles Surface, is really not that bad after all (all blame seems to be laid on his brother). Also, the virtuous young maiden—Maria—was right in her love at the end, though she obeyed her father's orders to refuse any further contact with Charles until he was vindicated.

Another interesting switch, here, is that Sheridan does not create affairs between the characters of his play. Lady Teazle was willing to cuckold Sir Peter with Joseph, until she hears the truth of his love and, as in every melodramatic drama, she realizes the error of her ways, repents and, when she is discovered, tells all and is forgiven. Of course, in a comedy, all must be restored to a happy ending, so, in the end Charles says, "Why as to reforming, Sir Peter, I'll make no promises, and that I take to be a proof that I intend to set about it. But here shall be my monitor—my gentle guide.— Ah! can I leave the virtuous path those eyes illuminate?" At the end, though, we are left with a all-too-perfect feeling. There is nothing really realistic about the play, but his intent seems to have been much more moral than any of the earlier comedies.

Though these Restoration plays broach similar themes, the methods and the outcomes are completely different, which graphically shows how much more conservative England had become by the late eighteenth century. Also as time moved forward, the emphasis changed from one on cuckoldry and the aristocracy to one on marriage as a contractual agreement and eventually progressed to the sentimental comedy, which seemed more interested in uplifting morals than anything else. As we look at the change, we see that, in many ways, the first plays were the most fun, even though they were the most obscene (according to a more traditional view). All along, though, we see a restoration of social order, in various forms. By looking at the changes, we can gain an insight into historical events.

### 18.2.2 Problem of Anti-semitism

One significant problem is the anti-semitism that runs throughout the play. Post-World War II audiences are understandably sensitive to the disparaging remarks made about moneylenders, who were often Jewish. That the character of Moses is portrayed as honest and concerned is depicted in the play as an aberration. When Sir Oliver is learning how to disguise himself as a moneylender, he is told that he must ask 100% interest because it is expected that he must behave as an "unconscionable dog."

### 18.2.3 Artificial in the Character's Speech, Dress and Motivation

Notes

But anti-semitism is not the only problem with modern staging. By current standards, the play appears artificial in the characters' speech, dress, and motivations. A comedy about manners is not as interesting to twentieth century audiences because manners and the rules of society are far more permissive and wide-ranging than they were in the 1700s. When *School for Scandal* was revived on the London stage in 1990, the director stated that another problem with staging was the lack of any one strong character to drive the play.

Perceptions regarding the nature of drama also play into contemporary perceptions of Sheridan's work. Peter Woods, who directed the 1990 revival, stated in an interview in *Sheridan Studies* that "today's audience supposes itself to be watching ART. Sheridan's audience was looking at the funnies." Woods believed that audiences taking themselves and historical plays too seriously are what prevent Sheridan's comedy from being as successful today. Nevertheless, *School for Scandal* remains a standard for comedies of manner and is considered Sheridan's defining work.

#### Self Assessment

Multiple Choice Questions:

16. On the opening of *The School for Scandal*, the reviews heralded that it was
  - (a) real comedy
  - (b) a comedy of manners
  - (c) a comedy of Restoration period
  - (d) a comedy of scandal.
17. The comedy *School for Scandal* shows that
  - (a) the society progressed with the restoration period
  - (b) a dramatic change, in moral attitudes about marriage and love, has taken place
  - (c) there is a deviation of social order in the society
  - (d) it fully fall in line with the restoration values.
18. The most interesting switch that Sheridan depicted in *The School for Scandal* is
  - (a) how conservative England had become by late 18<sup>th</sup> century
  - (b) portraying love marriage
  - (c) not to create affairs between the characters of his play
  - (d) that bad are rewarded and the good are punished.

Fill in the blanks:

19. The *School for Scandal* shows that a dramatic change, in moral attitudes about ..... and ....., has taken place.
20. Post-World War II audiences are understandably sensitive to the ..... made about moneylenders.
21. Sheridan's play "*The School for Scandal*" (1777) witnesses a decided swing away from most of the contemporary plays. Much of this change is due to a falling away of the ..... .
22. By current standards, the play appears artificial in the ..... dress, and motivations.
23. The main goal of the Restoration comedies of manners is to mock ..... .

State whether the following statements are true or false:

24. Anti-Semitism is the significant problem that runs throughout the play.
25. Though there is a restoration of social order in these comedies, we can gain an insight into historical events.

Notes

26. By current standards, the *School for Scandal* appears realistic in the characters' speech, dress, and motivations.
27. By the current standard, there is no strong character in the *School for Scandal* to drive the play.
28. The comedy of manners in England were classed as Comedy of love.

### 18.3 Summary

- Richard Brinsley Sheridan, (baptized November 4, 1751, Dublin, Ireland – died July 7, 1816, London, England) was born in Dublin, Ireland, on October 30, 1751.
- Sheridan's father, Thomas, was an actor and theater manager; his mother, Frances, was the author of novels and plays. The family moved to London in 1758, and Sheridan was educated at Harrow (1762-1768).
- Sheridan fell in love with Elizabeth Ann Linley (1754–92), whose fine soprano voice delighted audiences at the concerts and festivals conducted by her father, Thomas. In order to avoid the unpleasant attentions of a Welsh squire, Thomas Mathews of Llandaff, she decided to take refuge in a French nunnery. Sheridan accompanied her to Lille in March 1772 but returned to fight two duels that same year with Mathews.
- On April 13, 1773, Sheridan married Elizabeth Linley and set-up house in London on a lavish scale with little money and no immediate prospects of any – other than his wife's dowry. The young couple entered the fashionable world and apparently held up their end in entertaining.
- The year 1775 was a productive one for Sheridan. In May his farce, *St. Patrick's Day*, or the *Scheming Lieutenant*, was performed, and in November Sheridan's comic opera, *The Duenna*, was produced with the help of his wife's father at Covent Garden. A son, Thomas, was also born to the Sheridans in 1775.
- Sheridan had become Member of Parliament for Stafford in September 1780 and was undersecretary for foreign affairs (1782) and secretary to the treasury (1783). Later he was treasurer of the navy (1806–07) and a privy councillor. The rest of his 32 years in Parliament were spent as a member of the minority Whig party in opposition to the governing Tories.
- Sheridan's financial difficulties were largely brought about by his own extravagance and procrastination, as well as by the destruction of Drury Lane Theatre by fire in February 1809. With the loss of his parliamentary seat and his income from the theatre, he became a prey to his many creditors. His last years were beset by these and other worries—his circulatory complaints and the cancer that afflicted his second wife, Esther Jane Ogle.
- When Sheridan settled in London, he began writing for the stage. Less than two years later of his marriage, in 1775, his first play, *The Rivals*, was produced at London's Covent Garden Theatre. It was a failure on its first night. Sheridan cast a more capable actor for the role of the comic Irishman for its second performance, and it was a smash which immediately established the young playwright's reputation and the favour of fashionable London. It has gone on to become a standard of English literature.
- Sheridan's famous play *The School for Scandal* (Drury Lane, 8 May 1777) is considered one of the greatest comedies of manners in English. It was followed by *The Critic* (1779), an updating of the satirical Restoration play *The Rehearsal*, which received a memorable revival starring Laurence Olivier as Mr. Puff, opening at the New Theatre on 18 October 1945 as part of an Old Vic Theatre Company season.

- The *School for Scandal* opened at the Drury Lane Theatre in London, England, in May of 1777. It was an enormous success. Reviews heralded the play as a “real comedy” that would supplant the sentimental dramas that had filled the stage in the previous years. While wildly popular in the eighteenth century, the play has not been as successful with contemporary audiences. The play suffered with anti-semitism and appears artificial in the characters’ speech, dress, and motivations.

Notes

## 18.4 Keywords

- Playwright** : A person who writes plays. Or The texts of plays that can be read, as distinct from being seen and heard in performance.
- Novelist** : A person who writes novels.
- Social pariah** : Any person or animal that is generally despised or avoided. Even if one’s marriage was a sham, divorce made a woman a social pariah in the Victorian era.
- Post Chaise** : A closed four-wheeled horse-drawn coach used as a rapid means for transporting mail and passengers in the 18th and 19th centuries.
- Anti-semitism** : A person who persecutes or discriminates against Jews.
- Real comedy** : The phrase ‘all the world’s a stage’ is most famously remembered as a line in a soliloquy written by Shakespeare for the character Jacques in his comedy. Later the term frequently used for many a plays such as *The School for Scandal*.
- Comedy of manners:** Comedy of manners is a comedy representing the contemporary behaviour of fashionable society.

## 18.5 Review Questions

1. Give a brief sketch of birth and early childhood of Richard Sheridan.
2. Illustrate that Richard Sheridan was a playwright.
3. Richard Sheridan was a superb political orator, illustrate this statement in context of Hasting’s impeachment.
4. Explain that the *School for Scandal* was a real comedy.
5. Explain the following in context of *School for Scandal*:
  - (a) Anti-semitism
  - (b) Real comedy
  - (c) Lack of strong character

## Answers: Self Assessment

- |                                   |                         |                 |                        |           |
|-----------------------------------|-------------------------|-----------------|------------------------|-----------|
| 1. (c)                            | 2. (a)                  | 3. (b)          | 4. (d)                 | 5. (a)    |
| 6. livelihood                     | 7. orators              | 8. extravagance | 9. Warren Hastings     |           |
| 10. <i>The School for Scandal</i> |                         | 11. True        | 12. True               | 13. False |
| 14. False                         | 15. False               | 16. (a)         | 17. (b)                | 18. (c)   |
| 19. marriage, love                | 20. disparaging remarks |                 | 21. Restoration values |           |
| 22. characters’ speech            |                         | 23. society     | 24. True               | 25. True  |
| 26. False                         | 27. True                | 28. False       |                        |           |



Notes

**18.6 Further Readings**



Books

Fintan O'Toole. 1998. *A Traitor's Kiss: The Life of Richard Brinsley Sheridan, 1751–1816*. Farrar, Straus and Giroux.

George Gabriel Sigmond. 2010. *The Dramatic Works of Richard Brinsley Sheridan: With a Short Account of His Life*. Nabu Press.

Richard Brinsley Sheridan, Eric S. Rump (ed.). 1989. *The School for Scandal and other Plays*. Penguin Classics, UK.



Online links

<http://www.answers.com/topic/richard-brinsley-sheridan#ixzz1hkHxt17V>

<http://englishliterature99.wordpress.com/2009/01/09/>

<http://www.grin.com/en/e-book/114766/>

## **Unit 19: The School for Scandal: Detailed Analysis** **of the Text Act I to Act V**

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## Objectives

After studying this unit, you will be able to:

- Describe the summary of scenes in all the acts;
- Illustrate the analysis of scenes;
- Analyse in detail the text of Act I to Act V.

## Introduction

*The School for Scandal* opened at the Drury Lane Theatre in London, England, in May of 1777. It was an enormous success. Reviews heralded the play as a “real comedy” that would supplant the sentimental dramas that had filled the stage in the previous years. The subject of the play will be scandal and the fact that there is no need to bring more of it into the world. Unfortunately, everyone is always eager to hear bad reports and gossip about people, making it altogether impossible to root out entirely. Sheridan tried to attack it with his pen so that it might be brought under control. Sheridan admonishes the audience to avoid either creating scandals or listening to tales of the scandals of others. He also reminds the audience that appearances are not all they seem and they should look beneath the surface to find the true worth of men and women instead of listening to the reports that other people give. For, Sheridan says, appearances can be deceiving, and they often mislead people.

This unit elaborates the text of the play in detail from Act I to Act V. More emphasis is given on the detailed analysis of the text in all the scenes.

## 19.1 Act I

### 19.1.1 Scene I

Lady Sneerwell, a wealthy young widow, and her hireling Snake discuss her various scandal-spreading plots. Snake asks why she is so involved in the affairs of Sir Peter Teazle, his ward Maria, and Charles and Joseph Surface, two young men under Sir Peter’s informal guardianship, and why she has not yielded to the attentions of Joseph, who is highly respectable. Lady Sneerwell confides that Joseph wants Maria, who is an heiress, and that she wants Charles. Thus she and Joseph are plotting to alienate Maria from Charles by putting out rumors of an affair between Charles and Sir Peter’s new young wife, Lady Teazle. Joseph arrives to confer with Lady Sneerwell. Maria herself then enters, fleeing the attentions of Sir Benjamin Backbite and his uncle Crabtree. Mrs. Candour enters and ironically talks about how “tale-bearers are as bad as the tale-makers.” Soon after that, Sir Benjamin and Crabtree also enter, bringing a good deal of gossip with them. One item is the imminent return of the Surface brothers’ rich uncle Sir Oliver from the East Indies, where he has been for sixteen years; another is Charles’ dire financial situation.

Lady Sneerwell and Snake are discussing a recent success they had in assassinating someone’s character, and they are very pleased with their efforts. In their plot, Snake sent a few lines of a letter to a Miss Clackitt. Someone soon had his life destroyed. However, Snake notes that Miss Clackitt, while certainly very capable of destroying reputations, does not have the subtle abilities of Lady Sneerwell when it comes to bringing people down.



*Notes* With Lady Sneerwell's talents out in the open, she admits that she is proud of her abilities and she wants to use them on her next project. In this project, she is going to use Snake to break off the affections between Charles Surface, a drunk who is throwing away his money, and Maria, the ward of Sir Peter Teazle. Once the couple is split up, Sneerwell wants to move Maria's affections toward Charles's brother Joseph.

### 19.1.2 Scene II

Sir Peter complains of Lady Teazle's spendthrift ways. Rowley, the former steward of the Surfaces' late father, arrives, and Sir Peter gives him an earful on the subject. He also complains that Maria has refused Joseph, whom he calls "a model for the young men of the age," and seems attached to Charles, whom he denounces as a profligate. Rowley defends Charles, and then announces that Sir Oliver has just arrived from the East Indies.

Sir Peter Teazle, an old man, married a young woman six months ago and his life has been terrible since then. The once shy, innocent, poor young woman Sir Peter wedded has become a greedy shrew who argues with everything he says and demands everything that he has to give and more. Thus, rather than getting a beautiful, retiring woman, he is tied to an absolute beast.

Rowley arrives to speak with Sir Peter and Sir Peter tells him about his troubles with Lady Teazle. In fact, Sir Peter believes that much of her shrewish behavior is due to her spending so much time with Lady Sneerwell and her gang of character assassins. To add to his worries, Maria is still intent on marrying Charles, despite the fact that he has tried to get his ward to move her affections elsewhere.

## 19.2 Act II

### 19.2.1 Scene I

Sir Peter argues with his wife, Lady Teazle, refusing to be "ruined by [her] extravagance." He reminds her of her recent and far humbler country origins. Lady Teazle excuses herself by appealing to "the fashion," and departs to visit Lady Sneerwell. Despite their quarrel, Sir Peter still finds himself charmed by his wife even when she is arguing with him.

Sir Peter and Lady Teazle are having another argument, this time about the fact that Lady Teazle wants some expensive new fashions and Sir Peter is not willing to spend the money. Sir Peter tries to convince her that she should be happy just to get a few things from him, since she grew up poor. She, however, insists that she deserves everything any other woman has and more. After all, Sir Peter showed her how rich people live and it is his fault that she wants to live the best life possible.



*Notes* Sir Peter and Lady Teazle argue until Lady Teazle finally tells Sir Peter that she has to be at her appointment at Lady Sneerwell's and, to make matters worse, Sir Peter promised to join her. So, once Sir Peter offers one final complaint about his wife to the audience, the two of them go to Lady Sneerwell's.

### 19.2.2 Scene II

At Lady Sneerwell's, the scandal-mongers have great fun at the expense of friends not present. Lady Teazle and Maria arrive; Lady Teazle joins in, but Maria is disgusted. So is Sir Peter, when he

**Notes**

arrives, and rather breaks up the party with his comments. He departs, the others retire to the next room, and Joseph seizes the opportunity to court Maria, who rejects him again. Lady Teazle returns and dismisses Maria, and it is revealed that she is seriously flirting with Joseph – who doesn't want her, but cannot afford to alienate her.

Lady Teazle and Maria enter the gathering at Sneerwell's. While everyone else sits down to a good session of talking behind others' backs, Joseph Surface and Maria move off to speak to each other privately. When Sir Peter enters, he is shocked at the gossip and slander he hears. He dislikes everyone there, especially their incessant gossiping, and he cannot abide the fact that they enjoy tearing other people down. Thus, as he listens to the party assassinate the looks, qualities, and characters of people they claim to be friends with, he grows more disgusted by the minute. After listening to them, he finally walks out with the words, "I leave my character behind me."

With Sir Peter gone, the rest of the party eavesdrops on Maria and Joseph Surface. Of course, Joseph is pretending to be a kind friend who does not enjoy the others' gossiping.

### **19.2.3 Scene III**

Sir Oliver calls on his old friend Sir Peter. He is amused by Sir Peter's marriage to a young wife. Their talk turns to the Surface brothers. Sir Peter praises Joseph's high morals but Sir Oliver suspects that he may be a hypocrite.

Rowley and Sir Oliver enter as Sir Oliver is laughing at the news that Sir Peter has married a shrew. However, Rowley admonishes him not to bring up the subject with Sir Peter, as it is a very sore point with him. In addition, it will prevent Sir Peter from learning that Rowley has told Sir Oliver all about his marital strife.

Eventually, the subject turns to Sir Peter's estrangement from Charles Surface. It seems that Sir Peter thinks Lady Teazle has her eyes on Charles. Rowley sees she is after Joseph, but Sir Peter does not believe him. Of course, Sir Oliver knows the sort of gossiping and character destruction that goes on in some circles and he wants nothing to do with it. Thus, rather than listen to the stories told by others, Sir Oliver wishes to judge Charles for himself.

## **19.3 Act III**

### **19.3.1 Scene I**

Sir Oliver describes his plan to visit each of the brothers incognito in order to test their characters. He will disguise himself as their needy relative Mr Stanley, and ask each for his help. Rowley also brings in the "friendly Jew" Moses, a moneylender who has tried to help Charles, to explain Charles' position. Moses mentions that he is to introduce Charles to yet another moneylender ("Mr Premium") that very evening. Sir Oliver decides that with Moses' assistance, he will pose as Premium when visiting Charles (still intending to visit Joseph as Stanley).

Sir Peter is left alone and when Maria enters, he tries to urge Joseph on her as a worthier match than Charles, whom she favors. When she is not persuaded, he threatens her with "the authority of a guardian." She goes, and Lady Teazle enters asking her husband for two hundred pounds. Sir Peter and Lady Teazle argue again, and conclude that they should separate.

Sir Oliver, Sir Peter, and Rowley hatch a plan that will allow Sir Oliver to judge Charles and Joseph Surface on their relative merits. A man by the name of Stanley has appealed to both men for financial help. However, neither man has ever seen either Stanley or Sir Oliver, so Sir Oliver can pretend to be Stanley in order to see how his nephews will treat him. The plan changes slightly when Mr Moses, a money-lender, informs Sir Oliver that Charles has asked to borrow money from a Mr Premium. Sir Oliver can actually pretend to be a money-lender when he meets with Charles.

After Sir Oliver and Moses leave to check on Oliver's two nephews, Maria arrives to speak with Sir Peter about her engagement to Charles. Of course, Sir Peter tries to convince Maria to turn her attentions from Charles to Joseph, but Maria will not pay any heed to it.

### 19.3.2 Scene II

Mr Moses and Sir Oliver arrive at Charles Surface's house, but Charles's butler, Trip, forces them to wait. Then, while the men are waiting, Trip asks Moses for a loan. Since Trip's credit is no good, Mr Moses refuses to give it to him without collateral, so Trip offers to provide Mr Moses with some clothes from Charles's own wardrobe.

When Sir Oliver and Mr Moses arrive, they find the butler very well dressed, but he asks Mr. Moses for a loan. This shows that Charles is, indeed, quite a spendthrift, since he gives his own butler plenty of money, yet the butler still wants more. This latter point shows that the butler is learning bad habits from his master and Charles must be quite a disaster if even his butler is begging for a loan and will give Mr. Moses stolen goods in order to secure it.



*Task* When Mr Moses and Sir Oliver arrive at Charles Surface's house, Charles's butler Trip forces them to wait, elucidate.

### 19.3.3 Scene III

Charles Surface, Careless, and several other men are sitting at the table drinking as Mr. Moses and Sir Oliver enter. Of course, everyone there is drunk and obnoxious and they sing bawdy songs while they empty and refill their glasses. However, when Trip announces Sir Oliver (as Mr. Premium) and Mr. Moses, everyone there sits down to listen to the two money-lenders.

Charles and his raucous guests drink heavily and sing merry songs, as they prepare for a night of gambling. Charles raises a toast to Maria. Moses and "Premium" enter, and Sir Oliver is dismayed at the scene. Charles doesn't recognize his long-lost uncle. Charles frankly asks "Premium" for credit, noting that Sir Oliver (whom he believes is in India) will soon leave him a fortune. "Premium" discounts this possibility, noting that Sir Oliver may live many years, or disinherit his nephew. He asks if Charles has any valuables of his own to sell for immediate cash. Charles admits that he has sold the family silver and his late father's library, and offers to sell the family portrait collection.



*Did u know?* Though Charles is impudent, he is very honest and straightforward in his business dealings. However, Sir Oliver wants to know first if Charles has anything he can sell in order to raise capital on his own. Unfortunately, Charles has already sold off almost all of the family heirlooms and all he has left are the family portraits. Then, thinking about this, he offers to auction them to Sir Oliver. Of course, Sir Oliver is shocked, but he also realizes that he has an opportunity to save the family.

### Self Assessment

Multiple Choice Questions:

- In scene I of Act I Lady Sneerwell, a wealthy young widow, and her hireling Snake discuss her various
  - scandal-spreading plots
  - issues of guardianship
  - fidelity in various plots
  - affairs of Maria and Charles.

Notes

2. When Sir Oliver and Mr. Moses arrive, they find the Charles butler
  - (a) dishevel
  - (b) very well dressed
  - (c) waiting for them
  - (d) begging for some money.
3. On meeting with Sir Peter, Sir Oliver amused by
  - (a) Sir Peter's love affaire
  - (b) Sir Peter's fidelity
  - (c) Sir Peter's marriage to a young wife
  - (d) Sir Peter's wealth.
4. Sir Peter and Lady Teazle concluded to separate because of
  - (a) authority of guardianship
  - (b) inheritance of wealth
  - (c) Sir Peter's absurdity towards Lady Teazle
  - (d) Sir Peter's fidelity with Maria
5. Charles and his raucous guests drink heavily and sing merry songs, as they prepare
  - (a) for a night of gambling
  - (b) for a night of music
  - (c) for a night of fortune
  - (d) for a night of lovemaking.

Fill in the blanks:

6. Lady Sneerwell and Joseph are plotting to alienate Maria from ..... by putting out rumors of an affair between Charles and Lady Teazle.
7. Sir Peter Teazle rather than getting a beautiful, retiring woman, he is tied to an ..... .
8. Sir Peter argues with his wife, Lady Teazle, refusing to be ruined by her ..... .
9. When Mr Moses and Sir Oliver arrive at Charles Surface's house they find the butler very well dressed, but he asks Mr. Moses for a ..... .
10. Though Charles is impudent, he is very honest and straightforward in his ..... .

State whether the following statements are true or false:

11. Sir Oliver, Sir Peter, and Rowley hatch a plan that will allow Sir Oliver to judge Charles and Joseph Surface for their moral character.
12. Lady Sneerwell confides that Joseph wants Maria, who is an heiress, and that she wants Charles.
13. Lady Sneerwell is very talented in hatching plots, she is proud of her abilities and she wants to use them on her next project.
14. Sir Peter Teazle, an old man, married a young woman six months ago and his life has been running smoothly since then.
15. Sir Peter tries to convince Maria to turn her attentions from Charles to Joseph, but Maria will not pay any heed to it.

## **19.4 Act IV**

### **19.4.1 Scene I**

Charles sells all but one of the family portraits to "Premium", using the rolled-up family tree as an auction-hammer. However, he refuses to sell the last portrait, which is of Sir Oliver, out of respect

for his benefactor; Charles will not sell it even when "Premium" offers as much for it as for all the rest. Moved, Sir Oliver inwardly forgives Charles. Sir Oliver and Moses leave, and Charles sends a hundred pounds of the proceeds for the relief of "Mr. Stanley," despite Rowley's objection.

Charles, Careless, Mr Moses, and Sir Oliver enter the portrait room in Charles's house and Charles holds a sham auction to sell off the paintings that it holds. After listing off the names and accomplishments of a few of his illustrious forebears and selling the paintings to Sir Oliver, Charles finally decides to just sell off the rest of the lot for 300 pounds. However, when Sir Oliver points to his own portrait and asks how much it will cost, Charles refuses to sell it. In fact, even when Sir Oliver offers to purchase his own painting for over 400 pounds, Charles still refuses to sell it, since Sir Oliver was very good to him. Of course, Sir Oliver is very pleased to hear that his nephew holds him in such high regard, so he is finally convinced that Charles does have some worth after all.

### 19.4.2 Scene II

Sir Oliver, reflecting on Charles's character with Moses, is met by Rowley, who has brought him the hundred pounds sent to "Stanley." Declaring "I'll pay his debts, and his benevolence too," Sir Oliver plans to go meet his other nephew in the person of Stanley.

Mr Moses and Sir Oliver are in Charles's parlor and Mr Moses points out that all the stories about Charles are true. However, Sir Oliver is impressed that Charles refused to sell the portrait of Sir Oliver, which Sir Oliver appreciates greatly. Then, when Rowley enters and reports that Charles has dispatched him to give money to Stanley, Sir Oliver is even more impressed with his nephew, since the 100 pounds could be used to placate the creditors who are waiting to speak with Charles. Thus, Sir Oliver says that he will pay off Charles's debts himself.

Though Sir Oliver has seen Charles at his worst, he has also seen that Charles is still noble beneath the surface. Thus, Sir Oliver is shown to be a good judge of character, since he can look past Charles's roguishness and find the good in him.

### 19.4.3 Scene III

Joseph, anxiously awaiting a visit from Lady Teazle, is told by a servant that she has just left "her chair at the milliner's next door" and so has the servant draw a screen across the window (his reason: "my opposite neighbour is a maiden lady of so curious a temper"). On her entrance, Joseph forswears any interest in Maria, and flirts in earnest with Lady Teazle, perversely suggesting that she should make a "faux pas" for the benefit of her reputation. The servant returns to announce Sir Peter, and Lady Teazle hides in panic behind the screen. Sir Peter enters and tells Joseph that he suspects an affair between Charles and Lady Teazle (due to the rumors spread by Joseph and Lady Sneerwell). Joseph hypocritically professes confidence in Charles' and Lady Teazle's honor. Sir Peter confides his intention to give his wife a generous separate maintenance during his life and the bulk of his fortune on his demise. He also urges Joseph to pursue his suit with Maria (much to Joseph's annoyance, as Lady Teazle is listening behind the screen).

Charles's arrival is announced. Sir Peter decides to hide, and have Joseph sound Charles out about his relationship with Lady Teazle. He starts behind the screen, but sees the corner of Lady Teazle's petticoat there already. Joseph "confesses" that he is not as virtuous as he seems: "a little French milliner, a silly rogue that plagues me" is hiding there to preserve her own reputation. Sir Peter then hides in the closet.

Charles now enters and Joseph questions him about Lady Teazle. Charles disclaims any designs on her, noting that Joseph and the lady seem to be intimate. To stop Charles, Joseph whispers to him that Sir Peter is hiding in the closet, and Charles hauls him forth. Sir Peter tells Charles he now regrets his suspicions about him. Charles passes off his comments about Joseph and Lady Teazle as a joke.



**Notes**

When Lady Sneerwell is announced, Joseph rushes out to stop her from coming up. Meanwhile, Sir Peter tells Charles about the "French milliner." Charles insists on having a look at her and flings down the screen as Joseph returns, discovering Lady Teazle. Charles, very amused, leaves the other three dumbstruck individuals. Joseph concocts a phony explanation for Sir Peter of why he and Lady Teazle are together. But she refuses to endorse it and admits that she came to pursue an affair with Joseph; however, having learned of Sir Peter's generosity, she has repented. She denounces Joseph and exits, and the enraged Sir Peter follows as Joseph continues trying to pretend innocence.

## **19.5 Act V**

### **19.5.1 Scene I**

Sir Oliver (as Mr Stanley) now visits Joseph. Joseph, like Charles, does not recognize his long-lost uncle. He greets "Stanley" with effusive professions of goodwill, but refuses to give "Stanley" any financial assistance, saying he has no money to give. "Stanley" suggests that Sir Oliver would help him if he was here, and that Joseph might pass on some of what Sir Oliver has given him. But Joseph tells "Stanley" that Sir Oliver is in fact very stingy, and has given him nothing except trinkets such as tea, shawls, and "Indian crackers." Furthermore, Joseph has lent a great deal to his brother, so that he has nothing left for "Stanley." Sir Oliver is enraged, as he knows both statements are flat lies - he sent Joseph 12,000 pounds from India. He stifles his anger, and departs amid further effusions. Rowley arrives with a letter for Joseph announcing that Sir Oliver has arrived in town.

### **19.5.2 Scene II**

At Sir Peter's house, Lady Sneerwell, Mrs. Candour, Sir Benjamin, and Crabtree exchange confused rumors about the Teazle affair. Sir Benjamin says Sir Peter was wounded in a swordfight with Joseph Surface, while Crabtree insists it was a pistol duel with Charles. When Sir Oliver enters, they take him for a doctor and demand news of the wounded man. At that moment Sir Peter arrives to prove the report wrong, and orders the scandalmongers out of his house. Sir Oliver says he has met both of his nephews and agrees with Sir Peter's (former) estimate of Joseph's high character, but then acknowledges with laughter that he knows the story of what happened at Joseph's with the closet and screen. When he leaves, Rowley tells Sir Peter that Lady Teazle is in tears in the next room, and Sir Peter goes to reconcile with her.

Candour, Sneerwell, Backbite, and Crabtree are all at Sir Peter's house, discussing the events that so recently transpired at Joseph Surface's house. However, their information is all wrong, since some of them think that it was actually Charles and not Joseph who was caught with Lady Teazle. Furthermore, they seem to think that Sir Peter was wounded in a duel with either swords or pistols and is at death's door. Thus, when Sir Oliver enters, everyone seems to think that he is a physician who is there to treat Sir Peter's wounds.

### **19.5.3 Scene III**

Lady Sneerwell complains to Joseph that Sir Peter, now that he knows the truth about Joseph, will allow Charles to marry Maria. They plot to use Snake as a witness to a supposed relationship between Charles and Lady Sneerwell, and she withdraws.

Sir Oliver arrives. Joseph takes him for "Stanley" and orders him out. Charles arrives and recognizes "Premium". Despite the identity confusion, both brothers want the man out before Sir Oliver comes. As Charles and Joseph try to eject their incognito uncle, Sir Peter and Lady Teazle arrive with Maria, ending Sir Oliver's pretense. Sir Oliver, Sir Peter, and Lady Teazle together condemn Joseph, but Sir Oliver forgives Charles because of his refusal to sell Sir Oliver's picture and his generous aid

to his uncle "Stanley." Maria, however, declines to give Charles her hand, citing his supposed involvement with Lady Sneerwell. Joseph now reveals Lady Sneerwell. Charles is baffled, and Rowley then summons Snake. Snake, however, has been bribed to turn against Sneerwell, so her lie is exposed. After Lady Teazle tells her that she (Lady Teazle) is withdrawing from the School for Scandal, Lady Sneerwell leaves in a rage, and Joseph follows, supposedly to keep her from further malicious attacks. Charles and Maria are reconciled. Charles makes no promises about reforming, but indicates that Maria's influence will keep him on a "virtuous path." The concluding line assures the audience that "even Scandal dies, if you approve."

### Self Assessment

Multiple Choice Questions:

16. When Joseph anxiously awaiting a visit from Lady Teazle, the servant draw a screen across the window because
  - (a) of tempered opposite neighbour
  - (b) Lady Teazle just left
  - (c) Lady Teazle does not want to meet Joseph
  - (d) he wants to hide the presence of Lady Teazle.
17. When Sir Oliver points to his own portrait and asks how much it will cost, Charles
  - (a) asks for over 400 pounds for it
  - (b) refuses to sell it
  - (c) refuses to sell it, since Sir Oliver was bad to him
  - (d) refuses to sell it because it is priceless.
18. When Sir Oliver enters Sir Peter's house, Candour, Sneerwell, Backbite, and Crabtree are all at Sir Peter's house, and think
  - (a) that Joseph was wounded in a duel and is at death's door
  - (b) that Sir Peter caught was caught with Lady Teazle
  - (c) that Sir Oliver is a physician who has come to treat Sir Peter's wounds
  - (d) that their information is all correct.

Fill in the blanks:

19. Charles sells all but one of the family portraits to .....
20. Sir Oliver, reflecting on Charles's character with Moses, is met by Rowley, who has brought him the ..... sent to Stanley.
21. Mr Moses and Sir Oliver are in Charles's parlor and Mr Moses points out that all the stories about Charles are .....
22. Lady Sneerwell complains to Joseph that Sir Peter, now that he knows the truth about Joseph, will allow Charles to marry .....
23. Maria declines to give Charles her hand, citing his supposed involvement with .....

State whether the following statements are true or false:

24. When Sir Oliver offers to purchase his own painting for over 400 pounds, Charles agrees to sell it.
25. Sir Oliver (as Mr Stanley) visits Joseph. Joseph, like Charles, does not recognize his long-lost uncle.
26. Sir Oliver is shown to be a good judge of character, since he can look past Charles's roguishness and find the good in him.

Notes

27. In Scene II Act V Sir Oliver arrives, Joseph takes him for “Stanley” and orders him in.
28. At Sir Peter’s house, Lady Sneerwell, Mrs Candour, Sir Benjamin, and Crabtree exchange confused rumors about the Teazle affair.

## 19.6 Summary

- *The School for Scandal* opened at the Drury Lane Theatre in London, England, in May of 1777. The subject of the play was scandal and the fact that there is no need to bring more of it into the world.
- Lady Sneerwell, a wealthy young widow, and her hireling Snake discuss her various scandal-spreading plots.
- Sir Peter complains of Lady Teazle’s spendthrift ways. Rowley, the former steward of the Surfaces’ late father, arrives, and Sir Peter gives him an earful on the subject.
- Sir Peter and Lady Teazle are having another argument, this time about the fact that Lady Teazle wants some expensive new fashions and Sir Peter is not willing to spend the money. The couple argue until Lady Teazle finally tells Sir Peter that she has to be at her appointment at Lady Sneerwell’s and, to make matters worse, Sir Peter promised to join her.
- At Lady Sneerwell’s, the scandal-mongers have great fun at the expense of friends not present. Sir Peter departs. With Sir Peter gone, the rest of the party eavesdrops on Maria and Joseph Surface. Of course, Joseph is pretending to be a kind friend who does not enjoy the others’ gossiping.
- Sir Oliver calls on his old friend Sir Peter and amused by his marriage to a young wife. Rowley and Sir Oliver enter as Sir Oliver is laughing at the news that Sir Peter has married a shrew and Rowley admonishes him not to bring up the subject with Sir Peter, as it is a very sore point with him. Sir Oliver knows the sort of gossiping and character destruction that goes on in some circles and he wants nothing to do with it.
- Sir Oliver describes his plan to visit each of the brothers incognito in order to test their characters. And he with Sir Peter, and Rowley hatch a plan that will allow Sir Oliver to judge Charles and Joseph Surface on their relative merits. After Sir Oliver and Moses leave to check on Oliver’s two nephews, Maria arrives to speak with Sir Peter about her engagement to Charles.
- Mr Moses and Sir Oliver arrive at Charles Surface’s house, but Charles’s butler, Trip, forces them to wait. They find the butler very well dressed, but he asks Mr Moses for a loan. This shows that Charles is, indeed, quite a spendthrift, since he gives his own butler plenty of money.
- Charles sells all but one of the family portraits to “Premium”, using the rolled-up family tree as an auction-hammer. Charles refuses to sell Sir Oliver’s painting since he was very good to him. Sir Oliver is very pleased to hear that his nephew holds him in such high regard, so he is finally convinced that Charles does have some worth after all.
- Though Sir Oliver has seen Charles at his worst, he has also seen that Charles is still noble beneath the surface. Thus, Sir Oliver is shown to be a good judge of character, since he can look past Charles’s roguishness and find the good in him.
- Lady Teazle is withdrawing from the School for Scandal, Lady Sneerwell leaves in a rage, and Joseph follows, supposedly to keep her from further malicious attacks. Charles and Maria are reconciled. Charles makes no promises about reforming, but indicates that Maria’s influence will keep him on a “virtuous path.” The concluding line assures the audience that even Scandal dies, if you approve.

**19.7 Keywords**

- Spendthrift** : A person who spends possessions or money extravagantly or wastefully.
- Profligate** : Utterly and shamelessly immoral or dissipated; thoroughly dissolute. Or recklessly prodigal or extravagant.
- Extravagance** : Excessive or unnecessary expenditure or outlay of money or unrestrained or fantastic excess, as of actions or opinions. For instance sports car is an inexcusable extravagance.
- Hypocrite** : A person who pretends to have virtues, moral or religious beliefs, principles, etc., that he or she does not actually possess, especially a person whose actions belie stated beliefs. Or A person who feigns some desirable or publicly approved attitude, especially one whose private life, opinions, or statements belie his or her public statements.
- Disinherit** : To deprive (an heir or next of kin) of inheritance or right to inherit.
- Faux pas** : A slip or blunder in etiquette, manners, or conduct; an embarrassing social blunder or indiscretion.
- Scandal monger** : A person who spreads scandal or gossip.
- Guardianship** : The position and responsibilities of a guardian, especially toward a ward.
- Flirting** : A playful romantic or sexual overture by one person to another subtly indicating an interest in a deeper relationship with the other person.
- Alienate** : To make unfriendly, hostile, or indifferent especially where attachment formerly existed.

**19.8 Review Questions**

- Why is Lady Sneerwell involved in the affairs of Sir Peter Teazle, his ward Maria, and Charles and Joseph Surface?
- Illustrate and analyse the events of scene II of Act 1.
- What proves that Lady Teazle was extravagant?
- Why is Charles baffled in scene III of Act V?
- Give a brief sketch of the following characters in School for Scandal:
  - Lady Sneerwell
  - Sir Peter
  - Charles

**Answers: Self Assessment**

- (a)
- (b)
- (c)
- (d)
- (a)
- Charles
- absolute beast
- extravagance
- loan
- Business dealings
- False
- True
- True
- False
- True
- (a)
- (b)
- (c)
- Premium
- Hundred pounds
- True
- Maria
- Lady Sneerwell
- False
- True
- True
- True
- False
- True

Notes

**19.9 Further Readings**



*Books*

Richard Brinsley B. Sheridan. 1820. *The School for Scandal: A Comedy*. Oxford University Press, UK.

Richard Brinsley Sheridan, Eric S. Rump (ed.). 1989. *The School for Scandal and other Plays*. Penguin Classics, UK.



*Online links*

[http:// www.fullbooks.com/The-School-For-Scandal.html](http://www.fullbooks.com/The-School-For-Scandal.html)

<http://www.enotes.com/school-scandal>

[http://classiclit.about.com/cs/articles/a/aa\\_restoration.htm](http://classiclit.about.com/cs/articles/a/aa_restoration.htm)

## Unit 20: The School for Scandal: Criticism to the Text and Characterization

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### Objectives

After studying this unit, you will be able to:

- Illustrate the criticism of the text of the *School for Scandal*;
- Enumerate all the characters in the play;
- Discuss the criticism of each character.

### Introduction

As conceived by Robin Phillips, *The School for Scandal* displays a harsh and glittering world of exquisite beauty and viciousness, where sentimental sobriety – when genuine – is the only refuge from the savagery that lies in wait for vitality and virtue. Phillips has read the play as a piece of serious social criticism, with decidedly mixed results: his version of this classic comedy of manners is thought-provoking, visually stunning, but finally a failure.

*The School for Scandal* is a kind of dramatic harpsichord. It has surface vivacity rather than inner strength. It has elegance of style rather than profundity of substance. Thumped by realism's heavy hand, it would jangle and go mute; stroked with exquisite artifice, it enchants and amuses.

Reading a play requires an ability to visualize, and it is very difficult to manage this visualization without a careful scrutiny of the stage directions and some experience reading drama. This notion is especially true for Richard Brinsley Sheridan's *School for Scandal*, which makes the reader *wish* for a fine production to view.

The characters of the play have their own significance by their names. Sheridan makes one particular characteristic or weakness appear and plays on it. For instance, Joseph is totally exposed; there is no depth and roundness which provides humor. The humor is created by such characters because of their limitations suggested by their names.

## Notes

This unit illustrates the criticism of the text of the play and gives an analysis of the characters and justified their significance by their names.

## 20.1 Criticism to the Text

*The School for Scandal* is generally considered as Sheridan's masterful play. Ironically, the play excels in its blend of sentimentalism with the attack on sentimentalism. Some regard it as a revolt against the dominant sentimental comedy of Sheridan's time. Historically, comedy of manners preceded sentimental comedy. Sheridan's success lies in his skillful combination of elements from both traditions. As a dramatist, Sheridan has created virtually all that a comedy of intense qualities could provide: amusing characters, funny intrigues, jaunty and ridiculous situations, witty dialogue, incisive social satire, deft commentary on human foibles and penetrating insight of human relationship. Sheridan's characters follow their comic bents more consistently than abruptly. More laughter and wit than surprising episodes are poured into the play. He never lets up until he has wrung the last drop of laughter from every situation possible. These all add up to account for Sheridan's early success. *The School for Scandal* is a marvelous array of comic characters of a highly civilized urbane society of which the playwright plays an active role. It stirs uproar and wins admiration. It is so much a caricature of his own time and society in view of the interrelationship between Sheridan's comic art, literary mien, his time and social climate.



**Task** Critically evaluate *The School for Scandal* as a revolt against the dominant sentimental comedy of Sheridan's time.

Sheridan's time was an age of conversation, fashion, costume, color and gossip. *The School for Scandal* reflects faithfully the social temper – the tastes, customs, and morals of the modish society of its age in which the rich lived in magnificent style and dressed in ermine, silks, satins, and brocades exquisitely embroidered with gold or silver thread...the gentlemen vied with their ladies in the fantastic display of ostentatious fashion...manners were rigid and morals were lax. The society was elaborate and artificial. Small talk, scandalizing, drinking, and gambling were more important than occupation with the world of trade, the church, or the arts.

### Self Assessment

Multiple Choice Questions:

- At the beginning of the play Lady Teazle targets
  - Sir Peter Teazle, Joseph and Charles
  - Sir Peter Teazle and Maria
  - Maria and Charles
  - Joseph and Charles.
- The School for Scandal is generally considered as Sheridan's
  - sentimental play
  - masterful play
  - Restoration comedy
  - Restoration sentimental play.
- Sheridan's success of *School for Scandal* lies in his
  - depiction of sentimentalism
  - attack on sentimentalism
  - skillful combination of comedy of manners and sentimental comedy
  - depiction of revolt against the dominant sentimental comedy.

4. As a dramatist, Sheridan has created virtually all that a comedy of intense qualities could provide such as
- (a) amusing characters (b) funny intrigues  
(c) witty dialogue (d) all the above
5. Which of the following add up to account for Sheridan's early success?
- (a) His wit to wrung the last drop of laughter from every situation possible  
(b) Penetrating insight of human relationship  
(c) Surprising episodes as compared to laughter and wit  
(d) Array of comic characters of highly uncivilized society.

Notes

Fill in the blanks:

6. The play *The School for Scandal* excels in its blend of sentimentalism with the attack on ..... .
7. *The School for Scandal* is a marvelous array of comic characters of a highly ..... society.
8. Sheridan's time was an age of ....., fashion, costume, color and gossip.
9. The society during Sheridan's period was elaborate and ..... .
10. Small talk, scandalizing, drinking, and gambling were more important than ..... .

State whether the following statements are true or false:

11. *The School for Scandal* is generally considered as Sheridan's masterful play.
12. Historically, comedy of manners preceded Restoration comedy.
13. As a dramatist, Sheridan has created virtually all that a comedy of intense qualities could provide.
14. *The School for Scandal* badly treated the social temper – the tastes, customs, and morals of the modish society.
15. *The School of Scandal* stirs uproar and wins admiration.

## 20.2 Criticism to the Characters

Much of the success of Sheridan's *The School for Scandal* lies in the rich humorous exposition of characters. The delineation of characters is primarily designed to provoke laughter and entertainment. The hypocrite who fails, the forger who fears a reputation for honesty are more objects of laughter than devices of moral comment. No one in *The School for Scandal* acts as he does simply because some circumstance compels him: people act out of their own characters and shape events accordingly. When circumstances take the form of accidents and misunderstanding, their effect upon characters is always to display something we know to be there, not to reveal something entirely new to us. Much of the play's comic force springs from this treatment. The audience, let into the secret of a character, expects him to behave accordingly. When he does, Sheridan then devises ingenious circumstances to delight us with his inventiveness. At the same time, as he pleases and amuses us by showing the character confirming itself in behavior. By design and craft, there is an undisrupted flow of characterization. The plot unfolds itself along with the portrayal of characters. Hence, the plot is somewhat subordinated to the line of characterization. The continuity and intensity of characterization are achieved through the policy of gossiping and technique of scandalizing within the academy of scandalmongers.



Notes Characterization is caricature. Humor comes from the characters.



## Notes



Task

Elucidate that much of the success of Sheridan's *The School for Scandal* lies in the rich humorous exposition of characters.

Fashioned to suit the final showdown of surface characters, the plot breaks into three major parts – (i) the testing of Charles and Joseph by their uncle Sir Oliver Surface; (ii) the problem of Sir Peter and Lady Teazle; (iii) the events surrounding the scandalous school driven by the desire for revenge, fortune and fame. The play takes shape and begins to climb to a series of climaxes with the arrival of Sir Oliver Surface from India.

*The School for Scandal* opens with a scene in which Lady Sneerwell introduces many of the complications through an idle, gossiping conversation. We learn an astonishing amount of social climate, plot and character before Joseph Surface's entrance. The quiet opening is deceptive. Lady Sneerwell, president of the Academy of Scandal mongers, reveals her own character by a discussion with Snake. Snake questions, in a businesslike manner, Lady Sneerwell's motives in the matter of Sir Peter Teazle. In so doing, Sheridan reveals his power of insinuation as well as plot. Furthermore, Lady Sneerwell's circumstantial answer supplies some of our knowledge of her character, pointed by her reference to suffering in youth from the envenomed tongue of slander, namely an emotional, impulsive vulnerability which, in this instance, leads her to reveal more than she should to Snake. Her tender wound is spotted; her innate character slips and comes to the surface. Later, Joseph Surface mentions the danger of this lapse of the tongue and inclination. At the end of the play Snake gives Lady Sneerwell reason to regret confiding in him. Judged from this aspect, part of the ending is skillfully foreshadowed. The end is laden in the beginning. When Lady Sneerwell describes Joseph as a sentimental nave the reader is given a comment on the nature of a character who is about to show up.

With the entrance of Joseph, we know more about the plot and characters. We have already learned that Charles Surface and Maria have an attachment, that Lady Sneerwell, due to her love of Charles, supports Joseph in his attempt to win Maria (Sir Peter's ward) for himself (and thus her fortune). Now Joseph informs us that his brother Charles is hurrying to disaster. He does so in the smooth language of sentiment which lends itself so easily to transparent hypocrisy



*Example:* Aye, poor Charles! I am sure I wish it were in my power to be of any essential service to him; for the man who does not share in the distresses of a brother, even though merited by his own misconduct, deserves...

It is certainly a charity to rescue Maria from such a libertine.

All these remarks carry "reverse overtones" and hyperbole. Here for the first time Joseph is associated with one of the underlying themes—hypocrisy degenerated into malice and villainous schemes.

Snake's exit soon occurs. And Joseph's comment to Lady Sneerwell that the man is treacherous and will betray them both completes Sheridan's portrait of him in all essentials.



*Notes* Sheridan's smooth-tongued makers of plots motivated entirely by cold self-interest, acting under cover of morality and goodness, is presented in toto caelo at one stroke. Lady Sneerwell has already spoken of him in her gossiping way, and his entrance and subsequent behavior exactly match the description.

However, Sheridan's skill resides in his revelation of Joseph's character in action. Joseph talks to Lady Sneerwell and Snake as one of a trip of plot-makers and scandalizers who are concerned with how to make progress of a business. His sharp observation that Snake's friendship with old Rowley

is dangerous turns out to be accurate. Joseph appears to be gossiping and, of course, in a sense is, but really gossip is simply the form applied by Sheridan to policy to tell the story, to reveal foresight and wit. His character emerges here as the shaping force behind dialogue and plot.

The play moves easily into its presentation of scandalmongering without diminishing the audience's sense of the onward movement of plot. Lady Sneerwell presides over a scandalous school composed of Mrs Candour, Crabtree, Sir Benjamin Backbite, Snake and Joseph. Nothing new is added to the plot until Crabtree asks if it is true that Sir Oliver is coming home from India. This illusion of movement results from Sheridan's trick of letting plot emerge from gossip.

The gossip will turn sooner or later to Charles Surface; he is too good a subject to miss. As it ranges over other people and their affairs we become more and more entertained by our sense of anticipation of characters.

### 20.2.1 Major Characters

#### Charles Surface

Young bachelor notorious for his extravagance and dissipation. However, his dissolute behavior may only be a passing phase. At heart, he is a good and generous person. He and Maria are in love. He is the nominal hero of the play, both in the slight romantic plot and as a contrast to his hypocritical brother, Joseph. Despite the fact that he is a center of attention, he does not appear until scene three of the third act, almost half way through the play. His presence, however, is felt in many of the scenes preceding his entry, making him a focus of interest long before he appears. References to Charles are carefully manipulated by Sheridan so that, without having seen him, the audience recognizes him as an integral part of the framework of the play. The interest taken in him by many of the characters forces the audience to wait expectantly for his first appearance so that it can test its judgement against that of the various characters who either like or dislike him.



*Example:* Lady Sneerwell, who herself is fond of Charles, remarks on Charles: Must I confess that Charles—that libertine, that extravagant, that bankrupt in fortune and reputation—

The key to Charles's character could lie with Maria, who has been coupled with Charles by Lady Sneerwell and Snake. Her resentment of the derogation of his character argues that something can be said in his behalf, but she actually offers nothing at all about him. She is too busy trying to escape the advances of Sir Benjamin to have an opportunity to comment on her feelings about Charles. But Maria earns the respect of the audience not only by appearing comparatively innocent in her conversation, but by aligning herself against the gossips. In all, the character of Charles, phony or genuine, is a conversation focal point of the first scene. Had the play followed the conventional pattern of dramatic exposition, Charles could reasonably have been expected to make his entrance in the next scene or so; but, in order to sustain interest in Charles and manipulate the expectation of the audience, Sheridan withholds him for quite a while.



*Notes* Joseph Surface constantly provokes Sir Peter and other scandalizers to condemn Charles. However, Charles finds a supporter, Rowley, who is older, wiser, and more courteous than any of the other characters.

In order to develop the difference between Charles and Joseph, Sheridan has made Rowley withhold the really important information of the scene until the end. The play now takes on new interest as the arrival of Sir Oliver is certain to uncover the real character of Charles as contrasted with that created by the scandalous rumor.

## Notes

Sir Oliver agrees completely with Rowley's opinion of the relative merits of his two nephews. To Charles, he opines, "If Charles has done nothing false or mean, I shall compound for his extravagance." In marked contrast, Sir Oliver speaks of Joseph as "If he salutes me with a scrap of morality in his mouth, I shall be sick directly."

In Act III, scene III, Charles is presented to the audience in his native habitat, drinking, singing, toasting Maria, and living up to his reputation as an uninhibited wastrel. He is boisterous and carefree, in sharp contrast to his reserved and polished brother. This scene and the one that follows, the auction of the pictures, substantiate Rowley's favourable impression of Charles in spite of his high living. Undoubtedly, he is wild and full of clever talk in the first place; however, he eventually shows himself to be inherently decent. His bluntness and recklessness are anathema to the gossips, but his generosity to his poor relation, Mr. Stanley, and appreciation of past help from Sir Oliver, put him solidly on the side of common decency and honesty. The image of Charles has been completed in this scene. He has survived the scandalous gossip to carry the day in his uncle's eyes.

Sheridan's decision to hold a major character out of play until it is half finished adds considerably to the dramatic richness and accentuates the comic effect. It generates great interest in Charles's personality and, at the same time, is a device by which the various characters expose themselves by means of their remarks about Charles.



*Example:* Maria, Rowley and Sir Oliver all have faith in and understanding of Charles, while Joseph, Lady Sneerwell, and the rest of the gossips express disgust at his profligacy. These attitudes only serve to characterize themselves.



*Notes* The testing of Charles provides one of the several emotional climaxes of the play. Interest has built on Charles until it is natural that he should be the center of attention when he appears. His most important scene, the auction scene, comes immediately after his introduction to the audience. From this scene, the audience can come to understand his true skin. This snap yet effective treatment is indeed managed with dexterity.

### Joseph Surface

Young bachelor who pretends to be honorable gentleman but is really a double-dealing scoundrel. He is the older brother of Charles Surface and is in love with the fortune Maria. He plots with Lady Sneerwell to break up Charles and Maria. Meanwhile, he attempts to seduce the wife of Sir Peter Teazle. Where Charles is direct and frank, Joseph is devious; where Charles is honest, Joseph is deceitful; where Charles is generous to a fault, Joseph is mean to the point of vice, which he dresses up as virtue. The professional hypocrisy and contrived tactics are relentlessly peeled off in the famous screen scene. Two characters (Joseph and Maria) soon become three (with Sir Peter added), the third overhearing the other two, and then four, two overhearing the other two. The action proceeds through a series of exposed duplicities ending in a major revelation. The straightforward Charles throws down the screen to expose Joseph's perfidy and hypocrisy in the shape of the abashed Lady Teazle. Joseph reminds us of his ingratiating with Lady Teazle by saying in Act II:

I wish I may not lose the heiress, through the scrape I have drawn myself into with the wife; however, Charles's imprudence and bad character are great points in my favour.

This anticipates the events of the scene to ensue. The servant announces Lady Teazle, saying she always leaves her chair at the milliner's in the next street, therefore planting the word milliner in Joseph's mind for future use. Joseph ordered the servant to set-up the screen to ensure privacy from the prying eyes of a maiden lady across the street. The irony becomes so evident and plain when Lady Teazle hides behind it.

Act V, scene I, runs on from the screen scene with Joseph, the bad-tempered, blaming not himself but Fortune and abusing his servant. However, the audience expects Joseph to have a moment of composure. It does happen, in real life, that a man is pounded by unremitting misfortune but generally there is a pause. Joseph surveys the wreck of his hopes ruefully. His annoyance arise from the offended pride of a professional schemer: Sure Fortune never played a man of my policy such a trick before!

He cannot believe that disaster has befallen him through an error of judgement—as it has insofar as he has failed to understand Sir Peter and Lady Teazle—and attributes everything to the confrontation and revelations in his library. Apart from his miscalculations about the Teazles, his scheme to have an affair with Lady Teazle as a cover for his approach to Maria through Sir Peter has not been carefully thought out.

The effect Sheridan seeks and achieves in the characterization of Joseph Surface is that this man of Policy is too clever by half and that his discomfiture is just the punishment for his nasty combination of hypocrisy, self-seeking, and conceit. There is some danger that Sheridan may overplay his hand and, in Act V, portray Joseph as too repellent. Angry that his schemes have collapsed, Joseph is a specialist in pursuing his own ends under a cloak of morality and searching his own goals with a cynical disregard of others.

In Act V, the scenes are brief and powerful. Joseph speaks the perfect language of sentiment in order to fob off his beggar. To explain his inability to give, he holds up a mirror in which his own image is drawn and reflected. Joseph tends to use sentiment to offset the disadvantages of his reputation for benevolence, and recommends the technique to other men of policy as heartless as himself. He desires respectability—position and wealth—no matter how many bodies he has to climb over to achieve it. He spouts smug and sententious pieces of advice, artful, selfish and malicious.



*Notes* If we regard Sir Joseph as a sinner, then his brother, Sir Charles, is a saint. Not so! Not so much of a clear-cut line of demarcation! Sheridan would neither allow these two brothers to go to hell nor paradise! He gives them each a human foible and inherent flaw to make them sound and appear agreeable and laughable on the stage. For Charles, it is his extravagance and dissipation that smite him most. For Joseph, it is restlessness, wit, and avarice that betray himself in the first place!

### Sir Peter Teazle

Upright gentleman of about age fifty who has recently married a young woman. Fooled by Joseph Surface's pretensions, he promotes a marriage between Joseph and Maria. Sir Peter Teazle is named after the teasel, a thorny and prickly plant which suggests Sir Peter's vexatious nature. Sir Peter, the unhappy bridegroom and confidant of his more lively friend, Sir Oliver, fills three roles of varying degrees of importance. As far as the entertainment value of the play is concerned, his most important function lies in his role as the husband of Lady Teazle. These two engage in several thoroughly witty exchanges in the course of the action, which make them a delight to have on the stage. Sir Peter is obviously cast in the beginning as an aging comic husband who marries a young country girl. Sir Peter does stand alone for part of the play, talking to the audience or Rowley. He ceases to be specifically the husband of Lady Teazle and becomes more generally the stock comic figure of the woe-begone husband with serious difficulties on his hands. The Restoration concern with horns has been replaced by a concern with extravagant expenses but the overall comic effect is much the same.

Besides being a source of entertainment, Sir Peter is also important to the actual movement of the play in his role as confidant to Sir Oliver. It is through him and because of him that Sir Oliver

## Notes

decides on the disguises to test each of his nephews. Had it not been for Sir Peter's opposition to Rowley's judgements, Sir Oliver might never have felt it necessary to go to the extremes he does to test the brothers.



*Notes* The third role Sir Peter acts is as a contrast in character to Sir Oliver. Unlike Sir Oliver the unmarried shrewd, often he is both comic and pathetic, particularly in the scenes with Lady Teazle. In these encounters, his situation is pathetic in that his marital problem seems insurmountable. His approach to Lady Teazle is a blend of love and affection, with an attempt to win her with kindness and fatherly understanding.

At times, Sir Peter seems to be the dupe of Joseph, who has a design on Maria. He appears to be a solid citizen, despite his name, who approves the virtues professed by Joseph, and is a sober representative of the moral order. But when Sir Peter praises Joseph's feelings, he is unable to tell the difference between hypocrisy and honesty. In general, Sir Peter poses as a figure for sympathy because of his trouble with marriage and self-proclaimed righteousness.



*Example:* The sympathy built up for him in the first scene, however, is modified by his very first line which puts him in a different framework altogether, "When an old bachelor takes a young wife, what is he to expect?" The audience knew what he could expect. Having complained of his wife's expenses and admitting that he loves her, he concludes: "However, I will never be weak enough to own it." Here he produces a truly comic attitude.

By the end of the scene, Sir Peter has classed himself as a simple country squire, not very well suited to the complexities of life in the city. He is still likeable in his own stubborn way, but his faults are readily discernible.

By his widespread involvement in all the action, Sir Peter plays an important part in providing the connecting personality between the disparate characters of the play. He is the guardian of Maria, the overseer of Charles and Joseph, the husband of Lady Teazle, the employer of Rowley, and the friend of Sir Oliver. As such, he is "a nexus for all of them within the world of the play." This connection of the characters through Sir Peter is clearly borne out by the number of scenes which take place at his house. Of the fourteen scenes in the play, five take place at Sir Peter's. Sir Peter appears in eight scenes, over half of those in the play. This figure is exceeded only by Sir Oliver, who appears in ten scenes, and far overshadows Joseph, who appears in five scenes, and Charles, who is in only four scenes.

### Lady Teazle

Young wife of Sir Peter. She and her husband have their little spats. When he visits Joseph Surface one day, he discovers his wife hiding behind a screen and at first thinks she has been having an affair with Joseph, whom he now brands as a villain. Lady Teazle, as a counterpart of Sir Peter, is not quite a hoyden. She has become a charming, lovely young woman who has attained somehow her place in London society. As a matter of fact, her charm and superior wit often leave Sir Peter the comic butt of their arguments. Intoxicated with city life, clothes, and gossip, she is flattered by the attention of a worldly and handsome young man, Joseph Surface. As a glittering personality and novice of the worldly affairs, she is one of the important vehicles for Sheridan's wit. Without her daily jangle with Sir Peter, this would be a duller play. The audience shares the sense of danger when she plays with fire.

**Sir Oliver Surface**

Wealthy uncle of Charles and Joseph Surface. After returning to England from the East Indies, he disguises himself to find out the truth about his nephews. Sir Oliver, appearing in ten of the fourteen scenes of the play, is instrumental to the development of the characterization. Once he makes his entrance in the third scene of the second act, he is never again off the stage for more than part of a scene.

The antiquity of the business of testing character would make a role such as Sir Oliver's easily recognizable to the audience. In the role of tester, Sir Oliver will be the prime mover in the events to follow, but not necessarily the hero, that role devolving upon Charles. Sir Oliver well demonstrates an ability to see the unfortunate side of his friend's marriage.



*Example:* He began by laughing at the stock comic situation reminiscent of the Country Wife:

"So my old friend is married, hey?—a young wife out of the country—ha! Ha! Ha!"

But he shows compassion for the personal situation upon being appraised of it by Rowley. In all essentials, Sir Oliver represents the vigorous proponent of truth and good humor. Such a man could be Peter Teazle before he made the mistake of marrying a young wife.

To make a comparison between Sir Peter and Sir Oliver, both are kindly. But Sir Oliver has more common sense and broader humanity. Sir Peter is slightly self-centered. It is likely that his love for humanity was tempered by his frequent maulings by the social backbiters. Yet he is fair and not too exacting in his dealings with his wife whose inclination to an expensive gaiety is all too human.

**20.2.2 General Criticism of all the Minor Characters**

Sheridan makes each character embody a single trait in order to show the follies of London's fashionable life in the late eighteenth century. The significance of this type of characterization is evident in the very names which Sheridan gives his actors.

Sir Benjamin Backbite is just that—a clawing, "catty kind of man." Premium reminds us of the extra bonus or high interest which a money lender or a usurer would exact from a borrower. Careless is careless of his tongue. Snake, who is called Spatter in an earlier draft of the play, is a snake in the grass, darting his poisonous tongue at anybody for a price. The supposedly virtuous Mrs Candour with her assumed sweetness of disposition is ironically named. Lady Sneerwell, the attractive widow, is an unpleasant, vindictive scandalmonger, retaliating on the world. She knows no pleasure equal to the reducing others to the level of [her] own injured reputation. Trip plays the fop and is a burlesque exaggeration of his master's vices. Moses is set as a Jewish moneylender with canting speech.

**Maria**

Desirable and wealthy young ward of Sir Peter Teazle. She is a woman of principle who refuses to gossip.

**Lady Sneerwell**

Young widow of a knight. She is attracted to Charles Surface and plots with Joseph Surface to break up Charles and Maria.

**Snake**

Cat's paw of Lady Sneerwell. He spreads false rumors designed to help Lady Sneerwell achieve her goals.

Notes

**Mrs Candour**

Prolific gossip who says how wrong it is to spread rumors, then indulges in her favorite pastime—spreading rumors. Mrs Candour is a good-natured and friendly gossip whose talkative nature makes her dangerous, since she spreads slander more effectively than Backbite or Crabtree.

**Sir Benjamin Backbite**

Annoying young man who pursues Maria and engages in slanderous conversation. Backbite is a suitor to Marie. He is a gossip who will slander anyone, even those he does not know. Lady Sneerwell admires Backbite's wit and poetry Backbite is an especially malicious character whose rude behavior is encouraged in the company of his uncle, Lady Sneerwell, and Mrs Candour.

**Rowley**

Helpful servant and friend of Sir Peter Teazle and a former servant of the father of the Surface brothers. He is an upright fellow who sees through Joseph's hypocrisy. Aware of Snake's nefarious behavior, he pays him to reveal that the stories he has been spreading for Lady Sneerwell and Joseph are lies.

**Moses**

Moneylender who assists Sir Oliver in his scheme to find out the truth about Charles and Joseph Surface.

**Mr Stanley**

Dublin merchant who was ruined by business reversals. He is related to Charles and Joseph Surface, to whom he wrote for financial assistance. Sir Oliver assumes Stanley's identity when he is investigating his nephews.

**Self Assessment**

Multiple Choice Questions:

16. Much of the success of Sheridan's *The School for Scandal* lies in
  - (a) the rich humorous exposition of characters
  - (b) provoking laughter and entertainment
  - (c) poor delineation of characters
  - (d) comic representation of characters.
17. The School for Scandal opens with a scene in which
  - (a) Joseph Surface introduces plot against Charles Surface
  - (b) Lady Sneerwell introduces many of the complications through an idle, gossiping conversation
  - (c) Lady Sneerwell targeting his neighbour
  - (d) Lady Sneerwell hatching a plot with her venomous wit.
18. In order to develop the difference between Charles and Joseph, Sheridan has made
  - (a) entry of Sir Oliver to uncover the real character of Charles
  - (b) made Sir Oliver uncover the real character of Joseph with the scandalous rumor

- (c) Rowley withhold the really important information of the scene until the end
- (d) made Sir Oliver hid his identity.

Notes

Fill in the blanks:

- 19. The character Charles Surface is depicted as a young bachelor notorious for his extravagance and .....
- 20. Lady Sneerwell presides over a ..... composed of Mrs Candour, Crabtree, Sir Benjamin Backbite, Snake and Joseph.
- 21. Fooled by Joseph Surface's pretentions, Sir Peter Teazle promotes a marriage between .....
- 22. Backbite is gossip who will ....., even those he does not know.
- 23. Both Sir Peter and Sir Oliver are kindly but Sir Oliver has more common sense and .....

State whether the following statements are true or false:

- 24. No one in *The School for Scandal* acts as he does simply because some circumstance compels him: people act out of their own characters and shape events accordingly.
- 25. Sneerwell describes Joseph as a rude nave.
- 26. Sir Peter Teazle is named after the teasel, a thorny and prickly plant which suggests Sir Peter's vexatious nature.
- 27. In the role of tester, Sir Oliver will be the prime mover in the events to follow, as well as a hero.
- 28. When Sir Peter Teazle visits Joseph Surface one day, he discovers his wife hiding behind a screen, whom he now brands as a villain.

### 20.3 Summary

- Witty, sparkling dialogue is the hallmark of Sheridan's plays. Everybody including servants and fops displays wit in *The School for Scandal*. Even when a leading character such as Sir Peter Teazle loses his composure while quarreling with his wife and explodes with "Aye, ... you had no taste when you married me!" he does not lose his wit. His lines are of equal wit with those of his wife, whose earlier words, "If you wanted authority over me, you should have adopted me, and not married me. I am sure you were old enough." The whole play is full of epigrams and aphorism. "Charity begins at home," is but one of the many that we still cherish at home. To say the least, Sheridan's wit is an incessant flame. What distinguishes it from ordinary wit is that it has inherent charm and grace.
- In addition to his witty and epigrammatic dialogue, Sheridan is skillful in manipulating intrigues. The Playwright is inventive enough to give us an entertaining story in *The School for Scandal* in a vivacious manner which moves us smoothly from one incident to another. He is a master of good theatre as revealed in the screen scene in the library of Joseph Surface's house. The scene is a three ring circus done so well that it does not degenerate into common broad farce.
- The marvel of Sheridan's dramatic craft can also be attributed to his application of comic suspense, the audience gains joy and delight. Knowledge of action does not lessen the enjoyment because Sheridan adroitly subordinates action to anticipation. Through authentic portrait, liveliness permeates Sheridan's characters. Verisimilitude is his own disguise and masquerading as there is enough inconsequence to suggest realism. As an actor-manager Sheridan possesses a sensitive feeling for his audience, transforming in action and boredom into fun and wisdom.



Notes

- Most significant, *The School for Scandal* is not all for exposing scandals; it is a blend of satire and compassion. Sheridan was a sharp observer of a modish society; however, the brilliance of his satire was tempered with humanity. When he satirizes the ballooning of the rumor concerning Sir Peter's mythical duel with Charles, Sheridan is not vindictive, but just reportorial.

### 20.4 Keywords

- Caricature** : A pictorial, written, or acted representation of a person, which exaggerates his characteristic traits for comic effect.
- Humor** : A comic, absurd, or incongruous quality causing amusement: the humor of a situation.
- Dissipation** : Dissolute way of living, or unrestrained indulgence in physical pleasures, especially excessive drinking of liquor; intemperance.
- Moneylender** : A person or organization whose business it is to lend money at interest.
- Scoundrel** : An unprincipled, worthless, dishonorable person; villain.
- Villain** : A cruelly malicious person who is involved in or devoted to wickedness or crime; scoundrel.
- Slanderous** : A malicious, false, and defamatory statement or report.
- Tale-bearer** : A person who spreads gossip, secrets, etc., that may cause trouble or harm.
- Hypocrisy** : A pretense of having a virtuous character, moral or religious beliefs or principles, etc., that one does not really possess.

### 20.5 Review Questions

1. Which character in the play do you most admire? Explain your answer.
2. Which character do you list admire? Explain your answer.
3. Compare and contrast *The School for Scandal* with a modern situation comedy.
4. Which role in the play do you think poses the greatest challenge for an actor? Explain your answer.
5. Give a critical view of the following characters in *The School for Scandal*:  
 (a) Sir Peter Teazle                      (b) Maria                      (c) Joseph Surface

### **Answers: Self Assessment**

- |                     |                       |                      |
|---------------------|-----------------------|----------------------|
| 1. (a)              | 2. (b)                | 3. (c)               |
| 4. (d)              | 5. (a)                | 6. sentimentalism    |
| 7. civilized urbane | 8. conversation       | 9. artificial        |
| 10. occupation      | 11. True              | 12. False            |
| 13. True            | 14. True              | 15. True             |
| 16. (a)             | 17. (b)               | 18. (c)              |
| 19. dissipation     | 20. scandalous school | 21. Joseph and Maria |
| 22. slander anyone  | 23. broader humanity  | 24. True             |
| 25. False           | 26. True              | 27. False            |
| 28. True            |                       |                      |

## 20.6 Further Readings

Notes



Books

Auburn, Mark S. 1977. *Sheridan's Comedies: Their Contexts and Achievements*. University of Nebraska Press, Lincoln.

Richard Brinsley Sheridan, Eric S. Rump (ed.) 1989. *The School for Scandal and other Plays*. Penguin Classics, UK.



Online links

<http://www.enotes.com/school-scandal/critical-overview>

<http://www.cummingsstudyguides.net/Guides3/School.html>

<http://www.artsclub.com/youth/pdfs/0607guides/>

## Unit 21: The School for Scandal: All Major and Minor Themes

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### Objectives

After studying this unit, you will be able to:

- Illustrate all major themes in *The School for Scandal*;
- Elucidate all minor themes in *The School for Scandal*;
- Explain Defamation and deceptive appearance of characters;
- Illustrate the pitfalls of idleness in *The School for Scandal*;
- Discuss the hypocrisy occurring in the play *The School for Scandal*.

### Introduction

Richard Brinsley Sheridan's *The School for Scandal* is a comedy of manners, a play satirizing the behavior and customs of upper classes through witty dialogue and an intricate plot with comic situations that expose characters' shortcomings. Characters generally consist of stock types—such as the bore, the flirt, the gossip, the wastrel, the rich uncle, etc.—rather than individuals with unique qualities. Comedies of manners in Sheridan's time typically avoided the romantic sentimentality that characterized many other stage dramas of the eighteenth century. In *The School for Scandal*, the author mainly satirizes malicious gossip and hypocrisy in the fashionable society of London in the 1770s. This unit illustrates the various themes used in this play.

## 21.1 Defamation of Characters

Underlying the comedy is a serious theme: condemnation of the odious practice of slander and, in the case of the written letters, libel. Spreading scandal was commonplace in London's high society of the 1770s, when conversation—in drawing rooms, at balls, in spas, and across card tables—was a form of entertainment.



*Task* Illustrate that spreading scandal was a common place in London's high society of the 1770's in context of *the School for Scandal*.

## 21.2 Deceptive Appearance

Charles Surface has a reputation as a scoundrel. But beneath his flawed veneer, he is a decent fellow. Joseph Surface has a reputation as an upright man. But beneath his flawless veneer, he is a villain. Hence, this theme: Before judging a person, look beneath his or her outward guise.

## 21.3 Hypocrisy

Joseph Surface pretends to be a paragon of honor and rectitude while attempting to sabotage his brother and marry into a fortune. Mrs Candour and others of her ilk pretend to oppose gossip but delight in spreading it.



*Example:* When Maria tells her that it is "strangely impertinent" for people to busy themselves with the affairs of others, Mrs Candour says, Very true, child: but what's to be done? People will talk—there's no preventing it. Why, it was but yesterday I was told that Miss Gadabout had eloped with Sir Filigree Flirt. But, Lord! there's no minding what one hears; though, to be sure, I had this from very good authority.

## 21.4 Steadfast Integrity

Amid all the wrongdoing in the play, it is easy to overlook the moral resolve of Maria—and to a lesser extent, Charles. Maria refuses to gossip and repeatedly denounces the practice. For example, in Act 1, when Lady Sneerwell asks her what Sir Benjamin Backbite has done to make her run from him, she replies, "Oh, he has done nothing—but 'tis what he said: his conversation is a perpetual libel on all his acquaintance." Later, in the same act, she tells Mrs. Candour, "'Tis strangely impertinent for people to busy themselves so [with gossip]." When Joseph Surface attempts to defend his tongue-wagging friends—saying, "[T]hey appear more ill-natured than they are; they have no malice at heart"—Maria replies, "Then is their conduct more contemptible; for, in my opinion, nothing could excuse the intemperance of their tongues but an unnatural and uncontrollable bitterness of mind." Maria also steadfastly refuses to become involved with Joseph Surface even though her legal guardian, St. Peter Teazle, pressures her to do so. For his part, Charles Surface—despite his extravagance and devil-may-care lifestyle—refuses to compromise the basic goodness that undergirds his character. In particular, he refuses to sell the portrait of Sir Oliver even though the bidder, Sir Oliver in the guise of Mr. Premium, offers him a large sum of money. Moreover, even though he has little money left to support his wastrel ways, he contributes a generous sum to the destitute Mr. Stanley.

## Notes

**21.5 Pitfalls of Idleness**

An implied theme in the play is that idleness breeds mischief. Most of the characters live on inherited money and property, allowing them to devote a good portion of their time to leisure activities. Telling or listening to scandalous stories, as well as reading about them, is apparently one of their favorite pastimes. Favored activities of the young include gambling and drinking.

**Self Assessment**

Multiple Choice Questions:

1. Which of the following themes is not a characteristics of the play *The School for Scandal*?
 

(a) Admiration	(b) Pitfalls of idleness
(c) Steadfast integrity	(d) Hypocrisy.
2. Pitfalls of idleness is
 

(a) a sentimental theme	(b) an implied theme in the play
(c) wrongdoing in the play	(d) misdeed in the play.
3. Amid all the wrongdoing in the play, it is easy to overlook
 

(a) Maria's refusal of gossip	(b) Maria's repeated denounce of practice
(c) moral resolve of Maria	(d) hypocrisy shown by Maria.

Fill in the blanks:

4. Joseph Surface pretends to be a paragon of honor and .....
5. An implied theme in the play is that idleness breeds .....

State whether the following statements are true or false:

6. Charles Surface has a reputation as a scoundrel.
7. Spreading scandal was commonplace in London's high society of the 1770s.
8. Telling or listening to scandalous stories, as well as reading about them, was apparently one of the favorite pastimes in of working class.

**21.6 Summary**

- Spreading scandal was commonplace in London's high society of the 1770s, when conversation—in drawing rooms, at balls, in spas, and across card tables—was a form of entertainment.
- Charles Surface has a reputation as a scoundrel. But beneath his flawed veneer, he is a decent fellow.
- Joseph Surface pretends to be a paragon of honor and rectitude while attempting to sabotage his brother and marry into a fortune.
- Amid all the wrongdoing in the play, it is easy to overlook the moral resolve of Maria—and to a lesser extent, Charles.
- Maria refuses to gossip and repeatedly denounces the practice.
- An implied theme in the play is that idleness breeds mischief.
- Most of the characters live on inherited money and property, allowing them to devote a good portion of their time to leisure activities.
- Telling or listening to scandalous stories, as well as reading about them, is apparently one of their favorite pastimes. Favored activities of the young include gambling and drinking.

## 21.7 Keywords

- Hypocrisy** : Hypocrisy is the state of pretending to have beliefs, opinions, virtues, ideals, thoughts, feelings, qualities, or standards that one does not actually have. Or A pretense of having a virtuous character, moral or religious beliefs or principles, etc., that one does not really possess.
- Gambling** : To play at any game of chance for money or other stakes. Or to stake or risk money, or anything of value, on the outcome of something involving chance.
- Idling** : Idle (idling) is a term which generally refers to a lack of motion and/or energy.
- Defamation** : Defamation is also called calumny, vilification, traducement, slander, and libel is the communication of a statement that makes a claim, expressly stated or implied to be factual, that may give an individual, business, product, group, government, or nation a negative image.
- Scandal** : A person whose conduct causes reproach or disgrace.

## 21.8 Review Questions

- Explore the deceptive appearance in the play *The School for Scandal*.
- An implied theme in the play is that idleness breeds mischief. Explain.
- Amid all the wrongdoing in the play, it is easy to overlook the moral resolve of Maria. In the context of *The School for Scandal*, explain the theme used in this statement.
- Give a critical view of the following themes in *The School for Scandal*:
  - Hypocrisy
  - Steadfast Integrity
  - Pitfalls of idleness

## Answers: Self Assessment

- |              |             |         |
|--------------|-------------|---------|
| 1. (a)       | 2. (b)      | 3. (c)  |
| 4. rectitude | 5. mischief | 6. True |
| 7. True      | 8. False    |         |

## 21.9 Further Readings



### Books

- Rump, Eric. 1995. Sheridan, Congreve and *School for Scandal*. In: James Morwood and David Crane (eds.), *Sheridan Studies*. Cambridge University Press.
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### Online links

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## Unit 22: G. B. Shaw: Saint Joan – Introduction to the Author and the Text

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Objectives

Introduction

22.1 George Bernard Shaw – Introduction

22.1.1 Biography

22.1.2 Work Experience and Literary Works

22.2 Saint Joan – Introduction to the Text

22.3 Summary

22.4 Keywords

22.5 Review Questions

22.6 Further Readings

### Objectives

After studying this unit, you will be able to:

- Illustrate the biographical sketch of George Bernard Shaw;
- Elaborate the literary works of George Bernard Shaw;
- Explain that *Saint Joan* is a tragedy without villains;
- Illustrate the appropriateness of characterising Saint Joan as a tragedy;
- Describe that the play is full of historical inaccuracy and too talky or comic;
- Discuss the nature of the play.

### Introduction

George Bernard Shaw was an Irish playwright and a co-founder of the London School of Economics. Although his first profitable writing was music and literary criticism, in which capacity he wrote many highly articulate pieces of journalism, his main talent was for drama, and he wrote more than 60 plays. Nearly all his writings address prevailing social problems, but have a vein of comedy which makes their stark themes more palatable. Shaw examined education, marriage, religion, government, health care, and class privilege. This unit elaborates the details of his life since birth till his death.

*Saint Joan* is a play by George Bernard Shaw, based on the life and trial of Joan of Arc. Published not long after the canonization of Joan of Arc by the Roman Catholic Church, the play dramatises what is known of her life based on the substantial records of her trial. Shaw studied the transcripts and decided that the concerned people acted in good faith according to their beliefs. This unit also elaborates the text, drawbacks and problems of the play in detail. More emphasis is given on the detailed analysis of the text.

## **22.1 George Bernard Shaw – Introduction**

George Bernard Shaw was most angered by what he perceived as the exploitation of the working class. An ardent socialist, Shaw wrote many brochures and speeches for the Fabian Society. He became an accomplished orator in the furtherance of its causes, which included gaining equal rights for men and women, alleviating abuses of the working class, rescinding private ownership of productive land, and promoting healthy lifestyles. For a short time he was active in local politics, serving on the London County Council.

He is the only person to have been awarded both a Nobel Prize for Literature (1925) and an Oscar (1938), for his contributions to literature and for his work on the film *Pygmalion* (adaptation of his play of the same name), respectively. Shaw wanted to refuse his Nobel Prize outright because he had no desire for public honours, but accepted it at his wife's behest: she considered it a tribute to Ireland. He did reject the monetary award, requesting it be used to finance translation of Swedish books to English.

### **22.1.1 Biography**

#### **Birth and the Family**

George Bernard Shaw was born in Synge Street, Dublin, in 1856 to George Carr Shaw (1814–85), an unsuccessful grain merchant and sometime civil servant, and Lucinda Elizabeth Shaw, née Gurly (1830–1913), a professional singer. He had two sisters, Lucinda Frances (1853–1920), a singer of musical comedy and light opera, and Elinor Agnes (1855–76).

#### **Education**

Shaw briefly attended the Wesley College, Dublin, a grammar school operated by the Methodist Church in Ireland, before moving to a private school near Dalkey and then transferring to Dublin's Central Model School. He ended his formal education at the Dublin English Scientific and Commercial Day School. He harboured a lifelong animosity toward schools and teachers, saying: "Schools and schoolmasters, as we have them today, are not popular as places of education and teachers, but rather prisons and turnkeys in which children are kept to prevent them disturbing and chaperoning their parents". In the astringent prologue to *Cashel Byron's Profession* young Byron's educational experience is a fictionalized description of Shaw's own schooldays. Later, he painstakingly detailed the reasons for his aversion to formal education in his *Treatise on Parents and Children*. In brief, he considered the standardized curricula useless, deadening to the spirit and stifling to the intellect. He particularly deplored the use of corporal punishment, which was prevalent in his time.

When his mother left home and followed her voice teacher, George Vandeleur Lee, to London, Shaw was almost sixteen years old. His sisters accompanied their mother but Shaw remained in Dublin with his father, first as a reluctant pupil, then as a clerk in an estate office. He worked efficiently, albeit discontentedly, for several years. In 1876, Shaw joined his mother's London household. She, Vandeleur Lee, and his sister Lucy, provided him with a pound a week while he frequented public libraries and the British Museum reading room where he studied earnestly and began writing novels. He earned his allowance by ghostwriting Vandeleur Lee's music column, which appeared in the *London Hornet*. His novels were rejected, however, so his literary earnings remained negligible until 1885, when he became self-supporting as a critic of the arts.

#### **Marriage**

In 1898, Shaw married Charlotte Payne-Townshend, a fellow Fabian, whom he survived. They settled in Ayot St. Lawrence in a house now called Shaw's Corner.



## Notes

**Political Activism**

Influenced by his reading, he became a dedicated Socialist and a charter member of the Fabian Society, a middle class organization established in 1884 to promote the gradual spread of socialism by peaceful means. In the course of his political activities he met Charlotte Payne-Townshend, an Irish heiress and fellow Fabian; they married in 1898. The marriage was never consummated, at Charlotte's insistence, though he had had a number of affairs with married women; Shaw declined to stand as an MP, but in 1897 he was elected as a local councilor to the London County Council as a Progressive.



*Did u know?* In 1906 the Shaws moved into a house, now called Shaw's Corner, in Ayot St. Lawrence, a small village in Hertfordshire, England; it was to be their home for the remainder of their lives, although they also maintained a residence at 29 Fitzroy Square in London.

Shaw's plays were first performed in the 1890s. By the end of the decade he was an established playwright. He wrote sixty-three plays and his output as novelist, critic, pamphleteer, essayist and private correspondent was prodigious. He is known to have written more than 250,000 letters. Along with Fabian Society members Sidney and Beatrice Webb and Graham Wallas, Shaw founded the London School of Economics and Political Science in 1895 with funding provided by private philanthropy, including a bequest of £20,000 from Henry Hunt Hutchinson to the Fabian Society. One of the libraries at the LSE is named in Shaw's honor; it contains collections of his papers and photographs.



*Task* Why did G.B. Shaw become a dedicated socialist and a charter member of the Fabian society.

**Last Years and Death**

Shaw died there, aged 94, from chronic problems exacerbated by injuries he incurred by falling from a ladder. During his later years, Shaw enjoyed attending to the grounds at Shaw's Corner. He died at the age of 94, of renal failure precipitated by injuries incurred by falling while pruning a tree. His ashes, mixed with those of his wife, Charlotte Payne-Townshend, were scattered along footpaths and around the statue of Saint Joan in their garden.

**22.1.2 Work Experience and Literary Works**

After working in an estate agent's office for a while he moved to London as a young man (1876), where he established himself as a leading music and theatre critic in the eighties and nineties and became a prominent member of the Fabian Society, for which he composed many pamphlets. He began his literary career as a novelist; as a fervent advocate of the new theatre of Ibsen (*The Quintessence of Ibsenism*, 1891) he decided to write plays in order to illustrate his criticism of the English stage. His earliest dramas were called appropriately *Plays Pleasant and Unpleasant* (1898). Among these, *Widower's Houses* and *Mrs. Warren's Profession* savagely attack social hypocrisy, while in plays such as *Arms and the Man* and *The Man of Destiny* the criticism is less fierce. Shaw's radical rationalism, his utter disregard of conventions, his keen dialectic interest and verbal wit often turn the stage into a forum of ideas, and nowhere more openly than in the famous discourses on the *Life Force*, *Don Juan in Hell*, the third act of the dramatization of woman's love chase of man, *Man and Superman* (1903).

In the plays of his later period discussion sometimes drowns the drama, in *Back to Methuselah* (1921), although in the same period he worked on his masterpiece *Saint Joan* (1923), in which he rewrites the well-known story of the French maiden and extends it from the Middle Ages to the present.

Other important plays by Shaw are *Caesar and Cleopatra* (1901), a historical play filled with allusions to modern times, and *Androcles and the Lion* (1912), in which he exercised a kind of retrospective history and from modern movements drew deductions for the Christian era. In *Major Barbara* (1905), one of Shaw's most successful plays, the audience's attention is held by the power of the witty argumentation that man can achieve aesthetic salvation only through political activity, not as an individual. *The Doctor's Dilemma* (1906), facetiously classified as a tragedy by Shaw, is really a comedy the humour of which is directed at the medical profession. *Candida* (1898), with social attitudes toward sex relations as objects of his satire, and *Pygmalion* (1912), a witty study of phonetics as well as a clever treatment of middle-class morality and class distinction, proved some of Shaw's greatest successes on the stage. It is a combination of the dramatic, the comic, and the social corrective that gives Shaw's comedies their special flavour.

Shaw's complete works appeared in thirty-six volumes between 1930 and 1950, the year of his death.

### Self Assessment

Multiple Choice Questions:

- Which of the following play earned George Bernard Shaw The Nobel Prize?
  - Saint Joan*
  - The Quintessence of Ibsenism*
  - The Doctor's Dilemma*
  - Candida*.
- Which of the following plays was not written by George Bernard Shaw?
  - Caesar and Cleopatra*
  - The Merchant of Venice*
  - Pygmalion*
  - Major Barbara*.

Fill in the blanks:

- In 1906 the Shaws moved into a house, now called .....
- After marriage Shaw settled in .....

State whether the following statements are true or false:

- Influenced by his reading, he became a dedicated Socialist and a charter member of the Fabian Society.
- Shaw's plays were first performed in the 1870s.

## 22.2 Saint Joan – Introduction to the Text

George Bernard Shaw's *Saint Joan* was first produced in New York City in 1923 and in London in 1924. Shaw published it with a long Preface in 1924. When word came out that Shaw, who was known as an irreverent jokester, was writing about a Christian saint and martyr, there were fears that he would not be able to produce something appropriate, but the early reception of the play was generally favorable, although some commentators criticized him for historical inaccuracy and for being too talky or comic. Over the years, the play, a rare tragic work in his generally comic oeuvre, has been seen as one of his greatest and most important.



*Did u know?* Saint Joan has been hailed as being intellectually exciting and praised for dealing with important themes, such as nationalism, war, and the relation of the individual to society. The play solidified Shaw's reputation as a major playwright and helped win him the Nobel Prize in 1925.

## Notes



*Notes* Being at least in part a tragedy, though with comic moments, *Saint Joan* is part of a shift in Shaw's work from his earlier optimistic comedies to a more melancholy attitude, perhaps in part the result of his reaction to World War I.

Although he had been thinking about Joan of Arc as early as 1913, Shaw did not actually begin writing the play until 1923, three years after Joan's canonization. He consulted many earlier works on Joan, including the transcripts of her trial. In fact, he modestly said that he had done little more than reproduce Joan's own words as recorded in the transcripts; however, that statement is unfair to Shaw, who left a distinctive Shavian touch on the story of the martyred saint.

There are no villains in the play. Crime, like disease, is not interesting: it is something to be done away with by general consent, and that is all about it. It is what men do at their best, with good intentions, and what normal men and women find that they must and will do in spite of their intentions that really concern us.

Michael Holroyd has characterised the play as "a tragedy without villains" and also as Shaw's "only tragedy". John Fielden has discussed further the appropriateness of characterising Saint Joan as a tragedy.



*Task* Elucidate that the play Saint Joan is a tragedy without villains.

Joan, a teenage country girl, shows up at the castle of Vaucouleurs. She's determined to kick the English out of France and to crown the Dauphin, Charles, as King. Joan has heard voices from God telling her that this is her destiny. Through sheer confidence and natural charisma, she manages to sway the skeptical Captain Robert de Baudricourt. He gives her soldier's clothes, armor, and other supplies to assist in getting to the Dauphin.

Upon arriving at Charles's court, Joan wins over most everybody. First, she's able to pick Charles out of a crowd, which some view as a miracle. Her humility and reverence for the Church get the Archbishop on her side. Then of course, there's the Dauphin himself. It takes a little doing, but after a good old fashioned pep talk she convinces him to stop messing around and stand up for France and himself. Charles grants her control of the army.

She's off to Orleans, a town under siege by the English. Joan meets Dunois, the leader of the French troops at Orleans. He has been waiting for a while for the wind to change. It's the only way he can sail his soldiers up the river and launch a sneak attack on the English. When the wind switches directions upon Joan's arrival, Dunois is convinced that Joan has been sent by God. They march off together, to liberate Orleans.



*Notes* Joan's enemies are plotting against her. The Earl of Warwick and the Chaplain de Stogumber, both Englishmen, meet with Peter Cauchon, the Bishop of Beauvais. Warwick wants Cauchon to try Joan for heresy. The angry little Chaplain just wants her to die and die painfully. Cauchon agrees to try Joan, but refuses to be a political tool of the English. He says that he will do his best to save her soul.

Joan and company have been busy little bees. They've liberated Orleans, won a bunch of other battles, and have just crowned Charles as King in Rheims Cathedral. Joan, however, is unsatisfied. A good chunk of the country, including Paris, is still not under French control. She urges Charles,

the Archbishop, and Dunois to press on and liberate the capital city. When they refuse she says she'll just do it without them. They tell her that, if she gets captured, they'll do nothing to help her escape.

Joan gets captured and put on trial for heresy. Sure enough, her "friends" do nothing to rescue her. The Bishop Cauchon, true to his word, does everything he can to try and save her. He's helped in this effort by the Inquisitor. It proves to be impossible, though, because Joan's personal beliefs just don't jive with the Church's. She thinks God's messengers speak to her directly. They think God's voice on Earth is the Church and the Church alone; meaning the voices she hears must be demons. They also just can't handle with her wearing men's clothes. She absolutely refuses to dress like a woman as long as she's a soldier. In the end, they're forced to condemn her to death.

Twenty-five years later King Charles has a dream, in which Joan and good number of the other characters show up to have a chat in his royal bedroom. We learn the fate of everybody and, more importantly, we learn of Joan's legacy. King Charles now rules all of France. He set up a hearing to have her name cleared. We also learn from a time-traveling cleric that, many years afterward, Joan was made a saint by the Catholic Church. Everybody tells Joan how awesome she is and how they're sorry that they sold her out. Joan says, great, now can I come back to Earth as living person again? No way, says everybody and they all make excuses to exit the dream.

At the end of the play, Joan is left alone in a pool of light. She asks God when the world will be ready to accept saints like her.

## Self Assessment

Multiple Choice Questions:

7. George Bernard Shaw's *Saint Joan* was first produced in New York City in 1923 and in London in 1924. Shaw published it with
 

(a) a long preface	(b) a long epilogue
(c) detailed scenes	(d) seven scenes.
8. Twenty-five years later King Charles has a dream, in which Joan and good number of the other characters show up to have
 

(a) a chat in the battle	(b) a chat in his royal bedroom
(c) a chat in the hundred year war	(d) a chat in the battlefield of Orelon.

Fill in the blanks:

9. Michael Holroyd has characterised the play as a tragedy without .....
10. Joan gets captured and put on trial for .....

State whether the following statements are true or false:

11. There are no villains in the play *Saint Joan*.
12. Shaw start thinking about Joan of Arc in 1923 and write the play the same year.

## 22.3 Summary

- George Bernard Shaw was born in Synge Street, Dublin, in 1856 to George Carr Shaw (1814–85), an unsuccessful grain merchant and sometime civil servant, and Lucinda Elizabeth Shaw.
- Shaw briefly attended the Wesley College, Dublin, a grammar school operated by the Methodist Church in Ireland, before moving to a private school near Dalkey and then transferring to Dublin's Central Model School.
- When his mother left home and followed her voice teacher, George Vandeleur Lee, to London, Shaw was almost sixteen years old. His sisters accompanied their mother but Shaw remained in Dublin with his father, first as a reluctant pupil, then as a clerk in an estate office.

Notes

- In 1898, Shaw married Charlotte Payne-Townshend, a fellow Fabian, whom he survived. They settled in Ayot St. Lawrence in a house now called Shaw's Corner.
- Influenced by his reading, he became a dedicated Socialist and a charter member of the Fabian Society, a middle class organization established in 1884 to promote the gradual spread of socialism by peaceful means.
- In 1906 the Shaws moved into a house, now called Shaw's Corner, in Ayot St. Lawrence, a small village in Hertfordshire, England; it was to be their home for the remainder of their lives, although they also maintained a residence at 29 Fitzroy Square in London.
- Shaw's plays were first performed in the 1890s. By the end of the decade he was an established playwright.
- Shaw died there, aged 94, from chronic problems exacerbated by injuries he incurred by falling from a ladder.
- George Bernard Shaw's *Saint Joan* was first produced in New York City in 1923 and in London in 1924. Shaw published it with a long Preface in 1924.
- The play solidified Shaw's reputation as a major playwright and helped win him the Nobel Prize in 1925.
- Although he had been thinking about Joan of Arc as early as 1913, Shaw did not actually begin writing the play until 1923, three years after Joan's canonization.
- There are no villains in the play. Crime, like disease, is not interesting: it is something to be done away with by general consent, and that is all about it. It is what men do at their best, with good intentions, and what normal men and women find that they must and will do in spite of their intentions that really concern us.
- Joan, a teenage country girl, shows up at the castle of Vaucouleurs. She's determined to kick the English out of France and to crown the Dauphin, Charles, as King. Joan has heard voices from God telling her that this is her destiny.
- Joan and company have been busy little bees. They've liberated Orleans, won a bunch of other battles, and have just crowned Charles as King in Rheims Cathedral. Joan, however, is unsatisfied.
- Twenty-five years later King Charles has a dream, in which Joan and good number of the other characters show up to have a chat in his royal bedroom. We learn the fate of everybody and, more importantly, we learn of Joan's legacy.
- At the end of the play, Joan is left alone in a pool of light. She asks God when the world will be ready to accept saints like her.

## 22.4 Keywords

**Playwright** : A person who writes plays. Or The texts of plays that can be read, as distinct from being seen and heard in performance.

**Novelist** : A person who writes novels.

**Class privilege** : A special advantage, immunity, permission, right, or benefit granted to or enjoyed by an individual, class, or caste. Such an advantage, immunity, or right held as a prerogative of status or rank, and exercised to the exclusion or detriment of others. Or protection from being sued for libel or slander for making otherwise actionable statements in a context or forum where open and candid expression is deemed desirable for reasons of public policy.

**Fabian Society** : The Fabian Society is a British socialist movement, whose purpose is to advance the principles of democratic socialism via gradualist and reformist, rather than

- revolutionary, means. It is best known for its initial ground-breaking work beginning late in the 19th century and continuing up to World War I.
- Household** : Something for use in maintaining a home, especially for use in cooking, cleaning, laundering, repairing, etc., in the home.
- Martyr** : One who chooses to suffer death rather than renounce religious principles. Or One who makes great sacrifices or suffers much in order to further a belief, cause, or principle.
- Tragedy** : Tragedy depicts the downfall of a noble hero or heroine, usually through some combination of hubris, fate, and the will of the gods.
- Nationalism** : Nationalism is a political ideology that involves a strong identification of a group of individuals with a political entity defined in national terms, *i.e.* a nation.

## 22.5 Review Questions

1. Give a brief sketch of birth and early childhood of George Bernard Shaw.
2. Illustrate that George Bernard Shaw was a playwright.
3. George Bernard Shaw was a superb writer, illustrate this statement in context of his conferment of Nobel Prize and Oscar award.
4. Explain that *Saint Joan* was a tragedy without villain.
5. Joan gets captured and put on trial for heresy but her friends do nothing to rescue her. Why?

## Answers: Self Assessment

- |                      |          |                  |
|----------------------|----------|------------------|
| 1. (a)               | 2. (b)   | 3. Shaw's Corner |
| 4. Ayot St. Lawrence | 5. True  | 6. False         |
| 7. (a)               | 8. (b)   | 9. villains      |
| 10. heresy           | 11. True | 12. False        |

## 22.6 Further Readings



### Books

George Bernard Shaw, Harold Bloom (ed.). 1987. *Saint Joan*. Chelsea House Publishers, New York.

George Bernard Shaw, Dan H. Laurence (ed.). 2001. *Saint Joan*. Penguin Classics, UK.



### Online links

[http://www.nobelprize.org/nobel\\_prizes/literature/laureates/1925/](http://www.nobelprize.org/nobel_prizes/literature/laureates/1925/)

<http://www.novelguide.com/SaintJoan/novelsummary.html>

<http://www.enotes.com/saint-joan/underlying-philosophy>

## Unit 23: Saint Joan: Detailed Analysis of the Text

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## Objectives

## Notes

After studying this unit, you will be able to:

- Describe the summary of all the scenes;
- Illustrate the analysis of all the scenes;
- Analyse in detail the text of preface, scenes I to scenes VI and epilogue.

## Introduction

George Bernard Shaw's *Saint Joan* was first produced in New York City in 1923 and in London in 1924. Shaw published it with a long Preface in 1924. When word came out that Shaw, who was known as an irreverent jokester, was writing about a Christian saint and martyr, there were fears that he would not be able to produce something appropriate, but the early reception of the play was generally favorable, although some commentators criticized him for historical inaccuracy and for being too talky or comic. Over the years, the play, a rare tragic work in his generally comic oeuvre, has been seen as one of his greatest and most important. It has been hailed as being intellectually exciting and praised for dealing with important themes, such as nationalism, war, and the relation of the individual to society. The play solidified Shaw's reputation as a major playwright and helped win him the Nobel Prize in 1925. This unit elaborates the text of the play in detail from preface scene I to scene VI and epilogue. More emphasis is given on the detailed analysis of the text in all the scenes.

## 23.1 Preface

### 23.1.1 Summary

Shaw briefly recounts the barest biographical facts regarding Joan, and proceeds to anoint her as an exemplar of Protestantism, Nationalism, Realism, Feminism, and Rationalism. Shaw claims that, above all other real or perceived offenses, Joan was burned for her "presumption." People received Joan as either "miraculous" or "unbearable" because, like Socrates and even Jesus of Nazareth (but unlike Napoleon Bonaparte) before her, she did not understand the penalty paid by those who "show up" their supposed superiors: "[T]he strange superiority of Christ and the fear it inspires elicit a shriek of Crucify Him from all who cannot divine its benevolence."

In contrast to much of the hagiography Shaw sees surroundings of Joan; he judges her trial to have been a fair one, given the medieval worldview. He is not concerned with rehabilitating her character so much as he is concerned with restoring her humanity; he attempts not to demonstrate Joan's righteousness—"The mud that was thrown at her had dropped off by this time so completely that there is no need for any modern writer to wash up after it"—as to rehabilitate, to some degree, those who tried, judged, and condemned her. Joan's "ideal biographer," Shaw decrees, "must be free from nineteenth century prejudices and biases; must understand the Middle Ages, the Roman Catholic Church, and the Holy Roman Empire much more intimately than our Whig historians have ever understood them; and must be capable of throwing off sex partialities and their romance, and regarding women as the female of the human species, and not as a different kind of animal with specific charms and specific imbecilities." In short, Shaw proposes that, to truly understand Joan and the events in which she became embroiled and which she precipitated, one must first truly understand her historic, social, and intellectual context.



## Notes

Joan was not, argues Shaw, a beauty; or a poor “beggarmaid”; or illiterate; or unmindful of the political scene in which she moved. Nor, he insists, was Joan insane, despite the fact that she claimed inspiration and guidance from the voices and visions of saints and angels. In fact, Shaw posits, her voices and visions, so far from being evidence of insanity, are evidence of keen rationality and of superior imagination—a point to which Shaw returns repeatedly throughout the preface and, indeed, the play. Shaw argues that visionaries—those who are “geniuses,” those who see “farther and [probe] deeper than other people”—are judged by the results, or practical effects, of their visions. Joan’s visions were, for Shaw, simply the expression of her “mother wit.” Joan’s aims—raising the siege of Orleans and securing the enthronement of Charles VII at Rheims—were sound and sane, even though Joan claimed these aims came to her in messages from Saint Catherine. Shaw thus distinguishes between the content of Joan’s policy and the forms in which it came, which establish, not insanity, but “her dramatic imagination.” Joan was not “mentally defective” but “mentally excessive.”

Shaw praises Joan as “very capable” and “a born boss,” but reminds us that she was, after all, an adolescent girl. Her undeniable military and political successes, he argues, can only be attributed to “simplicity.” Her goals, for all their far-reaching consequences, were “simple” ones—that is, they could be decisively and unambiguously accomplished through force of arms. Her naïve nature aided her in this regard, Shaw says, but hurt her when she ran up against impersonal forces that drive and shape society—in Joan’s case, such forces as “the great ecclesiastical and social institutions of the Middle Ages.” As he will state later in the preface, “From the moment when [Joan] failed to stimulate Charles to follow up his coronation with a swoop on Paris she was lost.” She could not effect a further success to bolster her cause—and, as a “theocrat”, she learned the lesson that success after success is essential for the continuation of theocracy.

Shaw does not dispute that “a great wrong [was] done to Joan and to the conscience of the world by her burning.” He does, however, object that this wrong proves the medieval world “uncivilized” as compared to the modern world. He recounts childhood memories of public burnings in Dublin, and composer Richard Wagner’s recollection of crowds clamoring to see a man broken on the wheel, as evidence that modern bloodlust is all too real. Further, Shaw does not blithely pardon or excuse the Church for its part in Joan’s death. He argues, “The Churches must learn humility as well as teach it.” Only such humility leaves room for persons of genius, for visualizers, for giants of the imagination—such as Shaw believes Joan to have been—to move humanity forward. As Shaw says, “[W]hen the Churches set themselves against change as such, they are setting themselves against the law of God.”

Not only the Churches, Shaw argues, but all societal institutions must be on guard against stifling change and growth, of opposing what he has earlier called the “evolutionary appetite.” Granted, that “society must always draw a line somewhere between allowable conduct and insanity or crime,” we must still “be very careful what we persecute.” Shaw, therefore, argues for a broad tolerance, with limits of acceptability defined liberally rather than conservatively, widely rather than narrowly. As cautionary examples, he mentions such incidents as the imprisonment of pacifist Quakers during wartime and the 1920 attack of the British Government upon Irish “advocates of a constitutional change which it [i.e., the British Government] had presently to effect itself.” Shaw reminds his readers that Joan’s society afforded her a fair trial even during the stress and strain of civil war (between those French who supported the Dauphin and those who did not). Therefore, Shaw concludes, “there was not the smallest ground for the self-complacent conviction of the nineteenth century that it was more tolerant than the fifteenth.”



*Example:* Shaw returns at several points to the practice of inoculation. “Various forms of inoculation were used from ancient times in China, India, and Persia, but it remained for the English physician Edward Jenner in the late 18th century to demonstrate its feasibility to the Western world”. Judging from Shaw’s comments in the preface, all controversy regarding the practice and the mandating of it had not yet died down.



*Notes* In an arresting and provocative passage near the end of the preface, Shaw makes the point again that modern society is no less credulous than medieval society. He categorizes such spiritualist beliefs as mediums, clairvoyance and slate writing (i.e., “spirit writing”) together with such scientific items as “astronomers who tell us that the sun is nearly a hundred million miles away and that Betelgeuse is ten times as big as the whole universe” as well as atomic researchers. He does so not because he believes the scientists are wrong and the spiritualists correct, but rather to emphasize that “modern science has convinced us that nothing that is obvious is true.” Modern science demands every bit as much “faith” as medieval religion or the spiritualism of Shaw’s day.

## Notes

Turning finally to his own drama, Shaw reminds the readers that he has, because of the practical limits of the theatre, compressed the time frame in which events occurred and has combined some historical participants into composite characters. In short, he has taken dramatic license. He defends also the fact that his characters show, on the stage, awareness of their society that their historical counterparts would not have had, or at the least would not have articulated. He argues that such a theatrical device is needed to show the audience what impersonal societal forces were at work in Joan’s day and, indeed, are still at work in their own. He criticizes the plays of Shakespeare for creating the impression that “the world is finally governed by vulgarly ambitious individuals who make rows.” Shaw could thus be said to be rejecting what some later, twentieth and twenty-first century historians have referred to as the “Great Man” theory of history, in favor of a reading of history that privileges the work of larger societal forces.

Further, Shaw insists, “There are no villains in the piece. It is what men do at their best, with good intentions, and what normal men and women find that they must and will do in spite of their best intentions that really concern us.” Shaw relegates villains to melodrama; he is concerned with tragedy. He allows that tragedy, as a genre, inevitably falsifies its characters; but such falsification occurs for the greater good of making them intelligible to the audience, and therefore helping the audiences to better understand life. “[T]he things I represent these [characters] as saying,” Shaw states, “are the things they actually would have said if they had know what they were really doing.”

In closing, Shaw rejects calls from critics for shortening his play (which he says runs the accepted classical length of three hours for a tragedy), including calls to excise the epilogue. He defends the play as he has written it: “I write in the classical manner for those who pay for admission to a theatre because they like classical comedy or tragedy for its own sake, and like it so much when it is good of its kind and well done that they tear themselves away from it with reluctance.”

### 23.1.2 Analysis

In his classic book *The Quest for the Historical Jesus*, the nineteenth-century theologian, historian, and humanitarian Albert Schweitzer concluded that everyone finds the Jesus whom they intend to find. Judging from Shaw’s preface, we might well say the same of Joan. “She comes to us as one unknown,” we might say, revealing our own selves to us. Shaw hammers away at this point with his characteristic wit and vigor throughout the preface. At one point, for instance, he states that most-indeed, perhaps all-previous artistic interpreters and historians of Joan’s life “illustrate the too little considered truth that the fashion in which we think changes like the fashion of our clothes, and that it is difficult, if not impossible, for most people to think otherwise than in the fashion of their own period.” Readers would be justified in applying Shaw’s own words to himself. To what extent does Shaw think in the fashion of his day, and to what extent has he actually achieved the larger viewpoint that he seeks? Shaw is quick to criticize other artists’ representations of Joan. Does he posit that he is offering a superior view, or simply a different one? Whatever readers decide, they can at least credit him for

Notes

announcing his presuppositions at the outset. Saint Joan may or may not offer a historically accurate representation of its events, but at least we know that its author has tried to be accurate; and, in addition, it offers all readers an example in the possibilities and limits of doing history, of attempting to understand another era, as we would say, “from the inside out.”

## **23.2 Scene I**

### **23.2.1 Summary**

The play’s action begins in a room in Vaucouleurs, the castle of Captain Robert de Baudricourt, military commander, in the spring of 1429. Baudricourt is berating one of his servants, who has just informed him that there are no fresh eggs to be had that morning. Baudricourt is convinced that someone, perhaps this servant himself, has stolen the hens—as well as the cows, for there was no fresh milk to be had the day before. The servant informs Baudricourt that, on the contrary, the cows have stopped giving milk and the hens have stopped laying eggs ever since the captain refused to grant an audience to “The Maid.” The girl is still at the castle, still insistent upon seeing Baudricourt. “She is so positive,” the servant says of her, noting that all the captain’s host is encouraged by her. Exasperated at the girl’s stubbornness, Baudricourt summons her to him.

“The Maid” is, of course, Joan. Immediately upon meeting Baudricourt, she asks him to supply her with a horse, armor, and troops for a military expedition to Orleans, where the Dauphin (a title for the eldest son of the King of France or heir to the throne; in this context, the future King Charles VII) is being besieged by the invading English armies, thus being kept from assuming the throne. Baudricourt is shocked by her plans; he is even more shocked when the girl tells him that her plan is actually the will of God. She tells him she has already secured the aid of Bertrand de Poulengy (whom she casually calls “Polly”) and John of Metz (whom she similarly calls “Jack”), as well as other soldiers and servants of Baudricourt.

Still astonished, Baudricourt dismisses Joan and summons de Poulengy. He questions him about Joan. He suspects “Polly” of harboring untoward intentions toward the young lady. Polly insists that there is nothing improper about his interest in Joan. “There is something about her,” he tells Baudricourt, pointing out that Joan has inspired hope in French soldiers when neither the Dauphin nor La Hire, one of his military commanders, can. He wonders if supporting Joan in her quest to rid France of its English invaders, and to see Charles crowned as king, may not simply be the most practical course of action. Polly calls Joan “the last card left in our hand. Better play her than throw up the game.” When Baudricourt questions Joan’s sanity, Polly only replies, “We want a few mad people now. See where the sane ones have landed us!”

After a further interview with Joan, Baudricourt—seemingly, hardly able to believe it himself—agrees to give the Maid his support. He warns her that defeating the English will be more difficult than she expects, but Joan is confident that she will be able to beat the “goddams,” as the English soldiers are called: “One thousand like me can stop them. Ten like me can stop them with God on our side.” She says she will teach them that they belong in England, just as the French belong in France. As Joan departs, Baudricourt’s servant returns to make the unexpected report, “The hens are laying lie mad, sir.” Baudricourt can only conclude, “She did come from God.”

### **23.2.2 Analysis**

Scene I presents, on a small scale, many of the themes that will occupy the play on a larger scale by its conclusion. For example, much of what seemingly persuades Baudricourt to support Joan is her appeal to nationalism. Recall that, in the preface, Shaw called Joan an early advocate of nationalism,

a social and intellectual movement that, by definition, undercuts all claims to catholicity (or universality), including any claims of a “catholic” Church. Nationalism cannot be catholic; it is particular and specific. As Joan says, “God made [the English] just like us; but He gave them their own country and their own language.” Nationalism also stands in contrast to medieval feudalism: instead of vassals owing loyalty to their feudal masters, people now owe loyalty to their country, their nation. Joan summarizes the position nationalism occupies between feudalism and catholicism when she states, “We are all subject to the King of Heaven; and He gave us our countries and our languages, and meant us to keep to them.”



*Notes* The first scene also loudly announces Shaw’s theme of the salvific nature of imagination.

Even the description Shaw gives of Joan in his stage directions heralds this theme: Joan’s “eyes [are] very wide apart and bulging as they often do in very imaginative people” –and also, doubtless, indicative of her status as a “Galtonic visualizer”. While de Poulengey does not give credence to Joan’s reports of visions of and conversations with the saints, he cannot deny the practical effects her inspiration and motivation are having on French soldiers. He cannot deny, “There is something about the girl.” As Shaw said in the preface, the truth of the visions does not have to be granted in order to grant the truth of the visions’ outcomes, or the commonsense appeal of Joan’s policies and goals. “Her words and her ardent faith,” says Polly, “have put fire into me” –and that fire is exactly what the French need in their current situation. Imagination—the ability to see more and to see truly than others—will be the key to France’s salvation from English domination. Joan herself puts it plainly: when Baudricourt says, accusingly, that the voices she hears conveying God’s will come from her imagination, she replies with great assurance, “Of course. That is how the messages of God come to us.” The playwright’s unspoken warning is: Let those who ignore the divine message mediated through imagination beware! The rest of the play will show who is able to respond, and who is not, and what eventually happens to each.

## **23.3 Scene II**

### **23.3.1 Summary**

Charles the Dauphin and his court are at the central French town of Chinon. As the scene begins, four courtiers—Georges, Duc de la Trémouille, the Lord Chamberlain (the most important official in a royal household and counselor to the monarch); Regnault de Chartres, the Archbishop of Rheims (where the cathedral in which all French kings have been crowned is located); Captain Gilles de Rais, or “Bluebeard” for the “extravagance of a little curled beard dyed blue” which he sports, an aristocrat and military commander; and another commander, Captain La Hire are discussing the accidental drowning of a soldier whose death Joan supposedly prophesied because he was swearing. The Dauphin enters, interrupting the conversation, excited about the news he has received that Baudricourt is sending Joan to him: “He is sending a saint: an angel. And she is coming to me. She knows the blood royal.” Archbishop de Chartres protests that Charles cannot have an audience with Joan: “This creature is not a saint. She is not even a respectable woman.” La Hire proposes finding out what Joan is by testing her: when she arrives, Gilles de Rais will impersonate the Dauphin. If she can see through the deception, she will be permitted to speak to Charles. All agree to the plan, though for different reasons. Charles, for instance, wants to know that Joan can, in fact, detect the royal blood in him; De Chartres, on the other hand—who knows full well that, because the Dauphin’s physical description is common knowledge, Joan will be able to reject Gilles de Rais as an impostor—hopes that her “miracle” of detection will “confirm or create faith.”

## Notes

Joan, of course, does recognize that La Hire is not the Dauphin, and she is quickly introduced to Charles. They speak privately. Joan urges a reluctant Charles to accept his destiny: “[T]hou must face what God puts on thee.” Charles is loath to engage his enemies in combat, for “one good treaty is worth ten good fights.” Joan insists, however, that it cannot be France’s English invaders who are allowed to set the terms of any treaties. Charles further protests that he does not want to be king. Joan at last “tempts” him (Shaw’s word in the stage directions) by outlining for him her vision of a united France at peace. Charles calls his court back into session and announces that he has given command of his army to Joan—an announcement that sits well with neither La Trémouille nor De Chartres.

### 23.3.2 Analysis

Scene II raises the question of how much Joan is actually commanding the situation around her, and how much others are using her to advance their own agenda. As did Baudricourt and Polly in Scene I, the character in this scene recognize that supporting Joan’s crusade is a pragmatic, common sense decision. General Jack Dunois—the so-called “Bastard of Orleans” because he was the natural son of Louis, Duke of Orleans, Charles’ father whom the Burgundians had assassinated—has been unable to take his troops across the Loire River to attack the English because the wind has been blowing against him; therefore, the characters ask, might not Joan, for all her talk of saints and angels and visions, be able to do some good? The tone of Scene II, however, is quite different. Whereas Polly seemingly expressed a genuine hope, the outlook expressed here is more marked by cynicism and weariness. Consider, for instance, La Trémouille’s line: “Oh, let them have their way. Dunois’ men will give up the town in spite of him if somebody does not put some fresh spunk into them.” Also note how Archbishop de Chartres moves quickly from summary dismissal of Joan and her claims to a posture of asserting ecclesiastical authority over her: “The Church must examine the girl before anything is done about her.” La Trémouille and De Chartres’ conversation about Joan and miracles, in fact, emphasizes the degree to which Joan is vulnerable to being manipulated by others: the Archbishop views her as a potential “miracle,” not in any supernatural sense, but as “an event which creates faith,” even if the supposedly “miraculous” aspects can be rationally accounted for. Notice also how the Archbishop, who scoffed at the idea that Joan prophesied Foul Mouthed Frank’s death, then makes a similar prophecy of his own regarding De Rais, invoking Joan’s authority with the soldiers as his own. In these and other ways, Scene II dramatizes the claim Shaw made in the preface: that Joan, for all her energy and positive action, was always at the mercy of institutional and social forces larger than she understood.

Joan adopts an almost maternal attitude toward Charles in Scene II: she calls him the diminutive and intimate “Charlie,” for example, and she calls him a “poor child” whom she will have to teach to pray. Yet she also seems childlike, especially in her attitude of absolute and immediate subjection toward De Chartres: “Oh, my lord, you have given me such strength, such courage. It must be a most wonderful thing to be Archbishop.” This tension, too, dramatizes statements Shaw has made about Joan in the preface, and illustrates the paradoxical nature of her character.



*Task*

Illustrate the fact that Joan adopts an almost maternal attitude toward Charles in scene II.

This scene reinforces the preface in a further manner. De Chartres recognizes that “a new spirit [is] rising” in the age. “We are at the dawning of a wider epoch,” he states—an epoch, readers can infer, in which rationalism will carry the day away from religion. As a result, the Archbishop acts with

great pragmatism. Not only does the Archbishop's recognition of what we could call a new zeitgeist illustrate Shaw's depiction of Joan as a proto-Protestant and – Nationalist, it also is one example of his practice of having his characters say "what they would have said" if they fully understood their own actions and socio-cultural setting.

In both his stage directions and in the exchange of dialogue between De Rais and the Archbishop about his destiny on the gallows, Shaw is alluding to the fact that the historical De Rais is considered a forerunner of the modern "serial killer." For the murder of several young victims, de Rais was hanged; although he suffered this temporal capital punishment, he avoided the spiritual fate of excommunication by voluntary confession. Shaw does not fully develop the parallels he sees, if any, between Joan's trial and de Rais', likely because most academic historians today do not dispute de Rais' crimes. It is interesting, however, that both Joan and de Rais found themselves tried and executed, and that the one who died in the good graces of the Church—de Rais—was, history has shown, the true criminal, as opposed to Joan, who died a "relapsed heretic."

## 23.4 Scene III

### 23.4.1 Summary

The chronology of the play advances by almost two months, to Orleans on April 29, 1429 (the date on which French forces, led by Joan, entered the city). Captain Dunois, the "Bastard of Orleans," is lamenting the fact that the wind has not shifted in his favor when he receives word that Joan approaches. Joan urges that she, Dunois, and the French forces cross the bridge leading into Orleans, but Dunois advises her that matters are not as simple as that and gently chastises her for her impatience. He tells her she is in love with war (just as, in Scene II, de Chartres told her she was in love with religion). He explains that, without a change in the wind, the French rafts carrying heavy artillery with which to attack the English fortifications cannot progress upstream. He says he will take Joan to church that she may pray for a west wind. Almost immediately, Dunois' pageboy sneezes. Miraculously, the wind has changed. Dunois is now convinced that "God has spoken," and he and Joan lead the French into battle.

### 23.4.2 Analysis

This brief scene dramatizes the turning point of the battle of Orleans, which lasted from April 29 to May 9, and was, in itself, a turning point in the entire Hundred Years' War. The English had besieged Orleans since October 12 of the previous year. Shaw, who does not dramatize other dramatic moments from Joan's biography in his play—neither Joan's visions, Charles' coronation, nor Joan's burning are themselves shown on stage (see Shaw's comments about dramatic spectacle in the preface)—does choose to depict this key moment in the French campaign. Readers may wish to consider why this scene emerges as the one true "action moment" in this drama that is otherwise mainly occupied by dialogue.

In an essay entitled "On Playing Joan," actress Imogen Stubbs has written humorously of the practical difficulties staging this scene involves: "This requires a banner, a wind machine, and a sense of humour. We had nightmares with that moment. The poor boy whose only aim was to leap up and down and shout at the wind! the wind!—It's changed!' would either have to scream above the sound of a Boeing 707 taking off, or stare at the limp banner and say 'The wind! The wind! I'm sure it's about to change,' rush into the wings screaming 'Point the machine higher you idiots' and then rush back on stage and say 'God has spoken'. When staged successfully, this scene could provoke audiences to consider whether, in fact, God has spoken, or whether the shifting wind is—like the drowning of "Foul-Mouthed Frank," discussed in Scene II—another coincidence into which we are free to read what we will, or what we hope to find.

Notes

**Self Assessment**

Multiple Choice Questions:

1. Immediately upon meeting Baudricourt Saint Joan asks him supply her with
  - (a) horse, armor, and troops
  - (b) extra troops and foods for the soldier
  - (c) horse, armor and troops for a rescue operation
  - (d) back supply and extra troops for military expedition.
2. The scene III dramatizes the turning point of
  - (a) Second World War
  - (b) battle of Orleans
  - (c) the battle of French with the British
  - (d) The First World War.

Fill in the blanks:

3. Charles the Dauphin and his court are at the central French town of .....
4. What persuades Baudricourt to support Joan is her appeal to .....

State whether the following statements are true or false:

5. Shaw praises Joan as “very capable” and “a born boss,” but reminds us that she was, after all, an adolescent girl.
6. Scene III raises the question of how much Joan is actually commanding the situation around her, and how much others are using her to advance their own agenda.
7. The chronology of the play advances by almost two months, to Orleans on April 29, 1429, the date on which French forces, led by Joan, entered the city.

**23.5 Scene IV**

**23.5.1 Summary**

Several battles after Joan and Dunois recaptured Orleans, Richard de Beauchamp, the Earl of Warwick; and Chaplain Stogumber are in a tent in an English camp. Stogumber is most distressed at seeing English forces defeated abroad. Warwick (he is referred to by his title) cannot quite understand the priest’s self-identification as an “Englishman,” but he does understand that such burgeoning nationalism is a threat to both Stogumber’s ecclesiastical authority and his own authority as a feudal lord. To reassure Stogumber, however, that Joan’s campaign will not ultimately succeed, Warwick shares with the chaplain plans to get Joan under English control: “Some of Charles’s people will sell her to the Burgundians; the Burgundians will sell her to us.”

The chaplain and the nobleman receive a visitor: Cauchon, the Bishop of Beauvais. Warwick tells Cauchon that Stogumber believes Joan to be a witch, and suggests that Cauchon would have to turn Joan over to the Inquisition “and have her burnt for that offence.” While the chaplain points to Joan’s recovery on the battlefield at Orleans from what seemed to be a mortal wound, as well as to the very fact that her forces have bested those of the English, as evidence of her sorcery, Cauchon has a different opinion of the Maid: “She is not a witch. She is a heretic.” He believes the Devil is using Joan to strike, not against the English nation, but against the whole Catholic Church—indeed, against “the souls of the entire human race.”

Warwick mistakenly believes that the bishop is already disposed to help him find a way of killing Joan; with much indignation, Cauchon announces that he is no puppet. “You great lords are too

prone to treat The Church as a mere political convenience. [T]he soul of this village girl is of equal value with yours or your king's before the throne of God; and my first duty is to save it." He does not deny, however, that he can divide Joan's spiritual fate from her temporal one, and that, if she is declared to be excommunicated from the Church, she could be handed over to the temporal authorities for such punishment as those authorities deem fit. In response, Warwick suggests that "the practical problem would seem to be how to save her soul without saving her body." At first, Cauchon is primarily angry about the way Joan sets herself above the Church; but Warwick argues that Joan is equally as much a threat to "the temporal power," the aristocracy. In short, Joan proposes "a transaction which would wreck the whole social structure of Christendom." Joan is a "Protestant." In the end, all three men agree that—alluding to John 11:50, knowingly or not—"it is expedient that one woman die for the people."

### 23.5.2 Analysis

The wind has changed in more senses than the literal. With Scene IV, Shaw's play reaches a turning point as Joan's campaign did with Scene III. Until this point, Shaw has focused on Joan's supporters. Now, her opponents take the stage. Ironically, representatives of the two great, opposing armies of England and France find common ground, though for different reasons, in their desire to see Joan's cause brought to an end. Scene IV thus offers further, ample evidence of Shaw's technique (which he announced in his preface) of having characters speak as though they possessed the one-step-removed, dispassionate understanding of their own time and situation that Shaw possesses. Cauchon's assessment of Joan as a heretic rather than a witch, for example, shows that the bishop understands the true nature of the alleged threat that Joan represents: the threats of proto-Protestantism that undercuts the Church's magisterial authority, and of fledgling Nationalism that undercuts the authority of the medieval feudal system. The historical Cauchon would not, of course, have spoken in such terms; but Shaw enables his theatrical Cauchon to do so in order to dramatize the interplay of these various social forces.

In keeping with the spirit of Shaw's preface, which continually forces the modern era to justify its (in Shaw's eyes unjustifiable) sense of superiority to the Middle Ages, readers may choose to reflect on Cauchon's comment that, in a world where Joan's individualistic "Protestantism" becomes the spirit of the age, life will be filled with more blood, fury, and devastation. How many times have these terms proved apt to describe the post-medieval course of human civilization, especially in the 20th century in the early years of which Shaw was writing *Saint Joan*, having just witnessed the disillusioning horrors of World War I? To be sure, few, if any, in 21st century American society would choose to live under the structures of feudal aristocracy and medieval ecclesiastical power. Even so, we might pause to ask if our society could benefit from some arrangement in which "the individual soul" is not the ultimate seat of authority. Readers may ask: What institutions, if any, possess the potential of unifying society without crushing individual freedom and responsibility? Can the two goals be mutually achieved, or must they always remain in tension and, if so, how can the tension be a creative one?



*Notes* The word "Protestant," applied to Joan not only in this scene but also in the preface, was an originally pejorative term (as it is in Warwick's speech) that did not arise until the 16th century. In its essential meaning, however—literally, one who protests—it is applicable not only to Joan but also to Hus and Wycliffe, whom Cauchon mentions.



## Notes

**23.6 Scene V****23.6.1 Summary**

The setting is the “ambulatory,” or area behind the altar at the east end of a cathedral, of Rheims Cathedral, shortly after the Dauphin has been crowned King Charles VII. Joan is at prayer. She is interrupted by Dunois, who tells her the crowds outside are calling for her. Joan thanks Dunois for his friendship, and wonders why “all these courtiers and knights and churchmen” hate her. Dunois tells her that no one enjoys or appreciates being bested by those whom they regard as their inferiors. When Joan announces her assumption that the French forces will now press on to recapture Paris, Dunois warns her that she will not be allowed to do so. And, in fact when the newly anointed Charles arrives, with Rais and La Hire, he does recoil at the thought of marching on for Paris. He suggests making a treaty with the Burgundians instead: “[L]et us be content with what we have done.” When Joan protests, the Archbishop de Chartres, who has just entered the scene, warns Joan of her pride: “You forget yourself. You very often forget yourself.” And Dunois, even though he is a friend to Joan, reminds her that his military generalship contributed in no small part to the French successes: “I know exactly how much God did for us through The Maid, and how much He left me to do by my own wits.” He states that Joan is in danger of being captured by her enemies if she continues to press on against numerically superior forces.



*Example:* A price of 16,000 English pounds is on her head, and Dunois knows that no one from the army, the state, or the church will “lift a finger” to help Joan should she be captured. “You stand alone,” the Archbishop tells her. Rather than causing Joan to despair, this statement seems to determine her defiance and her resolve: “Yes. I have always been alone. France is alone; and God is alone; and what is my loneliness before the loneliness of my country and my God?” She marches out to meet the crowds who are calling for her, while her companions express sorrow over what now seems to be her inevitable fate.

**23.6.2 Analysis**

As did Scene IV, Scene V illustrates the way in which “commonsense” and realism is turning against Joan. Joan argues that no mystic voices need to make the commonsense case for “striking while the iron is hot” and marching on to Paris. She appeals to the sensible reasons she has provided for all of her actions, even if the promptings came from saints and angels. Dunois and the others do not dispute any of this, but they do insist that commonsense dictates against any one coming to Joan’s aid should she press too far. Dunois, for example, whom Shaw portrays as Joan’s strongest and staunchest supporter in the play, makes the cool, level-headed calculation that he will not be able to risk the lives of his men in an effort to rescue Joan, “much as I cherish her as a companion-in-arms.” Joan’s cause has reached a point at which she would be better off, as she says, going home to her farm. Part of her tragedy, as Shaw reads her story, is that Joan did not recognize her limitations and the limitations of others. He does present her as prideful-and, as the Archbishop admonishes her, alluding to a biblical proverb, “Pride will have a fall.” The falling action of Shaw’s classical tragedy is clearly taking shape.

**23.7 Scene VI****23.7.1 Summary**

Two years after Scene V-May 30, 1431-Joan’s trial is coming to its close at the castle of Rouen. Cauchon has convened the court. Canon John D’Estivet is the “promoter,” or prosecutor; and Brother John Lemaitre is at the proceedings in his capacity as representative of the Inquisition. The Inquisition

has only recently become involved in the case, he says, for only recently has the Inquisitor decided that Joan's is "one of the gravest cases of heresy within [his] experience." The Earl of Warwick makes it clear that he is looking forward to a hasty resolution and condemnation of Joan; Cauchon affirms again that Joan shall have a fair hearing, for "[t]he Church is not subject to political necessity." D'Estivet and the Inquisitor, however, remark that Joan has been doing much to condemn herself, every time she has opened her mouth in her previous examinations.

Not all of Joan's opponents are satisfied with the proceedings thus far, however. Chaplain de Stogumber and De Courcelles, a Parisian cleric, arrive and protest that the Inquisitor has reduced the charges against Joan, eliminating a number of what the Inquisitor considers lesser matters—for example, a charge that Joan stole a bishop's horse, or that she dances "round fairy trees with the village children, and praying at haunted wells, and a dozen other things." The Inquisitor is firm: "Heresy, gentlemen, heresy is the charge we have to try." He points out that they cannot leave a door open for Joan to defend herself successfully against lesser charges while the most important charge of heresy remains, inferring that any acquittal Joan might gain, however small, would undercut the case against her. He reminds his hearers that Joan's heresy in particular cannot be overlooked or forgiven, for she is one of many "vain and ignorant persons setting up their own judgment against the Church, and taking it upon themselves to be the interpreters of God's will." He urges the court to remember mercy, but also to insist upon justice and to set aside their natural compassion: "[R]emember that nothing is so cruel in its consequences as the toleration of heresy." Cauchon labels Joan's error the "arch heresy" of "Protestantism," which, if left unchecked, could well bring the "mighty structure of Catholic Christendom" to ruin.

A guard of English soldiers brings Joan, in shackles, before the court. Joan protests her treatment, but is told that nothing else can be done, for she tried to jump out the window of the tower where she was being held. Joan retorts that of course she tried to escape; it was a commonsense action, and her survival of the jump is a sign, not of witchcraft, but the degree to which the tale has grown in the re-telling—the tower's height has been exaggerated. Joan insists that she is neither a witch nor mad: "I am reasonable if you will be reasonable." When talk of making her yet again swear an oath to tell the truth arises, Joan refuses, claiming, "God does not allow the whole truth to be told." She further declares that she will not profess that her voices and visions, and the actions they prompted, spring from any diabolical source: "What God made me do I will never go back on; and what He has commanded or shall command I will not fail to do in spite of any man alive. My voices do not tell me to disobey the Church; but God must be served first."

At length, Joan realizes in horror that the stake is being readied for her even at that moment. Frightened, she says, after prompting from the court officials, that her voices have misled her. In order to avoid excommunication (the spiritual punishment) and execution (the temporal one), Joan makes her mark on a document of recantation. De Stogumber and other English officials are furious when the Inquisitor allows Joan to recant. Her recanting, however, does not last long, for a sentence is still pronounced: Joan must spend the rest of her life in prison, with only bread and water for sustenance. Now understanding that she is not to be set free, Joan tears up the recantation. Now judged as a "relapsed heretic," the Inquisitor and Cauchon solemnly intone the judgment of excommunication, and Joan is led away to the stake. The Inquisitor remarks, "[I]t is a terrible thing to see a young and innocent creature crushed between these mighty forces, the Church and the Law."

After Joan is burnt, de Stogumber, who has witnessed it all, returns to the castle interior, where he seeks consolation from Warwick. He laments, "I did not know what I was doing." He relates how Joan, as she burned, asked for a cross, and a nearby soldier took two sticks and tied them together for her. She clutched the cross until it was snatched from her, and as she died, she warned Ladvenu, another of the court officials, not to get too close to the flames. She thought of another's danger at her own moment of death. "Jesus!" the chaplain cries. "She is in Thy bosom; and I am in hell forevermore." Ladvenu prophesies, "This is not the end for her, but the beginning." And though the executioner reports that there is nothing left of Joan's body—save her heart, which would not burn Warwick believes that none have heard the last of Joan of Arc.

Notes

### 23.7.2 Analysis

In the penultimate scene of his drama, Shaw depicts Joan as the proto-Protestant he holds her to be: adamantly insisting upon the privileged position of her individual relationship to God, over and against the Church's magisterial authority to interpret and pronounce God's will; denying that the Church is wiser than she is, simply because the Church claims it is; and affirming her right of conscience to obey God as she understands such obedience. All the arguments that Shaw has been making about Joan throughout the play—her Nationalism, her Protestantism, her Rationalism, her Imagination—come to fruition in this scene. Some readers may feel, ironically, that Shaw, although he has set out to humanize Joan and strip away the "whitewashing" of centuries of legend and piety, he has substituted an equally "mythic" Joan in the former construct's place. On the other hand, readers must remember Shaw's intention, stated in the preface, to dramatize social forces, and to have his characters speak as they never could have in history. To a large extent, this intention accounts for Joan's emergence in Scene VI as virtually the incarnation of the modern spirit—despite her "imagery" (as Shaw called it in the preface) of saints and angels—in the face of the medieval spirit.

Yet Shaw does not let modern audiences rest easy in congratulatory self-satisfaction—another of Shaw's stated intentions. For example, the Inquisitor's lengthy speech justifying the Inquisition and its courts as a kindness gives modern readers pause. We are all too aware that the worst of actions can be justified under the best and most sincere of intentions. Indeed, as the Inquisitor himself states, "Heresy at first seems innocent and even laudable. [Heretics] believe honestly and sincerely that their diabolical inspiration is divine." Shaw unsettles his audience, leading them to wonder, as he does in the preface, if their own cherished "orthodoxies" are no less diabolical. Again, Shaw is dramatizing what he sees as the horror of intolerance. Joan is, in this sense, a martyr to society's need to preserve itself a legitimate need, but only when not taken too far, as Shaw believes it was in this case and still was in many cases in his own day. He does not offer any easy answers or solutions; his purpose is to confront us with the dilemma, and that purpose has achieved.

## 23.8 Epilogue

### 23.8.1 Summary

A quarter-century after Joan's death, King Charles VII is falling asleep over a book in bed when Ladvenu enters his chambers to tell him that Joan, in a new ecclesiastical inquiry, has been rehabilitated and judged innocent. Ladvenu reflects on the irony: at Joan's first trial, justice was administered fairly and truth was told, and yet she was burned; at her second, falsehood prevailed in testimony and procedure, and yet the Maid has been justified. Charles' sole concern is that he is now no longer open to charges that he was crowned by a witch and a heretic. He also talks about the hypocrisy of Joan's latter-day judges: "If you could bring her back to life, they would burn her again within six months, for all their present adoration of her."

After Ladvenu leaves, Charles sleeps and dreams. Joan appears to him in his dream. Joan reacts to news of her rehabilitation with typical commonsense: "I was burned, all the same. Can they unburn me?" Charles admits, "If they could, they would think twice before they did it."

More figures from the past—some dead, others who are also asleep, elsewhere, but whose spirits have been mystically summoned by the spirit of Joan—enter Charles' dream. Cauchon manifests himself, relating how, as a result of the second inquest into Joan's case, he is not allowed to rest in peace; his corpse has been unearthed and flung into the sewer, so great is the public's hatred of him, so thoroughgoing has the vilification of him been. Dunois appears, telling Joan that he has kept his

word and has rid France of the English. And the soldier who fashioned the cross for Joan at her burning makes his entrance, also making the rather startling announcement that he is in hell, but receives one “day off” each year for that good deed that he did for Joan. Charles and the others also glimpses the future canonization of Joan as a saint, thanks to the entrance of a gentleman from the 1920s who announces the news of Joan’s elevation to sainthood.

The epilogue and play end with a striking contrast of “litanies.” One by one, the characters in the dream offer their praises to Saint Joan, reciting the various reasons why she is to be lauded. Joan then declares, “Woe unto me when all men praise me!” She asks who among her chorus of admirers would want her to return from the dead. One by one, each character rejects her. No one, given the choice, would have her back. Only the anonymous soldier stays with her, until he, too, leaves, summoned back to Hell at the stroke of midnight. The last line of the play echoes biblical language of lament as Joan cries out, “O God that madest this beautiful earth, when will it be ready to receive Thy saints? How long, O Lord, how long?”

### 23.8.2 Analysis

When the anonymous soldier who made the cross for Joan tells her that his fifteen’ years service in the French wars was worse than his eternal damnation in Hell, Joan flings up her arms, a gesture, the stage directions inform us, of “despair of humanity.” That phrase could be seen as an apt summary of Shaw’s epilogue. Repeatedly, the playwright makes the point, through his characters, that Joan would be no more welcome in the modern world than she was in the medieval one. The litany of rejection that follows immediately after the litany of praise makes this point in a dramatic fashion, as does the play’s famous final line. Some readers may feel that Shaw exercises a heavy hand, but he does not want the moral of his version of Joan’s story to go unnoticed and unheeded. Joan’s lamentation in the face of men’s praise makes the point—as the Archbishop warned her in Scene V—that Joan is alone in death, even as she was in life. Shaw leaves his audience and his readers with a vision of Joan as imaginative genius, one of those singular members of the human race who embody its super-personal drive for evolution, for advancement, for change and who also embody the resistance to such development that is inevitably encountered. The plaintive question on Joan’s lips as the curtain falls, surely, is Shaw’s own.

### Self Assessment

Multiple Choice Questions:

8. Two years after scene V, May 30, 1431, Joan’s trial is coming to its close
 

(a) at the castle of Rouen	(b) in a room in Orleans
(c) in a room in Vaucouleurs	(d) in the battle field of Orleans.
9. All the arguments that Shaw has been making about Joan throughout the play—her Nationalism, Protestantism, her Rationalism, her Imagination—come to fruition in
 

(a) scene V	(b) scene VI
(c) epilogue	(d) scene IV.

Fill in the blanks:

10. Several battles after Joan and Dunois recaptured Orleans, ....., the Earl of Warwick; and Chaplain Stogumber are in a tent in an English camp.
11. Joan thanks Dunois for his friendship, and wonders why all these courtiers and ..... hate her.

Notes

State whether the following statements are true or false:

12. Scene V illustrates the way in which “commonsense” and realism is turning against Joan.
13. After Ladvenu leaves, Charles sleeps and dreams, Joan appears to him in his dream and Joan reacts to news of her rehabilitation with typical commonsense.

### 23.9 Summary

- Joan, a teenage country girl, shows up at the castle of Vaucouleurs. She’s determined to kick the English out of France and to crown the Dauphin (that’s a title for the oldest son of a king of France), Charles, as King.
- Joan has heard voices from God telling her that this is her destiny. Through sheer confidence and natural charisma, she manages to sway the skeptical Captain Robert de Baudricourt. He gives her soldier’s clothes, armor, and other supplies to assist in getting to the Dauphin.
- Upon arriving at Charles’s court, Joan wins over most everybody. First, she’s able to pick Charles out of a crowd, which some view as a miracle. Her humility and reverence for the Church get the Archbishop on her side. Then of course, there’s the Dauphin himself. It takes a little doing, but after a good old fashioned pep talk she convinces him to stop messing around and stand up for France and himself. Charles grants her control of the army.
- She’s off to Orleans, a town under siege by the English. Joan meets Dunois, the leader of the French troops at Orleans. He has been waiting for a while for the wind to change. It’s the only way he can sail his soldiers up the river and launch a sneak attack on the English.
- When the wind switches directions upon Joan’s arrival, Dunois is convinced that Joan has been sent by God. They march off together, to liberate Orleans.
- Meanwhile, Joan’s enemies are plotting against her. The Earl of Warwick and the Chaplain de Stogumber, both Englishmen, meet with Peter Cauchon, the Bishop of Beauvais. Warwick wants Cauchon to try Joan for heresy.
- The angry little Chaplain just wants her to die and die painfully. Cauchon agrees to try Joan, but refuses to be a political tool of the English. He says that he will do his best to save her soul.
- Joan and company have been busy little bees. They’ve liberated Orleans, won a bunch of other battles, and have just crowned Charles as King in Rheims Cathedral. Joan, however, is unsatisfied. A good chunk of the country, including Paris, is still not under French control. She urges Charles, the Archbishop, and Dunois to press on and liberate the capital city. When they refuse she says she’ll just do it without them. They tell her that, if she gets captured, they’ll do nothing to help her escape.
- Joan gets captured and put on trial for heresy. Sure enough, her “friends” do nothing to rescue her. The Bishop Cauchon, true to his word, does everything he can to try and save her. He’s helped in this effort by the Inquisitor. It proves to be impossible, though, because Joan’s personal beliefs just don’t jive with the Church’s.
- She thinks God’s messengers speak to her directly. They think God’s voice on Earth is the Church and the Church alone, meaning the voices she hears must be demons. They also just can’t handle with her wearing men’s clothes. She absolutely refuses to dress like a woman as long as she’s a soldier. In the end, they’re forced to condemn her to death.
- Twenty-five years later King Charles has a dream, in which Joan and good number of the other characters show up to have a chat in his royal bedroom. We learn the fate of everybody and, more importantly, we learn of Joan’s legacy.

- King Charles now rules all of France. He set up a hearing to have her name cleared. We also learn from a time-traveling cleric that, many years afterward, Joan was made a saint by the Catholic Church. Everybody tells Joan how awesome she is and how they're sorry that they sold her out. Joan says, great, now can I come back to Earth as living person again? No way, says everybody and they all make excuses to exit the dream.
- At the end of the play, Joan is left alone in a pool of light. She asks God when the world will be ready to accept saints like her.

### 23.10 Keywords

**Protestantism** : Protestantism is one of the three major groupings (Catholicism, Orthodoxy, and Protestantism) within Christianity.

**Nationalism** : Nationalism is a political ideology that involves a strong identification of a group of individuals with a political entity defined in national terms, *i.e.*, a nation.

**Realism** : Realism in the visual arts and literature refers to the general attempt to depict subjects "in accordance with secular, empirical rules", as they are considered to exist in third person objective reality, without embellishment or interpretation.

**Feminism** : Feminism is a collection of movements aimed at defining, establishing, and defending equal political, economic, and social rights and equal opportunities for women.

**Rationalism** : Rationalism is "any view appealing to reason as a source of knowledge or justification".

### 23.11 Review Questions

1. What does Saint Joan determined?
2. Illustrate and analyse the events of scene II.
3. Illustrate that the scene III dramatizes the turning point of the battle of Orleans.
4. Explain the fact that the epilogue and play end with a striking contrast of litanies.
5. Write a short notes on the events of:
  - (a) Scene I
  - (b) Scene IV
  - (c) Scene VI

### **Answers: Self Assessment**

1. (a)
2. (b)
3. Chinon
4. Nationalism
5. True
6. False
7. True
8. (a)
9. (b)
10. Richard de Beauchamp
11. knights and churchmen
12. True
13. True

Notes

**23.12 Further Readings**



*Books*

George Bernard Shaw, Harold Bloom (ed.). 1987. *Saint Joan*. Chelsea House Publishers, New York.

George Bernard Shaw, Dan H. Laurence (ed.). 2001. *Saint Joan*. Penguin Classics, UK.



*Online links*

<http://www.enotes.com/saint-joan/summary>

<http://www.shmoop.com/saint-joan/summary.html>

## Unit 24: Saint Joan: Epilogue and Plot

Notes

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Objectives

Introduction

24.1 Epilogue

24.2 Plot

24.3 Summary

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24.6 Further Readings

### Objectives

After studying this unit, you will be able to:

- Describe the analysis of the epilogue;
- Illustrate the various plots hatched in the play;
- Give a detailed analysis of all the plots.

### Introduction

A quarter-century after Joan's death, King Charles VII is falling asleep over a book in bed when Ladvenu enters his chambers to tell him that Joan, in a new ecclesiastical inquiry, has been rehabilitated and judged innocent. Ladvenu reflects on the irony: at Joan's first trial, justice was administered fairly and truth was told, and yet she was burned; at her second, falsehood prevailed in testimony and procedure, and yet the Maid has been justified. Charles' sole concern is that he is now no longer open to charges that he was crowned by a witch and a heretic. He also talks about the hypocrisy of Joan's latter-day judges: "If you could bring her back to life, they would burn her again within six months, for all their present adoration of her. This unit elaborates a detailed analysis of the epilogue and the plot hatched in this play.

### 24.1 Epilogue

Shaw characterised Saint Joan as "A Chronicle Play in six Scenes and an Epilogue". Joan, a simple peasant girl, hears voices which she claims to be those of Saint Margaret, Saint Catherine, and the archangel Michael, sent by God to guide her conduct.

Scene 1 begins with Robert de Baudricourt complaining about the inability of the hens on his farm to produce eggs. Joan claims that her voices are telling her to raise a siege against Orleans, and to allow her several of his men for this purpose. Joan also says that she will eventually crown the Dauphin in Rheims cathedral. De Baudricourt ridicules Joan, but his servant feels inspired by her



## Notes

words. De Baudricourt eventually begins to feel the same sense of inspiration, and gives his consent to Joan. The servant enters at the end of the scene to exclaim that the hens have begun to lay eggs again. De Baudricourt interprets this as a sign from God of Joan's divine inspiration.

In Scene 2 (8 March 1429), Joan talks her way into being received at the court of the weak and vain Dauphin. There, she tells him that her voices have commanded her to help him become a true king by rallying his troops to drive out the English occupiers and restore France to greatness. Joan succeeds in doing this through her excellent powers of flattery, negotiation, leadership, and skill on the battlefield.

In Scene 3 (29 April 1429), Dunois and his page are waiting for the wind to turn so that he and his forces can lay siege to Orléans. Joan and Dunois commiserate, and Dunois attempts to explain to her more pragmatic realities of an attack, without the wind at their back. Her replies eventually inspire Dunois to rally the forces, and at the scene's end, the wind turns in their favour.



*Task* Joan and Dunois commiserate, and Dunois attempts to explain to her more pragmatic realities of an attack, illustrate this statement in context of scene 3.

Ultimately she is betrayed, and captured by the English at the siege of Compiègne. Scene 6 (30 May 1431) deals with her trial. John de Stogumber is adamant that she be executed at once. The Inquisitor, the Bishop of Beauvais, and the Church officials on both sides of the trial have a long discussion on the nature of her heresy. Joan is brought to the court, and continues to assert that her voices speak to her directly from God and that she has no need of the Church's officials. This outrages de Stogumber. She acquiesces to the pressure of torture at the hands of her oppressors, and agrees to sign a confession relinquishing the truth behind her voices, so that she can live a life in permanent confinement without hope of parole. Upon hearing this, Joan changes her mind:

Joan: "You think that life is nothing but not being dead? It is not the bread and water I fear. I can live on bread. It is no hardship to drink water if the water be clean. But to shut me from the light of the sky and the sight of the fields and flowers; to chain my feet so that I can never again climb the hills. To make me breathe foul damp darkness, without these things I cannot live. And by your wanting to take them away from me, or from any human creature, I know that your council is of the devil."



*Notes* Joan accepts the ultimate punishment of death at the stake as preferable to such an imprisoned existence. De Stogumber vehemently demands that Joan then be taken to the stake for immediate execution.

The Inquisitor and the Bishop of Beauvais excommunicate her and deliver her into the hands of the English. The Inquisitor asserts that Joan was fundamentally innocent, in the sense that she was sincere and had no understanding of the church and the law. De Stogumber re-enters, screaming and severely shaken emotionally after seeing Joan die in the flames, the first time that he has witnessed such a death, and realising that he has not understood what it means to burn a person at the stake until he has actually seen it happen. A soldier had given Joan two sticks tied together in a cross before the moment of her death. Bishop Martin Ladvenu also reports that when he approached with a cross to let her see the cross before she died, and he approached too close to the flames, she had warned him of the danger from the stake, which convinced him that she could not have been under the inspiration of the devil.



*Did u know?* In the Epilogue, 25 years after Joan's execution, a new trial has cleared her of heresy.

Brother Martin brings the news to the King Charles. Charles then has a dream in which Joan appears to him. She begins conversing cheerfully not only with Charles, but with her old enemies, who also materialise in the King's bedroom. An emissary from the present day (at the time of the play, the 1920s) brings news that the Catholic Church is to canonise her, in the year 1920. Joan says that saints can work miracles, and asks if she can be resurrected. At this, all the characters desert her one by one, asserting that the world is not prepared to receive a saint such as her. The last to leave is the English soldier, who is about to engage in a conversation with Joan before he is summoned back to hell at the end of his 24-hour respite. The play ends with Joan ultimately despairing that mankind will never accept its saints:

O God that madest this beautiful earth, when will it be ready to accept thy saints? How long, O Lord, how long?

### Self Assessment

Multiple Choice Questions:

- Joan, a simple peasant girl, hears voices which she claims to be those of
  - Saint Margaret, Saint Catherine and archangel Michael
  - Saint Margaret and archangel Michael
  - Saint Catherine and Saint Maragaret
  - Saint Catherine and archangel Michael.
- Saint Joan is betrayed and captured by the English at the siege of
 

(a) Orleans	(b) Compiègne
(c) Stogumber	(d) Vaucouleurs.

Fill in the blanks:

- Joan accepts the ultimate punishment of death at the stake as preferable to such an ..... .
- In the Epilogue, 25 years after Joan's execution, a new trial has cleared her of ..... .

State whether the following statements are true or false:

- De Stogumber vehemently opposes the immediate execution of Joan.
- Church officials on both sides of the trial have a long discussion on the nature of her heresy.
- In Scene 3 (29 April 1429), Dunois and his page are waiting for the wind to turn so that he and his forces can lay siege to Orléans.

### 24.2 Plot

Most good stories start with a fundamental list of ingredients: the initial situation, conflict, complication, climax, suspense, denouement, and conclusion. Great writers sometimes shake up the recipe and add some spice.

The first scene does a great job of establishing Joan's character. Her charm, courage, and faith are on full display as she sways Robert and his soldiers to her side. The scene also establishes the generally unstately state of France. By the end of it we've got a good idea of who our protagonist is and the world she lives in. The stage is set for her to sally forth and kick some English butt.

Once Joan wins over Charles and gets control of the army, she can really get down to business. Her goals aren't small. She wants to raise the siege at Orleans, crown Charles at Rheims Cathedral, and expel the English out of France for good. The main conflict of the play is crystal clear.

**Notes**

In Scene Four, we see the Earl of Warwick and the Chaplain de Stogumber forming plans to take Joan down. They enlist the help of Cauchon, the Bishop of Beauvais, who agrees to try her for heresy. By the end of this scene, we know better than Joan the barriers that are standing in her way.

After Charles gets crowned at Rheims, Joan's buddies want to sit back and relax. Joan, however, demands they get off their lazy butts and keep the fight going. The English aren't all gone. Paris isn't under French control. Tempers flare when her allies refuse to help her and accuse her of being prideful.



*Notes* Joan's friends warn her that if she continues the fight and gets captured, they won't lift a finger to help her escape. Perhaps foolishly, perhaps bravely, she swears to trust in her voices and continue the fight without them.

The action of the play begins to resolve as the captured Joan is convicted of heresy and is burnt at the stake.

Shaw ends the play with a dream sequence. We learn that, after Joan was executed, her name was cleared and she was made a saint. A bunch of characters, show up and tell Joan they're sorry that they dissed her back in the day. However, when Joan asks them if she should come back to Earth, they all freak out and leave. Joan ends the play by asking God if the world will ever be ready for saints.

**Self Assessment**

Multiple Choice Questions:

8. Most good stories start with a fundamental list of ingredients such as
  - (a) conflict, complication, climax, suspense, denouement, and conclusion
  - (b) conflict and complication
  - (c) suspense and climax
  - (d) denouement, and conclusion.
9. In Scene Four, we see the Earl of Warwick and the Chaplain de Stogumber forming plans
 

(a) to rescue Joan	(b) to take Joan down
(c) execute Joan	(d) to chain Joan.

Fill in the blanks:

10. The first scene does a great job of establishing .....
11. Once Joan wins over Charles and gets control of the army, she can really get down to .....

State whether the following statements are true or false:

12. Joan's friends warn her that if she continues the fight and gets captured, they won't lift a finger to help her escape.
13. After Charles gets crowned at Rheims, Joan's buddies agitated and hatched plots.

**24.3 Summary**

- The stage directions inform us that it's a dark and stormy night in June 1456.
- Charles, who is now King Charles VII, is reading in bed. He's 51.

- Ladvenu, 25 years older than last we saw him, enters the bedroom unannounced.
- Startled, the King jumps out of bed.
- Ladvenu tells the King that Joan's good name has been cleared. Apparently he's been obsessed with setting the record straight ever since her execution.
- He goes on to say that, unlike Joan's original trial, this recent hearing was full of lies and corruption. However, strangely enough, this time the truth was actually heard.
- Charles says he doesn't care how Joan's name got cleared, as long as people can't criticize him for being crowned by a heretical sorceress.
- Ladvenu says that he should be thinking of Joan now not himself.
- There's no use in thinking about her, says the King. She was bigger than all of us.
- He tells Ladvenu that, if Joan were resurrected today, people would just burn her all over again.
- The clock tolls and the Soldier goes back to Hell.
- Joan is left alone in a bright white light.
- She asks God when the world will be ready for His saints.
- Most good stories start with a fundamental list of ingredients such as the initial situation, conflict, complication, climax, suspense, denouement, and conclusion.
- The first scene does a great job of establishing Joan's character. Her charm, courage, and faith are on full display as she sways Robert and his soldiers to her side.
- Once Joan wins over Charles and gets control of the army, she can really get down to business.
- In Scene Four, we see the Earl of Warwick and the Chaplain de Stogumber forming plans to take Joan down.
- After Charles gets crowned at Rheims, Joan's buddies want to sit back and relax.
- Joan's friends warn her that if she continues the fight and gets captured, they won't lift a finger to help her escape.
- The action of the play begins to resolve as the captured Joan is convicted of heresy and is burnt at the stake.

## 24.4 Keywords

- Peasant** : A member of a class of persons, as in Europe, Asia, and Latin America, who are small farmers or farm laborers of low social rank.
- Inspiration** : A divine influence directly and immediately exerted upon the mind or soul.
- Ingredients** : A constituent element of anything; component.
- Conflict** : A discord of action, feeling, or effect; antagonism or opposition, as of interests or principles.
- Rationalism** : Rationalism is "any view appealing to reason as a source of knowledge or justification".
- Climax** : In a dramatic or literary work, a decisive moment that is of maximum intensity or is a major turning point in a plot.

## 24.5 Review Questions

1. Give a brief view of the betrayal and capture of Saint Joan by British?
2. Illustrate and analyze the plot in Scene II.



## Unit 25: Saint Joan: Characterization

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25.1 Characterization

25.1.1 The Dauphin

25.1.2 Captain Jack Dunois

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25.1.4 The Earl of Warwick

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25.1.6 Joan

25.2 Summary

25.3 Keywords

25.4 Review Questions

25.5 Further Readings

### Objectives

After studying this unit, you will be able to:

- Enumerate all the characters in the play;
- Discuss the criticism of each character.

### Introduction

Most plays are a series of actions and therefore there is no surprise that the characters in *Saint Joan* are defined by their actions. The Chaplain's viciousness is shown in his relentlessly maniacal pursuit of Joan's execution. Cauchon and the Inquisitor's compassion (at least to their way of thinking) is shown in the lengths to which they go to try and get Joan to repent. King Charles's lack of love for warfare (some call it cowardice) is shown when he decides to negotiate for Paris instead of supporting Joan in her conquest. And, of course, there's Joan, herself—a woman of action to say the least. She single handedly inspires a movement which unites all of France. Her actions define her as brash, daring, and maybe just a little bit proud. The characters of the play have their own significance by their names. This unit illustrates the characterization of the play *Saint Joan* their significance by their names.

## Notes

**25.1 Characterization****25.1.1 The Dauphin**

The Dauphin, later King Charles VII, is a reluctant ruler, more eager for a lack of hostility than he is to govern the kingdom that is rightfully his. He seeks to avoid responsibility and decision-making, and, in Shaw's play, he is all but forced by Joan into his royal position. Perhaps the playwright is contrasting those who are called "great" by the world and those who are truly great, those who imagine, the "Galtonic visualizers". Imagination is not a quality Shaw's Dauphin can be said to possess! He is weak and easily bullied—including, readers note, "bullied" by Joan his own greatest champion. (He says as much when he complains to Joan in Scene V that his coronation was her fault.)



*Notes* Charles does not seem to grow any as a character during the course of the play. By the epilogue, he does lead his own troops into battle, but he is still self-centered, concerned only that Joan's rehabilitation twenty-five years after her death will lay to rest any questions about the legitimacy of his reign.



*Task* Elucidate that king Charles VII is a reluctant ruler.

**25.1.2 Captain Jack Dunois**

Captain Jack Dunois is described by Shaw in the stage directions as "a good natured and capable man who has no affectations and no foolish illusions." Shaw depicts him as both friendly with and respectful of Joan. Indeed, he seems to be the only true friend she has. He is a true military man who shares his expertise with the Maid: "Come! let me begin to make a soldier of you." He urges her not to press on to Paris, not out of fear (as seems to be King Charles' motivation), but out of concern for her. Yet even he abandons Joan in the epilogue's dream sequence, although he does so out of what seems to be a genuine awareness of his own status compared to her: "Forgive us, Joan: we are not yet good enough for you."



*Did u know?* Captain Jack Dunois is the only friend Joan has.

**25.1.3 Captain de Stogumber**

Chaplain de Stogumber typifies one medieval religious reaction to Joan: that she was a witch. Stogumber's objection to the Maid is that she is "unnatural"—leading armies into battle, wearing male garb, and so forth. Yet even as Stogumber is fully medieval in this aspect of his thinking, he is, paradoxically, modern in another: he is a burgeoning Nationalist: "I was born in England," he proudly declares, "and it makes a difference." Ironically, in his love of his native country, he is not unlike Joan, whom he regards as his enemy. In that sense, nationalism unites them.

**25.1.4 The Earl of Warwick**

The Earl of Warwick exemplifies the pragmatism of which Shaw writes in his preface—pragmatism, readers will recall, that Shaw credited Joan with having as well. Upon Warwick's introduction in

Scene IV, however, the audience will realize how such pragmatism, such realism, such “commonsense” becomes a double-edged sword that can work against Joan as well as for her. As a pragmatic man, the Earl of Warwick is not truly concerned with the Church’s condemnation or rehabilitation of Joan: he is concerned only that Joan undercuts his authority as a feudal lord, and therefore she must be destroyed.

### 25.1.5 Bishop Cauchon

Bishop Cauchon emerges in Shaw’s play as a man who wants to do what is right, but who is unable to do so. Indeed, readers should consider the possibility that Shaw establishes Cauchon as a “foil” in many ways to Joan herself. Like Joan, he is a person of principle, even if his principles serve the interest of the Church and not of the individual conscience or imagination (for instance, his repeated insistence that the Church is not subject to political necessity). As Joan is (literally) sanctified after her death, Cauchon, we learn in the epilogue, is (virtually) demonized after his. And yet his words in the epilogue could just as easily have come from Joan’s mouth: “I was faithful to my light: I could do no other than I did.”

### 25.1.6 Joan

Joan is, of course, the focus of the play. There can be little doubt that Shaw honestly attempts to present a human Joan. But readers will have to conclude if he has truly done so, especially given the drama’s famous final line: “O God when will [the world] be ready to receive Thy saints?” Surely, Joan is not a “saint” for Shaw in the medieval sense of a miracle-worker. Yet she is a “saint” of the imagination, and, for all the ways in which she may be like us, she may remain, even for Shaw, fundamentally of a different order.

### Self Assessment

Multiple Choice Questions:

- The Dauphin, a reluctant ruler of the kingdom that is rightfully his is later
  - King Charles VII
  - King Charles V
  - the real heir of the kingdom
  - was opposed by Joan.
- Which of the following statements is not true about Joan?
  - The focus of the play
  - The most cruel oppressor
  - The human and patriotic
  - The saint.

Fill in the blanks:

- The Dauphin seeks to avoid ....., and, in Shaw’s play, he is all but forced by Joan into his royal position.
- Captain Jack Dunois is described by Shaw a good natured and capable man who has no affectations and no .....

State whether the following statements are true or false:

- The Earl of Warwick exemplifies the pragmatism of which Shaw writes in his preface.
- Bishop Cauchon emerges in Shaw’s play as a man who wants to do the wrong.

### 25.2 Summary

- Characters in *Saint Joan* are defined by their actions. The Chaplain’s viciousness is shown in his relentlessly maniacal pursuit of Joan’s execution. Cauchon and the Inquisitor’s compassion is shown in the lengths to which they go to try and get Joan to repent.



Notes

- King Charles's lack of love for warfare (some call it cowardice) is shown when he decides to negotiate for Paris instead of supporting Joan in her conquest. And, of course, there's Joan, herself—a woman of action to say the least. She single handedly inspires a movement which unites all of France. Her actions define her as brash, daring, and maybe just a little bit proud.
- The world of Saint Joan is strictly divided according to social status. All the characters have their specific place, which grants them certain rights, privileges, and powers. Look at Joan's trial, for example. Bishop Cauchon is the ranking official for most of it. So, he presides over the proceedings.
- When the Inquisitor shows up, Cauchon must defer to some of his power because the Inquisition carries a lot of weight. Below Cauchon and the Inquisitor you have the lower Church officials like D'Estivet, the Chaplain, and Courcelles. Though they would dearly love to, they don't have the power to excommunicate Joan on their own. The decision ultimately rests with Cauchon and the Inquisitor.
- In the political world everything is just as regimented. There are kings like Charles and feudal lords like Warwick. Everybody knows their place. Then, of course, there's the army. We see everybody from commanders like Dunois down to the lowliest soldier.
- The conflict in the play is almost completely derived from the fact that Joan bucks all of these carefully laid out structures. She's just a common girl from the country. When she presumes to boss around kings, bishops, and generals the world is shaken. Her character is defined by the fact that she carves her own place in the social hierarchy through sheer resolve and determination.
- Joan's choice to wear men's clothes is one of the big reasons she is executed. It's unheard of in this time. Everybody else wears clothes befitting their station. Dunois wears his armor, the Bishop wears his robes, and the ladies of Charles's court wear the fancy dresses that they are expected to wear. Joan however, chooses to do away with the simple dress of an ordinary country girl and don the armor and clothes of a soldier.
- The use of men's cloth by Saint Joan makes sense. She's out there fighting everyday. How is she going to do that in a dress? Anyway, if she dresses like a woman, the soldiers will tend to think of her that way. Not only will they not be as likely to listen to her, they may even try to take advantage of her. Her choice to wear men's clothes is indicative of both her common sense approach to life and her flagrant flouting of authority.

### 25.3 Keywords

**Execution** : The infliction of capital punishment or, formerly, of any legal punishment.

**Maniacal** : Affected with or characteristic of mania or characteristic of or befitting a maniac.

**Warfare** : The process of military struggle between two nations or groups of nations.

**Conflict** : A discord of action, feeling, or effect; antagonism or opposition, as of interests or principles.

**Privileges** : A special right, immunity, or exemption granted to persons in authority or office to free them from certain obligations or liabilities.

### 25.4 Review Questions

1. Which character in the play do you most admire? Why.
2. Which character do you list admire? Why.

3. Sketch the character of Joan.
4. Bishop Cauchon emerges in Shaw's play as a man who wants to do what is right, but who is unable to do so. Analyze this character in view of this statement.
5. Give a critical view of the following characters in the play *Saint Joan*:
  - (a) Bishop Cauchon
  - (b) The Dauphin
  - (c) Captain Jack Dunois

Notes

### Answers: Self Assessment

- |                      |         |                                       |
|----------------------|---------|---------------------------------------|
| 1. (a)               | 2. (b)  | 3. responsibility and decision-making |
| 4. foolish illusions | 5. True | 6. False                              |

### 25.5 Further Readings



Books

George Bernard Shaw, Harold Bloom (ed.). 1987. *Saint Joan*. Chelsea House Publishers, New York.

George Bernard Shaw, Dan H. Laurence (ed.). 2001. *Saint Joan*. Penguin Classics, UK.



Online links

<http://www.shmoop.com/saint-joan/characterization.html>

<http://www.enotes.com/saint-joan-salem/saint-joan>

## Unit 26: Saint Joan: Themes

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26.3 Religion

26.4 Women and Femininity

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### Objectives

After studying this unit, you will be able to:

- Illustrate all major themes in *Saint Joan*;
- Explain Joan as hero of Imagination;
- Illustrate the religion, women and femininity in *Saint Joan*;
- Discuss the pride and admiration occurring in the play *Saint Joan*.

### Introduction

Shaw himself provides the best guide to the thematic concerns of Saint Joan in his preface to the play. The major themes that Shaw mentions in his play are: Power—The conflict in Saint Joan is built around some pretty major power clashes. The Religion—Saint Joan chronicles the life of a Catholic saint. Women and Femininity—Joan was an early pioneer of women’s equality. Society and Class—Medieval society was rigidly divided by class and position. Versions of Reality—Joan of Arc is well known for claiming to hear voices sent to her by God. Warfare—Saint Joan is set in medieval France, which was at the time in the throes of the Hundred Years War. Pride—Just about everybody in Saint Joan accuses Joan of pride. And Admiration—Joan is able to inspire such admiration, that she launches a movement which eventually unites a country. This unit illustrates these themes in detail.

## 26.1 Joan as a Hero of the Imagination

When Shaw invokes the “imagination” in reference to Joan, he does not mean that Joan was consciously “making up” the voices and visions she experienced, or that, as her accusers state in Scene VI, that she was “pretending” to receive messages from the saints. Rather, Shaw means that Joan possessed a faculty for transcending the everyday concerns of most people; she was gripped by, shaped by, driven by what Shaw calls the “evolutionary appetite” for humanity’s advancement to a degree that most people are not. She is a “visualizer.” Shaw’s conviction on this point accounts for the several references to imagination in the play.



*Example:* Baudricourt’s “They come from your imagination,” Scene I; “Must then a Christ perish in torment in every age to save those that have no imagination?,”

For Shaw, the imagination is the source of humanity’s progress, and Joan is one of its strongest representatives. In this respect, and not in the traditional ecclesiastical sense, Joan is, for Shaw, a “saint.” She is “the unaveraged individual, representing life possibly at its highest actual human evolution and possibly at its lowest, but never at its merely mathematical average.” She is “upstart” in the positive sense of the word—but also in its negative sense, which, in Shaw’s view, ultimately leads her to her doom.

## 26.2 The Will to Power

In his preface, Shaw points to the major social and cultural forces of the Middle Ages—the church and feudalism—as rocks against which Joan, in her innocence and naiveté, was dashed. Throughout the play, but especially in Scene VI, Shaw depicts Joan as someone who does not understand the powers she is up against; a victim of a collision between various peoples’ quest for and use and abuse of power. Thus the Archbishop can warn Joan, in Scene II, that it is dangerous to be “in love with religion”; and thus, for another instance, the Inquisitor can state, after her trial is concluded in Scene VI, “[I]t is a terrible thing to see a young and innocent creature crushed between these mighty forces, the Church and the Law.” Cauchon tells Warwick in Scene IV, “I know well that there is a Will to Power in the world. I know that while it lasts there will be a struggle between the Emperor and the Pope, between the dukes and the political cardinals, between the barons and the kings. The devil divides us and governs.” To a large extent, Shaw’s characters serve as ciphers for the powers they represent, and the conflicts between them on stage dramatize larger, more abstract conflicts among these powers. Notably, Joan, who represents the “super-personal” (that is, concerned with more than the individual) power of the evolutionary appetite, is destroyed by these conflicts.



*Task* There were two major social and cultural forces—the church and feudalism, explain this statement.

## 26.3 Religion

*Saint Joan* chronicles the life of a Catholic saint. As such, we’re sure it’s no big surprise that religion is a major theme. In the play, we see the one of the earliest clashes of Protestantism and Catholicism. There’s also much discussion of popular religious topics such as faith, heresy, martyrdom, and repentance.

## 26.4 Women and Femininity

Joan was an early pioneer of women’s equality. In a time where it was completely unheard of, she wore men’s clothes, became a soldier, and advised the most powerful men of her day, as *Saint Joan* details. She has inspired generations of women to challenge gender roles.

## Notes

**26.5 Society and Class**

Medieval society was rigidly divided by class and position. *Saint Joan* investigates the inner workings of this intricate structure. Among the things examined are the tiers of power within the Church, the political factions of kings and feudal lords, and the lot of common peasants and soldiers. We also see just how severe the punishment was for people who defied this rigid hierarchy.

**26.6 Pride**

Just about everybody in *Saint Joan* accuses Joan of pride. It is unclear as to whether she's guilty of this or not. Her every decision leads to success for her and those around her. She also believes that she gets her orders directly from God. In her mind, that all adds up to the idea that everyone should just listen to her and do what she says. The rich and powerful, however, view this as insufferable pride, when coming from an upstart teenage girl.

**26.7 Admiration**

Joan is able to inspire such admiration, that she launches a movement which eventually unites a country, shifting its entire power structure in the bargain. Even the men who put her to death can't help but respect her courage and tenacity. Her spirit was so strong that it continued to inspire for hundreds of years after her death. She became a symbol for generation after generation. Eventually, admiration for her grew so much that the Catholic Church made her a saint. *Saint Joan* chronicles the life, death, and legacy of this inspirational figure.

**Self Assessment**

Multiple Choice Questions:

1. There were two major social and cultural forces in the middle ages, they are
  - (a) church and feudalism
  - (b) admiration and power struggle
  - (c) feminism and social class
  - (d) pride and religion.
2. Medieval society was rigidly divided by
  - (a) religion and orthodoxy
  - (b) class and position
  - (c) religion and power struggle
  - (d) feminism and class.

Fill in the blanks:

3. Joan is able to inspire such admiration, that she launches a movement which eventually unites a ..... .
4. Joan was an early pioneer of women's ..... .

State whether the following statements are true or false:

5. In his preface, Shaw points to the major social and cultural forces of the Middle Ages.
6. *Saint Joan* chronicles the life of a Protestant saint.

**26.8 Summary**

- Power – The conflict in *Saint Joan* is built around some pretty major power clashes. The Catholic Church and the English feudal lords are all challenged by Joan's rise.
- Religion – *Saint Joan* chronicles the life of a Catholic saint. As such, we're sure it's no big surprise that religion is a major theme.

## Notes

- Women and Femininity—Joan was an early pioneer of women’s equality. In a time where it was completely unheard of, she wore men’s clothes, became a soldier, and advised the most powerful men of her day.
- Society and Class—Medieval society was rigidly divided by class and position. Saint Joan investigates the inner workings of this intricate structure.
- Versions of Reality—Joan of Arc is well known for claiming to hear voices sent to her by God. The Church chose a different view, saying they were demonic in origin.
- Warfare—Saint Joan is set in medieval France, which was at the time in the throes of the Hundred Years War. There are many different factions vying for power, the main ones being the English.
- Pride—Just about everybody in Saint Joan accuses Joan of pride. It is unclear as to whether she’s guilty of this or not. Her every decision leads to success for her and those around her.
- Admiration—Joan is able to inspire such admiration, that she launches a movement which eventually unites a country, shifting its entire power structure in the bargain.

## 26.9 Keywords

- Power** : Political ascendancy or control in the government of a country, state.
- Religion** : A set of beliefs concerning the cause, nature, and purpose of the universe, especially when considered as the creation of a superhuman agency or agencies, usually involving devotional and ritual observances, and often containing a moral code governing the conduct of human affairs.
- Femininity** : The quality of being feminine; womanliness.
- Warfare** : The process of military struggle between two nations or groups of nations; war. Or armed conflict between two massed enemies, armies, or the like.
- Pride** : A high or inordinate opinion of one’s own dignity, importance, merit, or superiority, whether as cherished in the mind or as displayed in bearing, conduct, etc.
- Admiration** : A feeling of wonder, pleasure, or approval. Or the act of looking on or contemplating with pleasure.

## 26.10 Review Questions

1. Where does Joan companions’ admiration give way to prejudice?
2. How is power divided between the religious and political spheres in Joan’s society?
3. Why is it so threatening for Joan to dress like a man?
4. Why does Bishop Cauchon feel so threatened by Joan’s voices? How do her beliefs challenge Church doctrine?
5. Give a critical view of the following themes in *Saint Joan*:
 

(a) Admiration	(b) Pride	(c) Femininity
----------------	-----------	----------------

## Answers: Self Assessment

- |             |         |            |
|-------------|---------|------------|
| 1. (a)      | 2. (b)  | 3. Country |
| 4. equality | 5. True | 6. False   |

Notes

**26.11 Further Readings**



*Books*

George Bernard Shaw, Harold Bloom (ed.). 1987. *Saint Joan*. Chelsea House Publishers, New York.

George Bernard Shaw, Dan H. Laurence (ed.). 2001. *Saint Joan*. Penguin Classics, UK.



*Online links*

<http://www.enotes.com/saint-joan/themes>

<http://www.shmoop.com/saint-joan/themes.html>

## Unit 27: Harold Pinter – Introduction to the Author and the Text

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27.3 Summary

27.4 Keywords

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### Objectives

After studying this unit, you will be able to:

- Illustrate the biographical sketch of Harold Pinter;
- Elaborate the literary works of Harold Pinter;
- Explain that *The Birthday Party* is a comedy of menace;
- Elucidate that *The Birthday Party* is failure of language to serve as an adequate tool of communication;
- Critically evaluate the play *The Birthday Party*;
- Discuss the nature of the play.

### Introduction

Harold Pinter was a Nobel Prize-winning English playwright and screenwriter. One of the most influential modern British dramatists, his writing career spanned more than 50 years. His best-known plays include *The Birthday Party* (1957), *The Homecoming* (1964), and *Betrayal* (1978), each of which he adapted to film. His screenplay adaptations of others' works include *The Servant* (1963), *The Go-Between* (1970), *The French Lieutenant's Woman* (1981), *The Trial* (1993), and *Sleuth* (2007). He also directed or acted in radio, stage, television, and film productions of his own and others' works. This unit depicts in detail his life since birth till his death.



## Notes

*The Birthday Party*, was the Harold Pinter's first commercially-produced, full-length play. He began writing the work after acting in a theatrical tour, during which, in Eastbourne, England, he had lived in filthy insane digs. There he became acquainted with a great bulging scrag of a woman and a man who stayed in the seedy place. The flophouse became the model for the rundown boarding house of the play and the woman and her tenant the models, respectively, for the characters of Meg Boles and Stanley Webber. Produced by Michael Codron and David Hall, the play had its world première at the Arts Theatre, in Cambridge, England, on 28 April 1958, where the play was warmly received on its pre-London tour, in Oxford and Wolverhampton, where it also met with a positive reception as the most enthralling experience the Grand Theatre has given us in many months. This unit also introduces the text, drawbacks and problems of the play.

## **27.1 Harold Pinter – Introduction**

Pinter was the author of 29 plays and 15 dramatic sketches and the co-author of two works for stage and radio. He was considered to have been one of the most influential modern British dramatists. Along with the 1967 Tony Award for Best Play for *The Homecoming* and several other American awards and award nominations, he and his plays received many awards in the UK and elsewhere throughout the world. His style has entered the English language as an adjective, Pinteresque, although Pinter himself disliked the term and found it meaningless. Pinter received over 50 awards, prizes, and other honours, including the Nobel Prize in Literature in 2005 and the French Legion d'honneur in 2007.

### **22.1.1 Biography**

#### **Birth and the Family**

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.

#### **Education**

Pinter was raised in Hackney, east London, and educated at Hackney Downs School (1941 to 1947), where he began writing poetry and prose. He was a sprinter and a keen cricket player, acting in school plays and writing poetry.



*Example:* He took an interest in theater, 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 did not complete the course. 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 for refusing National Service as a conscientious objector. Subsequently, he continued training at the Central School of Speech and Drama and worked in repertory theatre in Ireland and England.

#### **Marriage**

In 1956 he married actress Vivien Merchant and had a son, Daniel born in 1958. He left Merchant in 1975 and married author Antonia Fraser in 1980.

## Last Years and Death

Despite frail health after being diagnosed with oesophageal cancer in December 2001, Pinter continued to act on stage and screen, last performing the title role of Samuel Beckett's one-act monologue Krapp's *Last Tape*, for the 50th anniversary season of the Royal Court Theatre, in October 2006. He died from liver cancer on 24 December 2008.

### 27.1.2 Playwright

Pinter's career as a playwright began with a production of *The Room* in 1957. His second play, *The Birthday Party*, closed after eight performances, but was enthusiastically reviewed by critic Harold Hobson. His early works were described by critics as comedy of menace. Later plays such as *No Man's Land* (1975) and *Betrayal* (1978) became known as memory plays. He directed productions of his own plays, also those of others for stage, television and film.

### Comedies of Menace (1957–1968)

Pinter's first play, *The Room*, written and first performed in 1957, was a student production at the University of Bristol, directed by his good friend, actor Henry Woolf, who also originated the role of Mr. After Pinter mentioned that he had an idea for a play, Woolf asked him to write it so that he could direct it to fulfill a requirement for his postgraduate work. Pinter wrote it in three days. The production was described by Billington as a staggeringly confident debut which attracted the attention of a young producer, Michael Codron, who decided to present Pinter's next play, *The Birthday Party*, at the Lyric Hammersmith, in 1958.



*Notes* Written in 1957 and produced in 1958, Pinter's second play, *The Birthday Party*, one of his best-known works, was initially both a commercial and critical disaster, despite an enthusiastic review in *The Sunday Times* by its influential drama critic Harold Hobson, which appeared only after the production had closed and could not be reprinted. Pinter himself and later critics generally credited Hobson as bolstering him and perhaps even rescuing his career.

In a review published in 1958, borrowing from the subtitle of *The Lunatic View: A Comedy of Menace*, a play by David Campton, critic Irving Wardle called Pinter's early plays comedy of menace—a label that people have applied repeatedly to his work. Such plays begin with an apparently innocent situation that becomes both threatening and absurd as Pinter's characters behave in ways often perceived as inexplicable by his audiences and one another. Pinter acknowledges the influence of Samuel Beckett, particularly on his early work; they became friends, sending each other drafts of their works in progress for comments.

Pinter wrote *The Hothouse* in 1958, which he shelved for over 20 years. Next he wrote *The Dumb Waiter* (1959), which premièred in Germany and was then produced in a double bill with *The Room* at the Hampstead Theatre Club, in London, in 1960. It was then not produced often until the 1980s, and it has been revived more frequently since 2000, including the West End Trafalgar Studios production in 2007. The first production of *The Caretaker*, at the Arts Theatre Club, in London, in 1960, established Pinter's theatrical reputation. The play transferred to the Duchess Theatre in May 1960 and ran for 444 performances, receiving an Evening Standard Award for best play of 1960. Large radio and television audiences for his one-act play *A Night Out*, along with the popularity of his revue sketches, propelled him to further critical attention. In 1964, *The Birthday Party* was revived both on television and on stage and was well-received.

## Notes



*Did u know?* By the time Peter Hall's London production of *The Homecoming* (1964) reached Broadway in 1967, Pinter had become a celebrity playwright, and the play garnered four Tony Awards, among other awards.

During 1964–1967, Pinter also wrote the radio play *A Slight Ache*, first broadcast on the BBC Third Programme in 1959 and then adapted to the stage and performed at the Arts Theatre Club in 1961. *A Night Out* (1960) was broadcast to a large audience on Associated British Corporation's television show *Armchair Theatre*, after being transmitted on BBC Radio 3, also in 1960. His play *Night School* was first televised in 1960 on Associated Rediffusion. *The Collection* premiered at the Aldwych Theatre in 1962, and *The Dwarfs*, adapted from Pinter's then unpublished novel of the same title, was first broadcast on radio in 1960, then adapted for the stage in a double bill with *The Lover*, which was then televised on Associated Rediffusion in 1963; and *Tea Party*, a play that Pinter developed from his 1963 short story, first broadcast on BBC TV in 1965.

Working as both a screenwriter and as a playwright, Pinter composed a script called *The Compartment* (1966), for a trilogy of films to be contributed by Samuel Beckett, Eugene Ionesco, and Pinter, of which only Beckett's film, entitled *Film*, was actually produced. Then Pinter turned his unfiled script into a television play, which was produced as *The Basement*, both on BBC 2 and also on stage in 1968.

### Memory Plays (1968–1982)

From the late 1960s through the early 1980s, Pinter wrote a series of plays and sketches that explore complex ambiguities, elegiac mysteries, comic vagaries, and other quicksand-like characteristics of memory and which critics sometimes classify as Pinter's memory plays. These include *Landscape* (1968), *Silence* (1969), *Night* (1969), *Old Times* (1971), *No Man's Land* (1975), *The Proust Screenplay* (1977), *Betrayal* (1978), *Family Voices* (1981), *Victoria Station* (1982), and *A Kind of Alaska* (1982). Some of Pinter's later plays, including *Party Time* (1991), *Moonlight* (1993), *Ashes to Ashes* (1996), and *Celebration* (2000) draw upon some features of his memory dramaturgy in their focus on the past in the present, but they have personal and political resonances and other tonal differences from these earlier memory plays.

### Overtly Political Plays and Sketches (1980–2000)

Following a three-year period of creative drought in the early 1980s after his marriage to Antonia Fraser and the death of Vivien Merchant, Pinter's plays tended to become shorter and more overtly political, serving as critiques of oppression, torture, and other abuses of human rights, linked by the apparent invulnerability of power. Just before this hiatus, in 1979, Pinter re-discovered his manuscript of *The Hothouse*, which he had written in 1958 but had set aside; he revised it and then directed its first production himself at Hampstead Theatre in London, in 1980. Like his plays of the 1980s, *The Hothouse* concerns authoritarianism and the abuses of power politics, but it is also a comedy, like his earlier comedies of menace. Pinter played the major role of Roote in a 1995 revival at the Minerva Theatre, Chichester.



*Notes* Pinter's brief dramatic sketch precisely (1983) is a duologue between two bureaucrats exploring the absurd power politics of mutual nuclear annihilation and deterrence. His first overtly political one-act play is one for the *Road* (1984).

## Notes

In 1985 Pinter stated that whereas his earlier plays presented metaphors for power and powerlessness, the later ones present literal realities of power and its abuse. Pinter's political theater dramatizes the interplay and conflict of the opposing poles of involvement and disengagement. *Mountain Language* (1988) is about the Turkish suppression of the Kurdish language. The dramatic sketch *The New World Order* (1991) provides what Robert Cushman, writing in *The Independent* described as 10 nerve wracking minutes of two men threatening to torture a third man who is blindfolded, gagged and bound in a chair; Pinter directed the British première at the Royal Court Theatre Upstairs, where it opened on 9 July 1991, and the production then transferred to Washington, DC, where it was revived in 1994. Pinter's longer political satire *Party Time* (1991) premiered at the Almeida Theatre in London, in a double-bill with *Mountain Language*. Pinter adapted it as a screenplay for television in 1992, directing that production, first broadcast in the UK on Channel 4 on 17 November 1992.

Intertwining political and personal concerns, his next full-length plays, *Moonlight* (1993) and *Ashes to Ashes* (1996) are set in domestic households and focus on dying and death; in their personal conversations in *Ashes to Ashes*, Devlin and Rebecca allude to unspecified atrocities relating to the Holocaust. After experiencing the deaths of first his mother (1992) and then his father (1997), again merging the personal and the political, Pinter wrote the poems *Death* (1997) and *The Disappeared* (1998).



*Notes* Pinter's last stage play, *Celebration* (2000), is a social satire set in an opulent restaurant, which lampoons *The Ivy*, a fashionable venue in London's West End theatre district, and its patrons who have just come from performances of either the ballet or the opera. Not that they can remember a darn thing about what they saw, including the titles.

During 2000–2001, there were also simultaneous productions of *Remembrance of Things Past*, Pinter's stage adaptation of his unpublished Proust Screenplay, written in collaboration with and directed by Di Trevis, at the Royal National Theatre, and a revival of *The Caretaker* directed by Patrick Marber and starring Michael Gambon, Rupert Graves, and Douglas Hodge, at the Comedy Theatre.

Like *Celebration*, Pinter's penultimate sketch, *Press Conference* (2002), invokes both torture and the fragile, circumscribed existence of dissent. In its première in the National Theatre's two-part production of *Sketches*, despite undergoing chemotherapy at the time, Pinter played the ruthless Minister willing to murder little children for the benefit of *The State*.

### 27.1.3 Screenwriter

Pinter composed 27 screenplays and film scripts for cinema and television, many of which were filmed, or adapted as stage plays. His fame as a screenwriter began with his three screenplays written for films directed by Joseph Losey, leading to their close friendship: *The Servant* (1963), based on the novel by Robin Maugham; *Accident* (1967), adapted from the novel by Nicholas Mosley; and *The Go-Between* (1970), based on the novel by L. P. Hartley. Films based on Pinter's adaptations of his own stage plays are: *The Caretaker* (1963), directed by Clive Donner; *The Birthday Party* (1968), directed by William Friedkin; *The Homecoming* (1973), directed by Peter Hall; and *Betrayal* (1983), directed by David Jones.

Pinter also adapted other writers' novels to screenplays, including *The Pumpkin Eater* (1964), based on the novel by Penelope Mortimer, directed by Jack Clayton; *The Quiller Memorandum* (1966), from the 1965 spy novel *The Berlin Memorandum*, by Elleston Trevor, directed by Michael Anderson; *The Last Tycoon* (1976), from the unfinished novel by F. Scott Fitzgerald, directed by Elia Kazan; *The French Lieutenant's Woman* (1981), from the novel by John Fowles, directed by Karel Reisz; *Turtle Diary* (1985), based on the novel by Russell Hoban; *The Heat of the Day* (1988), a television film, from

## Notes

the 1949 novel by Elizabeth Bowen; *The Comfort of Strangers* (1990), from the novel by Ian McEwan, directed by Paul Schrader; and *The Trial* (1993), from the novel by Franz Kafka, directed by David Jones.

His commissioned screenplays of others' works for the films *The Handmaid's Tale* (1990), *The Remains of the Day* (1990), and *Lolita* (1997), remain unpublished and in the case of the latter two films, uncredited, though several scenes from or aspects of his scripts were used in these finished films. His screenplays *The Proust Screenplay* (1972), *Victory* (1982), and *The Dreaming Child* (1997) and his unpublished screenplay *The Tragedy of King Lear* (2000) have not been filmed. A section of Pinter's Proust Screenplay was, however, released as the 1984 film *Swann in Love*, directed by Volker Schlöndorff, and it was also adapted by Michael Bakewell as a two-hour radio drama broadcast on BBC Radio 3 in 1995, before Pinter and director Di Trevis collaborated to adapt it for the 2000 National Theatre production.



*Did u know?* Pinter's last filmed screenplay was an adaptation of the 1970 Tony Award-winning play *Sleuth*, by Anthony Shaffer, which was commissioned by Jude Law, one of the film's producers. It is the basis for the 2007 film *Sleuth*, directed by Kenneth Branagh.

Pinter's screenplays for *The French Lieutenant's Woman* and *Betrayal* were nominated for Academy Awards in 1981 and 1983, respectively.

### Self Assessment

Multiple Choice Questions:

- Which of the following play earned Harold Pinter Tony Award for Best Play?
  - The Homecoming*
  - The Birthday Party*
  - The Hothouse*
  - Betrayal*.
- Which of the following plays was not written by Harold Pinter?
  - No Man's Land*
  - Roots*
  - Family Voices*
  - Party Time*.

Fill in the blanks:

- Harold Pinter was suffering with ..... cancer.
- Working as both a screenwriter and as a playwright, Pinter composed a script called ..... for a trilogy of films to be contributed by Samuel Beckett, Eugene Ionesco, and Pinter.

State whether the following statements are true or false:

- In the early 1980s after his marriage to Antonia Fraser and the death of Vivien Merchant, Pinter's plays become overtly political, serving as critiques of oppression, torture, and other abuses of human rights.
- Pinter composed 27 screenplays and film scripts for cinema and television, many of which could not be filmed.

### 27.2 The Birthday Party – Introduction to the Text

Harold Pinter's *The Birthday Party* was the playwright's first commercially-produced, full-length play. He began writing the work after acting in a theatrical tour, during which, in Eastbourne, England, he had lived in filthy insane digs. There he became acquainted with a great bulging scrag

of a woman and a man who stayed in the seedy place. The flophouse became the model for the rundown boarding house of the play and the woman and her tenant the models, respectively, for the characters of Meg Boles and Stanley Webber.

In an earlier work, *The Room*, a one-act play, Pinter had worked on themes and motifs that he would carry over into *The Birthday Party* and some of his succeeding plays. Among these themes are the failure of language to serve as an adequate tool of communication, the use of place as a sanctum that is violated by menacing intruders, and the surrealistic confusions that obscure or distort fact.



**Task** Elucidate that language as an adequate tool of communication is a failure in context of the play *The Birthday Party*.

Directed by Pinter himself, the finished full-length play premiered in Cambridge, England, at the Arts Theatre, on April 28, 1958. There and on tour in Oxford it was quite successful, but when, under the direction of Peter Wood, it moved to London and later opened on May 19 at the Lyric Opera House in Hammersmith, it met with harsh reviews and closed down within a week. Among the reviewers, only Harold Hobson of the *Sunday Times* saw much promise in the play. He thought that Pinter had considerable originality and was “the most disturbing and arresting talent in theatrical London.” However, his review appeared too late to do the production any good. The show was already off the boards, done in by abysmal attendance, including one matinee audience of six, and persistently hostile reviews. Most critics opined that Pinter floundered in obscurity and suffered from the negative influence of Samuel Beckett (*Waiting for Godot*), Eugene Ionesco (*The Bald Prima Donna*), and other avant-garde writers.

Pinter would later marvel at the fact that in London the play was completely massacred by the critics but noted that it was the only maltreatment he had received from reviewers and that it never dimmed his interest in writing. The work, in fact, became the dramatist’s first full-length comedy of menace, a group of plays that secured Pinter’s reputation as a premier, avant-garde playwright. Subsequent productions were much better received, including the play’s 1964 revival at London’s Aldwych Theatre and its 1968 Broadway premier at the Booth Theatre in New York. By the mid-1960s, the burgeoning appreciation of absurdist drama and the success of other plays by Pinter, including *The Dumbwaiter* (1959) and *The Caretaker* (1960), had secured for *The Birthday Party* a reputation as a classic in the dramatic genre that literary critic Martin Esslin dubbed the Theatre of the Absurd.

## Self Assessment

Multiple Choice Questions:

7. Harold Pinter’s play *The Birthday Party*, the finished full length play was first premiered at
  - (a) the Arts Theatre in Cambridge
  - (b) at London’s Aldwych Theatre
  - (c) at Lyric Opera House in Hammersmith
  - (d) at Booth Theatre in New York.
8. Twenty-five years later King Charles has a dream, in which Joan and good number of the other characters show up to have
  - (a) a chat in the battle
  - (b) a chat in his royal bedroom
  - (c) a chat in the hundred year war
  - (d) a chat in the battlefield of Orelon.

Fill in the blanks:

9. Harold Pinter had worked on themes and motifs that he would carry over into *The Birthday Part* from an earlier work ....., a one-act play.
10. Martin Esslin dubbed the *The Birthday Party* as .....

## Notes

State whether the following statements are true or false:

11. Harold Pinter's *The Birthday Party* was the playwright's first commercially-produced, full-length play.
12. *The Birthday Party* when opened on May 19 at the Lyric Opera House in Hammersmith, it met with harsh reviews and closed down within a week.

### 27.3 Summary

- Harold Pinter was born on October 10, 1930, in Hackney, a section of metropolitan London, England.
- Pinter was raised in Hackney, east London, and educated at Hackney Downs School (1941 to 1947). His education continued in 1948, when he obtained a grant to study at the Royal Academy of Dramatic Art but did not complete the course.
- In 1956 he married actress Vivien Merchant and had a son, Daniel born in 1958. He left Merchant in 1975 and married author Antonia Fraser in 1980.
- Pinter died from liver cancer on 24 December 2008.
- Pinter's career as a playwright began with a production of *The Room* in 1957. His second play, *The Birthday Party*, closed after eight performances, but was enthusiastically reviewed by critic Harold Hobson.
- Pinter's first play, *The Room*, written and first performed in 1957, was a student production at the University of Bristol, directed by his good friend, actor Henry Woolf, who also originated the role of Mr. After Pinter mentioned that he had an idea for a play, Woolf asked him to write it so that he could direct it to fulfill a requirement for his postgraduate work.
- Pinter wrote *The Hothouse* in 1958, which he shelved for over 20 years. Next he wrote *The Dumb Waiter* (1959), which premiered in Germany and was then produced in a double bill with *The Room* at the Hampstead Theatre Club, in London, in 1960.
- The first production of *The Caretaker*, at the Arts Theatre Club, in London, in 1960, established Pinter's theatrical reputation. The play transferred to the Duchess Theatre in May 1960 and ran for 444 performances, receiving an Evening Standard Award for best play of 1960.
- During 1964–1967, Pinter also wrote the radio play *A Slight Ache*, first broadcast on the BBC Third Programme in 1959 and then adapted to the stage and performed at the Arts Theatre Club in 1961. *A Night Out* (1960) was broadcast to a large audience on Associated British Corporation's television show *Armchair Theatre*, after being transmitted on BBC Radio 3, also in 1960.
- Working as both a screenwriter and as a playwright, Pinter composed a script called *The Compartment* (1966), for a trilogy of films to be contributed by Samuel Beckett, Eugene Ionesco, and Pinter, of which only Beckett's film, entitled *Film*, was actually produced.
- Following a three-year period of creative drought in the early 1980s after his marriage to Antonia Fraser and the death of Vivien Merchant, Pinter's plays tended to become shorter and more overtly political, serving as critiques of oppression, torture, and other abuses of human rights, linked by the apparent invulnerability of power.
- Pinter composed 27 screenplays and film scripts for cinema and television, many of which were filmed, or adapted as stage plays. His fame as a screenwriter began with his three screenplays written for films directed by Joseph Losey, leading to their close friendship: *The Servant* (1963), based on the novel by Robin Maugham; *Accident* (1967), adapted from the novel by Nicholas Mosley; and *The Go-Between* (1970), based on the novel by L. P. Hartley.
- Harold Pinter's *The Birthday Party* was the playwright's first commercially-produced, full-length play.

- In an earlier work, *The Room*, a one-act play, Pinter had worked on themes and motifs that he would carry over into *The Birthday Party* and some of his succeeding plays.
- Among these themes are the failure of language to serve as an adequate tool of communication, the use of place as a sanctum that is violated by menacing intruders, and the surrealistic confusions that obscure or distort fact.
- Directed by Pinter himself, the finished full-length play premiered in Cambridge, England, at the Arts Theatre, on April 28, 1958. There and on tour in Oxford it was quite successful.
- Pinter would later marvel at the fact that in London the play was completely massacred by the critics but noted that it was the only maltreatment he had received from reviewers.

## 27.4 Keywords

- Playwright** : A person who writes plays. Or The texts of plays that can be read, as distinct from being seen and heard in performance.
- Screenwriter** : A person who writes screenplays, especially as an occupation or profession.
- Comedies of Menace** : A term used to describe the plays of David Campton, Nigel Dennis, N. F. Simpson, and Harold Pinter by drama critic Irving Wardle, borrowed from the subtitle of Campton's play *The Lunatic View: A Comedy of Menace*, in reviewing Pinter's and Campton's plays in *Encore* in 1958.
- Political Plays** : In the history of theatre, there is long tradition of performances addressing issues of current events and central to society itself, encouraging consciousness and social change. The political satire performed by the comic poets at the theatres, had considerable influence on public opinion. Such plays are known as political plays.
- Maltreatment** : To treat or handle badly, cruelly, or roughly; abuse.
- Memory Plays** : A play that focuses on the past as narrated by the main character. Usually, the play is a dramatic representation of the playwright's life—or at least loosely based upon the playwright's experiences.

## 27.5 Review Questions

1. Give a brief sketch of birth and early childhood of Harold Pinter.
2. Illustrate that Harold Pinter was an apt screenwriter.
3. Harold Pinter was a superb screenwriter. Illustrate this statement in context of his conferment of Tony Award and Academy Awards.
4. Explain that *The Birthday Party* is failure of language to serve as an adequate tool of communication.
5. Harold Pinter never dimmed his interest in writing even though his play *The Birthday Party* was completely massacred by the critics in London. Why?

## Answers: Self Assessment

- |                           |          |                    |
|---------------------------|----------|--------------------|
| 1. (a)                    | 2. (b)   | 3. oesophageal     |
| 4. <i>The Compartment</i> | 5. True  | 6. False           |
| 7. (a)                    | 8. (b)   | 9. <i>The Room</i> |
| 10. Theatre of the Absurd | 11. True | 12. True.          |



Notes

**27.6 Further Readings**



*Books*

Stanley N. Alpert. 1987. *The Birthday Party: A Memoir of Survival*. G. P. Putnam's Sons, UK.

Harold Pinter. 1991. *The Birthday Party*. Faber and Faber.



*Online links*

<http://www.thebirthdayparty.com.au/>

[http://www.haroldpinter.org/plays/title\\_bdayparty.shtml](http://www.haroldpinter.org/plays/title_bdayparty.shtml)

<http://www.enotes.com/birthday-party>

## Unit 28: The Birthday Party: Detailed Analysis of the Text

### CONTENTS

Objectives

Introduction

28.1 Act I

28.2 Act II

28.3 Act III

28.4 Summary

28.5 Keywords

28.6 Review Questions

28.7 Further Readings

### Objectives

After studying this unit, you will be able to:

- Describe the summary of all the Acts;
- Illustrate the analysis of all the Acts;
- Analyse in detail the text of Act I to Act III.

### Introduction

Harold Pinter's *The Birthday Party*, was the playwright's first commercially-produced, full-length play. He began writing the work after acting in a theatrical tour, during which, in Eastbourne, England, he had lived in filthy insane digs. The flophouse became the model for the rundown boarding house of the play and the woman and her tenant the models, respectively, for the characters of Meg Boles and Stanley Webber. The play was heavily criticized by the reviewers, some of which very negative. The nearly unanimous negative reviews that assaulted the 1958 London premier of Pinter's *The Birthday Party* baffled the young playwright but never dampened his spirits. Those early reviewers, with the exception of Harold Hobson, found Pinter's play unfunny, obscure, and derivative. In the *Evening Standard*, Milton Shulman, scoffed that the work would be best enjoyed by those who believe that obscurity is its own reward and further complained that the play was not very funny, in part because the fun to be derived out of the futility of language. This unit elaborates the text of the play in detail from from Act I to Act III. More emphasis is given on the detailed analysis of the text in all the Acts.

### 28.1 Act I

*The Birthday Party* opens in the living-dining area of a seedy rooming house at an unnamed seaside resort in England. Petey and Meg Boles, the proprietors, converse while she prepares his breakfast

## Notes

and he reads the newspaper. Their talk is inane, centering on their tenant, Stanley Webber. Petey also tells her of two strangers who might come to rent a room.

While Meg prepares to serve her husband Petey breakfast, Stanley, described as a man in his late thirties, who is disheveled and unshaven, enters from upstairs. Alternating between maternal and flirtatious affectation toward Stanley, Meg tells him that two gentlemen, two new visitors, will be arriving. At this information, Stanley appears concerned, suspicious, and disbelieving; there is “A sudden knock on the front door” and Meg goes offstage, while Stanley listens at a voice coming through the letter box, but it is just Lulu carrying in a package delivered for Meg. Right after Meg and Lulu exit, Goldberg and McCann arrive, but Stanley immediately sidles through the kitchen door and out of the back door before they can see him to eavesdrop, but they speak only vaguely about this job they have to do with bureaucratic clichés, nevertheless rendering McCann satisfied. After Meg’s new guests go up to their room, Stanley enters, and Meg gives him the package brought by Lulu containing his birthday present, which he opens, revealing, inappropriately for a man his age, a toy drum.



*Task* Illustrate the opening of the play *The Birthday Party*.

## 28.2 Act II

It is evening of the same day. McCann, at the living room table, methodically tears Petey’s newspaper into strips. Stanley enters and begins a polite conversation. When McCann mentions the birthday party, Stanley insists that he wants to celebrate alone, but McCann says that, as the guest of honor, Stanley cannot skip out on it.

McCann and Stanley bicker, with Stanley acting erratically and denying that it is his birthday and that Meg is round the bend. Goldberg sends McCann out to buy alcohol for the party that Meg has informed them that she has planned to celebrate Stanley’s birthday, which he denies having. McCann eventually confronts Stanley by asking Why did you leave the organization? and Why did you betray us? telling him You betrayed our land [...] you betray our breed [...] you’re dead. Meg comes down in her dress, and they begin the party, all except Stanley drinking and becoming drunk. Lulu enters and they decide to play the children’s game blind man’s buff.

## 28.3 Act III

It is early the next morning. As before, Petey sits at the table reading the newspaper. Through the hatch, Meg explains that Goldberg and McCann had eaten all the breakfast food. She enters to pour Petey some tea and spots Stanley’s present, broken and discarded in the fireplace. She plans to fetch Stanley down, observing that she had gone up earlier and found him talking to McCann. Meg asks Petey about Goldberg’s car and the suspicious wheelbarrow, which, he tells her, does not exist.

Paralleling the first scene of the play, Petey is having breakfast, and Meg asks him innocuous questions, with important differences revealing the aftermath of the party. They exit and McCann brings in Stanley, with his broken glasses; overpowered by their rhetorical prowess, Stanley goes catatonic and does not respond. They begin to lead him out of the house toward the car waiting to take him to Monty. Petey confronts them one last time but passively backs down as they take Stanley away, broken, calling out Stan, don’t let them tell you what to do! After Meg returns from shopping, she notices that The car’s gone and as Petey remains silent, he continues to withhold his knowledge of Stanley’s departure, allowing her to end the play without knowing the truth about Stanley.



Task

Illustrate the parallelism of scenes in Act I and Act II.

Notes

## Self Assessment

Multiple Choice Questions:

- Which of the following is not true about *The Birthday Party*?
  - It was a tragedy
  - It was Harold Pinter's first commercially-produced play
  - Harold Pinter began writing *The Birthday Party* after acting in a theatrical tour
  - The play was heavily criticized by the reviewers.
- Who is described disheveled and unshaven in the Act I?
  - McCann
  - Stanley
  - Meg
  - Petey.

Fill in the blanks:

- McCann, at the living room table, methodically tears Petey's ..... into strips.
- Through the hatch, Meg explains that Goldberg and McCann had eaten all the ..... .

State whether the following statements are true or false:

- On hearing the news of arrival of two new visitors, Stanley appears concerned, suspicious, and disbelieving.
- Paralleling the first scene of the play, Petey is having breakfast, and Meg asks him innocuous questions, with important differences revealing the details of the party.
- The nearly unanimous negative reviews that assaulted the 1958 London premier of Pinter's *The Birthday Party* baffled him and dampened his spirits of writing.

## 28.4 Summary

- Harold Pinter's *The Birthday Party*, was the playwright's first commercially-produced, full-length play. He began writing the work after acting in a theatrical tour, during which, in Eastbourne, England, he had lived in filthy insane digs. The flophouse became the model for the rundown boarding house of the play and the woman and her tenant the models, respectively, for the characters of Meg Boles and Stanley Webber.
- The criticism of the 1958 London premier of Pinter's *The Birthday Party* baffled the young playwright but never dampened his spirits.
- The Birthday Party* opens in the living-dining area of a seedy rooming house at an unnamed seaside resort in England. Petey and Meg Boles, the proprietors, converse while she prepares his breakfast and he reads the newspaper.
- While Meg prepares to serve her husband Petey breakfast, Stanley, described as a man in his late thirties, who is disheveled and unshaven, enters from upstairs.
- It is evening of the same day. McCann, at the living room table, methodically tears Petey's newspaper into strips. Stanley enters and begins a polite conversation. When McCann mentions the birthday party, Stanley insists that he wants to celebrate alone, but McCann says that, as the guest of honor, Stanley cannot skip out on it.
- It is early the next morning. As before, Petey sits at the table reading the newspaper. Through the hatch, Meg explains that Goldberg and McCann had eaten all the breakfast food. She enters to pour Petey some tea and spots Stanley's present, broken and discarded in the fireplace.

**Notes**

- After Meg returns from shopping, she notices that The car's gone and as Petey remains silent, he continues to withhold his knowledge of Stanley's departure, allowing her to end the play without knowing the truth about Stanley.

**28.5 Keywords**

- Insane** : Characteristic of a person of unsound mind.  
**Flophouse** : A cheap lodging house, especially one used by tramps.  
**Tenant** : A person or group that rents and occupies land, a house, an office, or the like, from another for a period of time.  
**Unfunny** : Not funny; especially failing to achieve the intended humor.  
**Obscure** : Not clear or plain; ambiguous, vague, or uncertain: an obscure sentence in the contract. Or not clear to the understanding; hard to perceive: obscure motivations. Or not expressing the meaning clearly or plainly.

**28.6 Review Questions**

1. What truth about Stanley Petey withhold to tell Meg?
2. Illustrate and analyse the events of Act II.
3. Illustrate the conversation of Petey and Meg Boles in their living dining area in the opening of the play.
4. Illustrate the events of Act III about the Stanley's departure and end of the play.
5. Write a short notes on the events of:
 

(a) Act I	(b) Act II	(c) Act III
-----------	------------	-------------

**Answers: Self Assessment**

- |                   |         |              |
|-------------------|---------|--------------|
| 1. (a)            | 2. (b)  | 3. newspaper |
| 4. breakfast food | 5. True | 6. False     |
| 7. False          |         |              |

**28.7 Further Readings**



Books

Ganz, Arthur (ed.). 1972. *Introduction to Pinter: A Collection of Critical Essays*. Prentice-Hall.

Esslin, Martin. 1976. *The Theatre of the Absurd*, revised and enlarged edition, Penguin Books.



Online links

<http://www.slideshare.net/Johof/the-birthday-party-full-text-2073679>

<http://www.enotes.com/birthday-party/birthday-party-work-anti-text>

## Unit 29: The Birthday Party: Characterization and Theme

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Introduction

29.1 Characterization

29.1.1 Meg and Petey Boles

29.1.2 Goldberg and McCann

29.1.3 Stanley Webber

29.1.4 Lulu

29.2 Themes

29.3 Summary

29.4 Keywords

29.5 Review Questions

29.6 Further Readings

### Objectives

After studying this unit, you will be able to:

- Enumerate all the characters in the play;
- Discuss the criticism of each character;
- Elucidate that the play *Birthday Party* is full of disjointed information;
- Illustrate that with the hosting of the birthday party, the play reaches its climax of menace.

### Introduction

Characterization is the process by which the writer reveals the personality of a character. Characterization of a play is revealed through direct characterization and indirect characterization. Most plays are a series of actions and manners and therefore there is no surprise that the characters in *The Birthday Party* are defined by their behaviour. The Meg Boles's good nature is shown in her behaviour with their tenant Stanley calling him boy and mothering him. She fills a void in her life by turning the Boles's boarding house tenant into a kind of surrogate child. The characters of the play have their own significance by their behaviour. This unit illustrates the characterization of the play *The Birthday Party* and analyse their behaviour. The themes depicted in the play have also been illustrated here.

## Notes

**29.1 Characterization****29.1.1 Meg and Petey Boles**

Petey's wife, Meg Boles is a good-natured woman in her sixties. If only from a lack of any reference to offspring of her own, it is implied that she and Petey are childless, thus she fills a void in her life by turning the Boles's boarding-house tenant, Stanley Webber, into a kind of surrogate child. She insists on calling him "boy" and mothering him. She even takes liberties appropriate to a parent—though not to the landlady of an adult roomer—by invading his privacy to fetch him down to breakfast.

Like his wife, Petey Boles is in his sixties. He is a deck-chair attendant at the unidentified seaside resort where he and Meg own their boarding house, which, although it is "on the list," has seen much better days. Petey is dull and ambitionless, no more inclined than his wife to find challenges beyond the confines of their rooming house. The pair have simply settled into a humdrum existence appropriate to their mundane minds.

*Task*

Illustrate the events in the play *Birthday Party* that proves Meg Boles a good natured woman.

**29.1.2 Goldberg and McCann**

Goldberg and McCann represent not only the West's most autocratic religions, but its two most persecuted races. Goldberg goes by many names sometimes Nat but when talking about his past he mentions that he was called by the names Simey and also Benny. He seems to idolise his Uncle Barney as he mentions him many times during the play. It is thought that Goldberg is a Jewish man. McCann is an unfrocked priest and has two names. Petey refers to him as Dermot but Goldberg calls him Seamus. McCann seems to think that Goldberg is a Christian man but this seems not to be the case as Goldberg is a typically Jewish name.

Nat Goldberg, in his fifties, is the older of the two strangers who come to interrogate and intimidate Stanley before taking him away. He is a suave character, a gentleman in appearance and demeanor. He also seems to exude superficial good will, inclined to give kindly advice to both his henchman, McCann, and the other characters. He is nostalgic, too. He fondly and affectionately recalls his family and events in his early life. He also insists that Meg and the others honor Stanley with a birthday party.

*Task*

Goldberg and McCann represent both west's most autocratic religions and persecuted races. Analyse this statement in context of *Birthday Party*.

**29.1.3 Stanley Webber**

Stanley Webber is a palpably Jewish name incidentally is a man who shores up his precarious sense of self through fantasy, bluff, violence and his own manipulative form of power-play. His treatment of Meg initially is rough, playful, teasing, ... but once she makes the fateful, mood-changing revelation—'I've got to get things ready for the two gentlemen'—he's as dangerous as a cornered animal.

### 29.1.4 Lulu

### Notes

Lulu is a woman in her twenties whom Stanley tries vainly to rape during the birthday party in Act II. Described as a girl in her twenties, Lulu is a neighbor who first appears carrying Stanley's birthday present, the toy drum and drum sticks that Meg had bought for him. On the flirtatious side, she is self-conscious about her sexual appeal and cannot sit still for long without taking out a compact to powder her face. To her, looks are obviously important, and she sees Stanley as a washout because he seems to care nothing about his unkempt appearance.

### Self Assessment

Multiple Choice Questions:

- Goldberg and McCann represent not only the West's most autocratic religions, but its
  - two most persecuted races
  - class society
  - oppressed society
  - aristocratic society.
- Which of the following statements is not true Stanley Webber?
  - He is the tenant of Petey Boles
  - He is a saint
  - He is as dangerous as a cornered animal
  - He is palpably a Jewish name.

Fill in the blanks:

- Like his wife, Petey Boles is in his .....
- Lulu is a woman in her twenties whom ..... tries vainly to rape during the birthday party in Act II.

State whether the following statements are true or false:

- Lulu is a neighbor who first appears carrying Stanley's birthday present.
- Nat Goldberg, in his fifties, is the older of the two strangers who come to interrogate and intimidate Stanley before taking him away.

### 29.2 Themes

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.

The term comedy of menace was first used by David Campton as a subtitle to his four short plays *The Lunatic view*. Harold Pinter exploited the possibilities of this kind of situation in his early plays like *The Room*, *Birthday Party* and *A Slight Ache*, where the both the character/s and the audience face an atmosphere, apparently funny but actually having suggestiveness of some impending threat from outside. Pinter himself explained the situation thus: more often than not the speech only seems to be funny – the man in question is actually fighting a battle for his life. He also said: Everything is funny until the horror of the human situation rises to the surface! Life is funny because it is based on illusions and self-deceptions, like Stanley's dream of a world tour as a pianist, because it is built out of pretence. In fact the play *Birthday Party* is built around the exchanges of words, which, though



## Notes

funny enough, contain hints that suggest the impending doom lurking around to them. Meg's situation as a childless old woman who talks through repetitions may seem funny and odd, but those cover up her unconscious desire to have son, a desire she tries to fulfil through the mothering of Stanley and Petey. But Above all, Stanley's staying in a sea-side lodge, his shabby appearance combined with inconsistent words and memorising may seem strange and invoke mild laughter but in reality he is facing a crisis which he is himself not completely aware of.

Pinter creates an atmosphere of menace through a variety of dramatic elements and techniques. First of all, he lets situations fall from a light-hearted situation unexpectedly down to one which is highly serious. For instance, while talking to Meg among other things, he tells her about a wheelbarrow which will come to the house for some body. Here we get a suggestion of impending death through the sudden reference to coffin. Again, we see Meg offering Staley the gift of a drum as a compliment to his supposed musical talent. But Stanley begins to beat it with such savagery that the audience is left dumb-struck as to the real intention behind this. This kind of abrupt explosion of violence is once again seen when Stanley kicks at McCann. But more importantly, menace is presented through the fears the characters feel but cannot spot. First of all, fear of weather is introduced: the characters repeatedly enquire about weather, and this becomes tangible once the audience understands that the lodge is situated on the coast of a sea. Then Stanley tries to frighten Meg by prophesying the arrival of wheel-barrow which, of course, does not come for her. On the other hand, on hearing the visit of two strangers, Stanley feels a complex fear—first of all, the fear of being driven away from the lodge which has become for him as comfortable as his mother's womb. A house represents security and comforts from the hazards of the outside world but sadly it is impossible to sustain. Goldberg and McCann is the embodiment of menace from a hostile outside world. We also note that he stays in a lodge, which cannot be a substitute for home. Secondly, Stanley faces the fear of being persecuted by the intruders. That is why he expresses his desire to run away with Lulu, but is afraid of doing so in reality.



*Task* How does Pinter create an atmosphere of menace in the play *Birthday Party*.

With the hosting of the birthday party, the play reaches its climax of menace. A birthday party is expected to be a ritualistic celebration of one's life, but in the case of Stanley it turns out to be the greatest ordeal of life leading to his complete mental derangement. The audience now understands the menace turning real though in transformed forms. Stanley faces not only physical assault but also a torrent of words, with the serious accusations like He's killed his wife mingled with trivial and ludicrous like Why do you pick your nose? The persons who could have saved him are either absent or drunk.

The play ends with Stanley's forced removal from the house by Goldberg and McCann who leave a further note of unknown menace awaiting Stanley in near future. This uncertain menace is further strengthened by Petey's inability to communicate to Meg what has exactly happened with Stanley. To conclude, it can be said that the final impression of the play on the audience echoes Pinter's own words: In our present-day world, everything is uncertain, there is no fixed point, we are surrounded by the unknown... There is a kind of horror about and I think that this horror and absurdity (comedy) go together.

### Self Assessment

Multiple Choice Questions:

7. Pinter creates an atmosphere of menace through a variety of
- |                                      |                                   |
|--------------------------------------|-----------------------------------|
| (a) dramatic elements and techniques | (b) admiration and power struggle |
| (c) ritualistic celebration          | (d) disjointed information.       |

8. The play ends with Stanley's forced removal from the house by
- |                       |                         |
|-----------------------|-------------------------|
| (a) Goldberg and Lulu | (b) Goldberg and McCann |
| (c) Lulu and Petey    | (d) Lulu and McCann.    |

Fill in the blanks:

9. Pinter creates an atmosphere of menace through a variety of dramatic elements and ..... .
10. With the hosting of the birthday party, the play reaches its climax of ..... .

State whether the following statements are true or false:

11. Stanley tries to frighten Meg by prophesying the arrival of wheel-barrow which, of course, does not come for her.
12. The play ends with Stanley's willing removal from the house by Goldberg and McCann.

### 29.3 Summary

- Most plays are a series of actions and manners and therefore there is no surprise that the characters in *The Birthday party* are defined by their behaviour.
- The Meg Boles's good nature is shown in her behaviour with their tenant Stanley calling him boy and mothering him. She fills a void in her life by turning the Boles's boarding house tenant into a kind of surrogate child.
- Petey's wife, Meg Boles is a good-natured woman in her sixties. If only from a lack of any reference to offspring of her own, it is implied that she and Petey are childless.
- Like his wife, Petey Boles is in his sixties. He is a deck-chair attendant at the unidentified seaside resort where he and Meg own their boarding house, which, although it is "on the list," has seen much better days.
- Goldberg and McCann represent not only the West's most autocratic religions, but its two most persecuted races.
- McCann seems to think that Goldberg is a Christian man but this seems not to be the case as Goldberg is a typically Jewish name.
- Nat Goldberg, in his fifties, is the older of the two strangers who come to interrogate and intimidate Stanley before taking him away.
- Stanley Webber is a palpably Jewish name incidentally is a man who shores up his precarious sense of self through fantasy, bluff, violence and his own manipulative form of power-play.
- Lulu is a woman in her twenties whom Stanley tries vainly to rape during the birthday party in Act II.
- As in many absurdist works, *The Birthday Party* is full of disjointed information that defies efforts to distinguish between reality and illusion.
- The term comedy of menace was first used by David Campton as a subtitle to his four short plays *The Lunatic view*.
- Harold Pinter exploited the possibilities of this kind of situation in his early plays like *The Room*, *Birthday Party* and *A Slight Ache*, where the both the character/s and the audience face an atmosphere, apparently funny but actually having suggestiveness of some impending threat from outside.
- Pinter himself explained the situation thus: more often than not the speech only seems to be funny – the man in question is actually fighting a battle for his life.



## 29.6 Further Readings

Notes



Books

Ganz, Arthur (ed.). 1972. *Introduction to Pinter: A Collection of Critical Essays*. Prentice-Hall.

Esslin, Martin. 1976. *The Theatre of the Absurd*, revised and enlarged edition, Penguin Books.



Online links

<http://www.bookrags.com/studyguide-birthdayparty/char.html>

<http://www.enotes.com/birthday-party/meg-boles>

## Unit 30: Arnold Wesker – Introduction to the Author and the Text

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Introduction

30.1 Arnold Wesker – Introduction

30.1.1 Life and Career

30.1.2 Works

30.2 Roots – Introduction to the Text

30.3 Summary

30.4 Keywords

30.5 Review Questions

30.6 Further Readings

### Objectives

After studying this unit, you will be able to:

- Illustrate the biographical sketch of Arnold Wesker;
- Elaborate the literary works of Arnold Wesker;
- Explain that *Root* is one of the play of Arnold Wesker Chicken soup trilogy;
- Elucidate that *Root* is a kitchen sink drama
- Critically evaluate the play *Root*;
- Discuss the nature of the play.

### Introduction

Arnold Wesker, considered one of the key figures in 20th Century drama, is the author of 44 plays, 4 volumes of short stories, 2 volumes of essays, an autobiography, a book on journalism, a children's book, extensive journalism, poetry and other assorted writings. His plays have been translated into 18 languages, and performed worldwide. 2002 celebrated his 70th birthday, 2006 celebrated his knighthood for services to drama. 2008 celebrates his 50th year as a playwright. In this unit details of his work with summaries and synopses, his essays, lectures and journalism, the books written about him, and his life has been depicted.

*Roots* is the second play by Arnold Wesker in The Wesker Trilogy. The first part is *Chicken Soup with Barley* and the final play *I'm Talking about Jerusalem*. *Roots* focuses on Beatie Bryant as she makes the transition from being an uneducated working-class woman obsessed with Ronnie, her unseen liberal

boyfriend. The story, briefly, is about Beatie Bryant, the daughter of Norfolk farm labourers who returns for a short holiday from London, where she has fallen in love with a young, Jewish, working-class boy. This unit also introduces the text, drawbacks and problems of the play.

## 30.1 Arnold Wesker—Introduction

### 30.1.1 Life and Career

Sir Arnold Wesker was born on 24 May 1932 in Stepney, London, the son of Leah, a cook, and Joseph Wesker, a tailor's machinist. He was delivered by the father of Oliver Sacks and is a prolific British dramatist known for his contributions to kitchen sink drama. His early plays *Roots*, *The Kitchen*, and *Their Very Own* and *Golden City* were staged by The English Stage Company at the Royal Court Theatre under the management of George Devine and later William Gaskill.



*Did u know?* The inspiration for *The Kitchen* came when Arnold Wesker was working at the Bell Hotel in Norwich. It was while working here that he also met his future wife Dusty. *Roots* are also set in Norfolk. He founded the Roundhouse's first theatre, called Centre 42, in 1964.

Wesker's play *The Merchant* (a play which he also called *Shylock*) tells the plot of Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice* from Shylock's point of view. In this retelling, Shylock and Antonio are fast friends bound by a mutual love of books and culture and a disdain for the crass anti-semitism of the Christian community's laws. They make the bond in defiant mockery of the Christian establishment, never anticipating that the bond might become forfeit. When it does, the play argues, Shylock must carry through on the letter of the law or jeopardize the scant legal security of the entire Jewish community. He is, therefore, quite as grateful as Antonio when Portia, as in Shakespeare's play, shows the legal way out. The play received its American premiere on November 16, 1977 at New York's Plymouth Theatre with Joseph Leon as Shylock, Marian Seldes as Shylock's sister Rivka and Roberta Maxwell as Portia. This production had a challenging history in previews on the road, culminating with the death of the exuberant Broadway star Zero Mostel, who was initially cast as Shylock. Wesker wrote a book chronicling the entire process from initial submissions and rejections of the play through to rehearsals, Zero's death, and the disappointment of the critical reception for the Broadway opening called *The Birth of Shylock and the Death of Zero Mostel*. The book reveals much about this playwright's relationship to director John Dexter, to criticism, to casting, and to the ephemeral process of collaboration through which the text of any play must pass.



*Notes* In 2005, Arnold Wesker published his first novel, *Honey*, which recounted the experiences of Beatie Bryant, the heroine of his earlier play *Roots*. The novel broke from the previously established chronology. *Roots* was set in the early 1960s and Beatie is 22, in *Honey* she has only aged 3 years yet the action has been transplanted into the 1980s. Other oddities are that the timeframe includes the Rushdie affair and John Major's fall as recent events and yet the action is concerned with the dotcom boom.

He was knighted in the 2006 New Year's Honours list. He was the castaway on Desert Island Discs, BBC Radio 4 on Sunday 17 December 2006. In 2008 Arnold Wesker published his first collection of poetry, *All Things Tire of Themselves*. The collection dates back many years and represents what he considers his best and most characteristic poems. He is a member of the editorial advisory board of

## Notes

Jewish Renaissance magazine. Many of Wesker's plays have underlying political themes, and Wesker himself is open about his admiration of the working class side of the 'class struggle'. Wesker joined with enthusiasm the Royal Court group on the Aldermaston March in 1959. Another of the Royal Court contingent, Lindsay Anderson, made a documentary film about the event.



*Task* Illustrate the work for which Arnold Wesker was knighted in the 2006 New year's Honours List.

### 30.1.2 Works

*The Kitchen*, 1957, *Chicken Soup with Barley*, 1958, *Roots*, 1958, *I'm talking about Jerusalem*, 1958, *Menace*, 1961 (For Television), *Chips with Everything*, 1962, *The Nottingham Captain*, 1962, *Four Seasons*, 1965, *Their Very Own and Golden City*, 1966, *The Friends*, 1970, *The Old Ones*, 1970, *The Journalist*, 1972, *The Wedding Feast*, 1974, *Shylock*, 1976, *Love Letters on Blue Paper*, 1976, *Phoenix*, 1980, *Caritas*, 1980, *Words on the Wind*, 1980, *One More Ride on the Merry-Go-Round*, 1980, *Breakfast*, 1981, *Sullied Hand*, 1981, *Four Portraits - Of Mothers*, 1982, *Annie Wobbler*, 1982, *Yardsale*, 1983, *Cinders*, 1983, *The Merchant*, 1983, *Whatever Happened to Betty Lemon?*, 1986, *When God Wanted a Son*, 1986, *Lady Othello*, 1987, *Little Old Lady and Shoeshine*, 1987, *Badenheim 1939*, 1987, *The Mistress*, 1988, *Beorhtel's Hill*, 1988 (Community Play for Basildon), *Men Die Women Survive*, 1990, *Letter To A Daughter*, 1990, *Blood Libel*, 1991, *Wild Spring*, 1992, *Bluey*, 1993, *The Confession*, 1993, *Circles of Perception*, 1996, *Break, My Heart*, 1997, *Denial*, 1997, *Barabbas*, 2000, *The Kitchen Musical*, 2000, *Groupie*, 2001, *Longitude*, 2002, *Honey*, 2005 (novel), *The Rocking Horse*, 2007.

### Self Assessment

Multiple Choice Questions:

- For which of the following play Arnold Wesker got inspiration working at Bell Hotel in Norwich?
 

(a) <i>The Kitchen</i>	(b) <i>Chicken Soup with Barley</i>
(c) <i>The Nottingham Captain</i>	(d) <i>Four Seasons</i> .
- Which of the following plays was not written by Arnold Wesker?
 

(a) <i>Caritas</i>	(b) <i>Family Voices</i>
(c) <i>The Mistress</i>	(d) <i>When God Wanted a Son</i> .

Fill in the blanks:

- Wesker's play *The Merchant* tells the plot of Shakespeare's ..... from Shylock's point of view.
- In 2005, Arnold Wesker published his first novel, *Honey*, which recounted the experiences of Beatie Bryant, the heroine of his earlier play .....

State whether the following statements are true or false:

- Arnold Wesker met his future wife Dusty while working at the Bell Hotel in Norwich.
- Many of Wesker's plays have underlying social themes.

### 30.2 Roots – Introduction to the Text

*Roots* is the second play by Arnold Wesker in The Wesker Trilogy. The first part is *Chicken Soup with Barley* and the final play *I'm Talking about Jerusalem*. *Roots* focuses on Beatie Bryant as she makes the

transition from being an uneducated working-class woman obsessed with Ronnie, her unseen liberal boyfriend, to a woman who can express herself and the struggles of her time. It is written in the country dialect of the people on which it focuses, and is considered to be one of Wesker's Kitchen Sink Dramas.



*Task* Elucidate that *Roots* is a Kitchen Sink Drama.

The story, briefly, is about Beatie Bryant, the daughter of Norfolk farm labourers who returns for a short holiday from London, where she has fallen in love with a young, Jewish, working-class boy (Ronnie Kahn, the son from *Chicken Soup with Barley*). He is due to join her to meet the family. During the days of waiting, she regales her family with stories about Ronnie and his bewilderingly alien east London family. Her spirit is effervescent and sunny, but her words are not hers, they're Ronnie's.

Her stern but hospitable mother gathers the family to meet him. An event of great importance is about to take place: Beatie's lover is coming to meet the family. He has been described, imitated, quoted, talked about, made fun of and eagerly awaited. He doesn't turn up. Instead, the postman brings a letter from Ronnie saying he doesn't think the relationship will work. The effect upon Beatie and her family is at first numbing, then humiliating. They are incensed to have been left standing like fools. The ensuing anger with which they turn on Beatie, her self-defence, her halting, hesitant stumble upon fluency, the discovery of her own voice deliriously reaching high C as she uses her own words instead of Ronnie's all take up the last 15 minutes of the play.

### Self Assessment

Multiple Choice Questions:

7. *Roots* is the second play by Arnold Wesker
  - (a) in the Wesker Trilogy
  - (b) in the Chicken tetralogy
  - (c) in the political trilogy
  - (d) in the social trilogy.
8. The play *Roots* focuses on
  - (a) Norfolk farm labourers
  - (b) Beatie Bryant
  - (c) Ronnie Kahn
  - (d) an alien east London family.

Fill in the blanks:

9. Beatie Bryant makes the transition from being an uneducated working-class woman obsessed with .....
10. The story of *Roots*, briefly, is about Beatie Bryant, the daughter of .....

State whether the following statements are true or false:

11. Beatie's spirit is effervescent and sunny, but her words are not hers, they're Ronnie's.
12. *Roots* is written in the country dialect of the people on which it focuses.

### 30.3 Summary

- Sir Arnold Wesker was born on 24 May 1932 in Stepney, London, the son of Leah, a cook, and Joseph Wesker, a tailor's machinist.
- His early plays *Roots*, *The Kitchen*, and *Their Very Own* and *Golden City* were staged by The English Stage Company at the Royal Court Theatre under the management of George Devine and later William Gaskill.



Notes

- His inspiration for *The Kitchen* came when he was working at the Bell Hotel in Norwich.
- It was while working here that he also met his future wife Dusty.
- *Roots* are also set in Norfolk. He founded the Roundhouse's first theatre, called Centre 42, in 1964.
- Wesker's play *The Merchant* (a play which he also called *Shylock*) tells the plot of Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice* from Shylock's point of view.
- In 2005, he published his first novel, *Honey*, which recounted the experiences of Beatie Bryant, the heroine of his earlier play *Roots*.
- The novel broke from the previously established chronology. *Roots* was set in the early 1960s and Beatie is 22, in *Honey* she has only aged 3 years yet the action has been transplanted into the 1980s.
- He was knighted in the 2006 New Year's Honours list. He was the castaway on Desert Island Discs, BBC Radio 4 on Sunday 17 December 2006.
- In 2008 Arnold Wesker published his first collection of poetry, *All Things Tire of Themselves*. The collection dates back many years and represents what he considers his best and most characteristic poems.
- He is a member of the editorial advisory board of Jewish Renaissance magazine.
- Wesker joined with enthusiasm the Royal Court group on the Aldermaston March in 1959. Another of the Royal Court contingent, Lindsay Anderson, made a documentary film about the event.
- *Roots* is the second play by Arnold Wesker in The Wesker Trilogy. The first part is *Chicken Soup with Barley* and the final play *I'm Talking about Jerusalem*.
- *Roots* focuses on Beatie Bryant as she makes the transition from being an uneducated working-class woman obsessed with Ronnie, her unseen liberal boyfriend, to a woman who can express herself and the struggles of her time.
- It is written in the country dialect of the people on which it focuses, and is considered to be one of Wesker's Kitchen Sink Dramas.
- The story, briefly, is about Beatie Bryant, the daughter of Norfolk farm labourers who returns for a short holiday from London, where she has fallen in love with a young, Jewish, working-class boy.
- Her spirit is effervescent and sunny, but her words are not hers, they're Ronnie's.
- Her stern but hospitable mother gathers the family to meet him.
- The effect upon Beatie and her family is at first numbing, then humiliating. They are incensed to have been left standing like fools. The ensuing anger with which they turn on Beatie, her self-defence, her halting, hesitant stumble upon fluency, the discovery of her own voice deliriously reaching high C as she uses her own words instead of Ronnie's all take up the last 15 minutes of the play.

### 30.4 Keywords

- Playwright* : A person who writes plays. Or The texts of plays that can be read, as distinct from being seen and heard in performance.
- Machinist* : A person who operates machinery, especially a skilled operator of machine tools.

- Dramatist** : A writer of dramas or dramatic poetry; playwright.
- Kitchen sink drama** : The kitchen sink drama is placed in an ordinary domestic setting and typically tells a relatively mundane family story. Family tensions often come to the fore with realistic conflict between husband and wife, parent and child, between siblings and with the wider community. The family may also pull together in unity against outer forces that range from the rent-collector to rival families.
- Trilogy** : A series or group of three plays, novels, operas, etc., that, although individually complete, are closely related in theme, sequence, or the like.

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### 30.5 Review Questions

1. Give a brief sketch of birth and early childhood of Arnold Wesker.
2. Illustrate that Arnold Wesker was an apt playwright.
3. Arnold Wesker is a prolific British dramatist known for his contributions to kitchen sink drama. Illustrate this statement in context of his contribution.
4. Explain that *Roots* is a kitchen sink drama.
5. Elucidate that *Root* is written in the country dialect of the people on which it focuses.

### Answers: Self Assessment

- |                            |          |                                  |
|----------------------------|----------|----------------------------------|
| 1. (a)                     | 2. (b)   | 3. <i>The Merchant of Venice</i> |
| 4. <i>Roots</i>            | 5. True  | 6. False                         |
| 7. (a)                     | 8. (b)   | 9. Ronnie                        |
| 10. Norfolk farm labourers | 11. True | 12. True                         |

### 30.6 Further Readings



Books

Arnold Wesker. 1959. *Roots: The Second Play of the Chicken Soup Trilogy*. Penguin Books.

Robert Wilcher. 1991. *Understanding Arnold Wesker*. University of South Carolina Press, Columbia, S. Carolina.



Online links

<http://www.arnoldwesker.com/synopses/roots.htm>

<http://www.walesonline.co.uk/showbiz-and-lifestyle/theatre-in-wales/2011/>

## Unit 31: Roots: Detailed Analysis of the Text

### CONTENTS

Objectives

Introduction

31.1 Analysis of the Text

31.2 Summary

31.3 Keywords

31.4 Review Questions

31.5 Further Readings

### Objectives

After studying this unit, you will be able to:

- Describe the summary of the play *Roots*;
- Describe the summary of all the three acts of the play *Roots*;
- Illustrate the analysis of play *Roots*.

### Introduction

In *Roots*, Arnold Wesker gives us a bickering, baffled, sometimes belligerent, always believable family of farm workers in the north of England. His achievement here is to show the Bryants simultaneously as individuals, as a family and as victims of an economic and social system far beyond their comprehension. The catalyst is Beatie, the youngest daughter, who has been living in London with her lover, a Socialist intellectual. She has returned home for two weeks, bursting with the notions of uplift that her Ronnie, who sounds slightly Shavian, has been pouring into her. In London, she has been an ignorant farm girl; at home, she tries to be a force for enlightenment, arguing with her hidebound brother-in-law, Jimmy, about the rights of labor and trying to get her mother to appreciate classical music. This unit elaborates the text of the play in detail from from Act I to Act III. More emphasis is given on the detailed analysis of the text in all the Acts.

### 31.1 Analysis of the Text

The play opens at a rather ramshackle house in Norfolk where there is no water laid on, nor electricity, nor gas. Everything rambles and the furniture is cheap and old. If it is untidy it is because there is a child in the house and there are few amenities, so that the mother is too over-worked to take much care.

An assortment of clobber lies around: papers and washing, coats and basins, a tin wash-tub with shirts and underwear to be cleaned, tilly lamps and primus stoves. Washing hangs on a line in the room. It is September.

## Notes

Two weeks have passed. It is Saturday, the day Ronnie is to arrive. One of the walls of the kitchen is now pushed aside and the front room is revealed. It is low-ceilinged, and has dark brown wooden beams. The furniture is not typical country farm house type. There may be one or two windsor-type straight-back chairs, but for the rest it is cheap utility stuff. Two armchairs, a table, a small bamboo table, wooden chairs, a small sofa, and a swivel bookcase. There are a lot of flowers around—in pots on the window, ledge and in vases on the bamboo table and swivel case.

It is three in the afternoon, the weather is cloudy—it has been raining and is likely to start again. On the table is a spread of food (none of this will be eaten). There are cakes and biscuits on plates and glass stands. Bread and butter, butter in a dish, tomatoes, cheese, jars of pickled onions, sausage rolls, dishes of tinned fruit—it is a spread! Round the table are eight chairs. Beatie's paintings are hanging on the wall. The room is empty because Beatie is upstairs changing and Mrs Bryant is in the kitchen. Beatie—until she descends—conducts all her conversation shouting from upstairs.



*Did u know?* *Roots*, written about 30 years ago, is part of the Wesker trilogy and is, by consensus, among the playwright's best works. A slice of England in the 1950's, it was also an acute study of a woman's liberation before that phrase was devalued by overuse.

The production at the Jewish Repertory Theatre is intelligent, if not inspired. The mood, emphasized by Geoffrey Hall's domestic sets and Edward M. Cohen's direction, is realistic. Much of the slow first act is given to Beatie's tidying of sister Jenny's living room and their conversation about Jimmy's back pains. Mr. Wesker saves his big revelations for the end, tossing in a couple of false leads along the way as though trying to hold our attention while we get comfortable with the characters. The play begins with the crying of a baby, who we learn is Jenny's illegitimate child, but we never find out who the father is. And there are entirely mystifying references to a dispute between Mrs. Bryant and her daughter-in-law, Pearl, over the labor tote, which the program informs us is a pool. The point is to show up the triviality even of their feuds.

Gradually, Beatie's irrepressible energy and her striving toward ideals she scarcely understands win our affection and concern. By the second act, we are caught up in her confusion at belonging neither in the family that she now sees through Ronnie's eyes nor among the self-made intellectuals back in London.

If Mr. Wesker says too little in Act I, he says too much in Act III. The family is gathered to meet Ronnie; Beatie is on edge. I don't want Ronnie to think I come from a small-minded family, she confesses—a generous estimate of people whose conversation is confined mostly to town gossip, bits from the tabloids and jokes about sex. Members of the audience who do not glance at the cast list may be surprised when Ronnie does not appear. Beatie realizes that now she is on her own, and her final soliloquy, though rousing, sounds as though Mr Wesker had taken over as her ventriloquist.



*Task* Analyse the fact that Arnold Wesker says too little in Act I, but too much in Act III.

Nealla Spano develops her portrayal of Beatie carefully. She is full of affection for her family but exasperated at their self-satisfied ignorance; watching them, she becomes Ronnie watching her. You didn't open a door for me! she cries desperately to her mother. Miss Spano's dialect, like those of the other players, has never been heard in the North Country, but Mr. Wesker's dialogue is so flavorsome that after the first moments, the accents don't jar.

Gloria Barret as Mrs Bryant comes on rather more stylishly than her words or her condition allow. Even so, the Act II give-and-take between Beatie and her mother about music is the play's most

## Notes

effective scene. Dermot McNamara as Mr Bryant and Bonnie Gallup, Fred Sanders and Brian Drillinger as the younger generation are more convincing as not-too-bright people resisting any changes in their narrow lives. Just sitting awkwardly side by side on a couch, dressed in their blue-suit best, their white socks on display, Mr Sanders and Mr Drillinger are plainly men who would be more comfortable out with the livestock. Roger DeKoven gets every bit of juice out of the role of a dying neighbor whose lusty impulses have not entirely subsided and is disgusted with the lifeless resignation he sees all about him. He seems to sense that the prospect that society's trap may yet be broken by a new generation rides with Beatie. Mr Wesker and Miss Spano between them give reason for hope.

### Self Assessment

Multiple Choice Questions:

1. Which of the following is not true about *Roots*?
  - (a) It was a comedy of menace
  - (b) Nealla Spano develops her portrayal of Beatie carefully
  - (c) It is part of the Wesker trilogy
  - (d) The play opens at a ramshackle house in Norfolk.
2. Who is focused in the play *Roots*?
 

(a) Nealla Spano	(b) Beatie
(c) Gloria Barret	(d) Bonnie Gallup.

Fill in the blanks:

3. The production of the play *Roots* at the Jewish Repertory Theatre is intelligent, if not ..... .
4. If Mr Wesker says too little in ....., he says too much in Act III.

State whether the following statements are true or false:

5. *Roots* is part of the Wesker trilogy and is, by consensus, among the playwright's best works.
6. Arnold Wesker's achievement in *Roots* is to show the Bryants simultaneously as individuals, as a family and as victims of an economic and political system.
7. Gloria Barret as Mrs Bryant comes on rather more stylishly than her words or her condition allow.

### 31.2 Summary

- The play *Roots* opens at a rather ramshackle house in Norfolk where there is no water laid on, nor electricity, nor gas. Everything rambles and the furniture is cheap and old. If it is untidy it is because there is a child in the house and there are few amenities, so that the mother is too over-worked to take much care.
- An assortment of clobber lies around: papers and washing, coats and basins, a tin wash-tub with shirts and underwear to be cleaned, tilly lamps and primus stoves.
- Two weeks later it is Saturday, the day Ronnie is to arrive. One of the walls of the kitchen is now pushed aside and the front room is revealed. It is low-ceilinged, and has dark brown wooden beams.
- It is three in the afternoon, the weather is cloudy—it has been raining and is likely to start again. On the table is a spread of food (none of this will be eaten). There are cakes and biscuits on plates and glass stands. Bread and butter, butter in a dish, tomatoes, cheese, jars of pickled onions, sausage rolls, dishes of tinned fruit—it is a spread!

- *Roots*, written about 30 years ago, is part of the Wesker trilogy and is, by consensus, among the playwright's best works.
- The production of the play at the Jewish Repertory Theatre is intelligent, if not inspired.
- The mood, emphasized by Geoffrey Hall's domestic sets and Edward M. Cohen's direction, is realistic. Much of the slow first act is given to Beatie's tidying of sister Jenny's living room and their conversation about Jimmy's back pains.
- Mr. Wesker saves his big revelations for the end, tossing in a couple of false leads along the way as though trying to hold our attention while we get comfortable with the characters.
- The play begins with the crying of a baby, who we learn is Jenny's illegitimate child, but we never find out who the father is.
- If Mr. Wesker says too little in Act I, he says too much in Act III.
- The family is gathered to meet Ronnie; Beatie is on edge. I don't want Ronnie to think I come from a small-minded family, she confesses — a generous estimate of people whose conversation is confined mostly to town gossip, bits from the tabloids and jokes about sex.
- Nealla Spano develops her portrayal of Beatie carefully. She is full of affection for her family but exasperated at their self-satisfied ignorance; watching them, she becomes Ronnie watching her.
- Gloria Barret as Mrs Bryant comes on rather more stylishly than her words or her condition allow. Even so, the Act II give-and-take between Beatie and her mother about music is the play's most effective scene.
- Dermot McNamara as Mr Bryant and Bonnie Gallup, Fred Sanders and Brian Drilling as the younger generation are more convincing as not-too-bright people resisting any changes in their narrow lives.

### 31.3 Keywords

- Bickering** : To engage in petulant or peevish argument; wrangle.
- Baffled** : To frustrate or confound; thwart by creating confusion or bewilderment.
- Belligerent** : Pertaining to a warlike character; aggressively hostile; bellicose.
- Enlightenment** : A philosophical movement of the 18th century, characterized by belief in the power of human reason and by innovations in political, religious, and educational doctrine.
- Hidebound** : Oriented toward or confined to the past; extremely conservative.
- Soliloquy** : An utterance or discourse by a person who is talking to himself or herself or is disregarding of or oblivious to any hearers present (often used as a device in drama to disclose a character's innermost thoughts).
- Ventriloquist** : The art of producing vocal sounds that appear to come from another source.

### 31.4 Review Questions

1. Why did Nealla Spano cry desperately to her mother saying "you didn't open a door for me!"?
2. Illustrate and analyse the events of Act II.
3. Illustrate that the Act II give-and-take between Beatie and her mother about music is the play's most effective scene.

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4. Illustrate the events of Act III about the arrival of Ronnie.
5. Write a short notes on the events of:
  - (a) Act I
  - (b) Act II
  - (c) Act III

**Answers: Self Assessment**

1. (a)
2. (b)
3. inspired
4. Act I
5. True
6. False
7. True

**31.5 Further Readings**



*Books*

Arnold Wesker. 1959. *Roots: The Second Play of the Chicken Soup Trilogy*. Penguin Books.

Robert Wilcher. 1991. *Understanding Arnold Wesker*. University of South Carolina Press, Columbia, S. Carolina.



*Online links*

<http://theater.nytimes.com/mem/>

<http://www.questia.com/PM.qst?a=o&d=4753755>

## Unit 32: Roots: Characterization and Theme

Notes

### CONTENTS

Objectives

Introduction

32.1 Themes

32.2 Summary

32.3 Keywords

32.4 Review Questions

32.5 Further Readings

### Objectives

After studying this unit, you will be able to:

- Elucidate that the play *Roots* is governed by three sources of pressure—current affairs, the author’s attitude and the characters;
- Illustrate that the most notable qualities of the play are emotional maturity and command of action in depth.

### Introduction

Wesker’s most notable qualities are emotional maturity and his command of action in depth. The first means that he never condescends to his characters, the second that what happens on stage is always more interesting in performance than we would be likely to guess from quotation. Under the surface of dialogue which, like O’Neill’s, is often limp and colourless on the page, there comes into focus a network of relationships more significant than the interplay in the foreground, which can be written off as a quarrel between cooks or the gushing quotation of a half-educated young man’s ideas, accurate but uninspiring. The inner framework, on the contrary, contains social and political issues, held together dramatically by the playwright’s urgent concern for them and by his conviction that they affect the homely characters in front. Thus, behind Ronnie Kahn lies the Hungarian revolution of 1956 and behind both is the fact of the author’s Russo-Hungarian descent; behind Peter the cook lies German idealism and violence; and behind Beatie Bryant is a generation faced with a new kind of choice. In each case there are three sources of pressure: current affairs, the author’s attitude, and the characters in the play. This unit illustrates the themes depicted in the play.

### 32.1 Themes

Arnold Wesker has tried his best explores the theme of self-discovery. Beatie Bryant, daughter of Norfolk farm labourers, has fallen in love with Ronnie Kahn from the Chicken Soup family. She returns from London to visit her family all of whom await the arrival of Ronnie. During the two-week



## Notes

waiting period Beatie is full of Ronnie's thoughts and words. To greet him the family gathers for a huge Saturday afternoon tea. He doesn't turn up. Instead comes a letter saying he doesn't think the relationship will work. The family turns on Beatie. In the process of defending herself she finds, to her delight, that she's using her own voice.

Her stern but hospitable mother gathers the family to meet him. An event of great importance is about to take place: Beatie's lover is coming to meet the family. He has been described, imitated, quoted, talked about, made fun of and eagerly awaited. He doesn't turn up. Instead, the postman brings a letter from Ronnie saying he doesn't think the relationship will work. The effect upon Beatie and her family is at first numbing, then humiliating. They are incensed to have been left standing like fools. The ensuing anger with which they turn on Beatie, her self-defence, her halting, hesitant stumble upon fluency, the discovery of her own voice deliriously reaching high as she uses her own words instead of Ronnie's all take up the last 15 minutes of the play. He had been wrong; the gap could have been bridged. "I can stand on my own two feet," she cries.



**Task** Rather than turning up of Ronnie, a letter is brought from him saying he doesn't think the relationship will work. Illustrate the aftermath of this scene.

At the end of *Roots* there is a good example of the way this three-fold pressure is applied. The elementary theatrical situation is that of a heroine ditched by her fiancé and alone with a family she has outgrown. From the current sociological angle, Beatie Bryant is a working-class girl, newly awakened to the joys of abstract painting, classical music, and extra-marital love. From Wesker's angle she is all that, and also a creature with a choice between self-realisation and absorption by the greedy mass of spenders corrupted by advertising; from her own, she is a woman in love who has done her best to reconcile her boy-friend's view of life with that of her mother. By the end of the play she has been let down by everybody, yet she chooses that moment to assert herself with all the zest of a woman who at last knows her own mind. It works, because the commonplace events on stage register a series of pressures beyond those undergone by the characters.

### Self Assessment

Multiple Choice Questions:

1. There were three sources of pressure in the play the play *Roots*, they are
  - (a) current affairs, author's attitude and the characters
  - (b) feudalism, admiration and power struggle
  - (c) feminism, social class, and author's attitude
  - (d) pride, characters, and current affairs.
2. Which of the following depicts the elementary theatrical situation in the play *Roots*?
  - (a) heroine outgrown alone with the family
  - (b) heroine ditched by her fiancé
  - (c) fiancé revolted against the heroine's family
  - (d) heroine's extra marital love.

Fill in the blanks:

3. Arnold Wesker has tried his best explores the theme of .....
4. The elementary theatrical situation is that of a ..... ditched by her fiancé.

State whether the following statements are true or false:

Notes

5. The inner framework contains social and political issues, held together dramatically by the playwright's urgent concern for them and by his conviction.
6. From the contemporary sociological angle, Beatie Bryant is a working-class girl, newly awakened to the joys of extra-marital love.

## 32.2 Summary

- Wesker's most notable qualities are emotional maturity and his command of action in depth.
- The first means that he never condescends to his characters, the second that what happens on stage is always more interesting in performance than we would be likely to guess from quotation.
- The inner framework contains social and political issues, held together dramatically by the playwright's urgent concern for them and by his conviction that they affect the homely characters in front.
- Arnold Wesker has tried his best explores the theme of self-discovery.
- Beatie Bryant, daughter of Norfolk farm labourers, has fallen in love with Ronnie Kahn from the Chicken Soup family.
- During the two-week waiting period Beatie is full of Ronnie's thoughts and words. To greet him the family gathers for a huge Saturday afternoon tea.
- Ronnie doesn't turn up. Instead comes a letter saying he doesn't think the relationship will work. The family turns on Beatie. In the process of defending herself she finds, to her delight, that she's using her own voice.
- Her stern but hospitable mother gathers the family to meet him. An event of great importance is about to take place: Beatie's lover is coming to meet the family. He has been described, imitated, quoted, talked about, made fun of and eagerly awaited.
- At the end of Roots there is a good example of the way this three-fold pressure is applied.
- The elementary theatrical situation is that of a heroine ditched by her fiancé and alone with a family she has outgrown.
- From the current sociological angle, Beatie Bryant is a working-class girl, newly awakened to the joys of abstract painting, classical music, and extra-marital love.
- From Wesker's angle she is all that, and also a creature with a choice between self-realisation and absorption by the greedy mass of spenders corrupted by advertising; from her own, she is a woman in love who has done her best to reconcile her boy-friend's view of life with that of her mother.

## 32.3 Keywords

**Current affairs:** The cultural, political, and social events of importance and interest at the present time; also called current events.

**Imitated** : To follow or endeavor to follow as a model or example.

**Quoted** : To repeat (a passage, phrase, etc.) from a book, speech, or the like, as by way of authority, illustration, etc.

- Notes**
- Numbing** : Incapable of action or of feeling emotion; enervated; prostrate: numb with grief.  
Or lacking or deficient in emotion or feeling; indifferent.
- Humiliating** : Lowering the pride, self-respect, or dignity of a person; mortifying.

### 32.4 Review Questions

1. Explore the three sources of power in the play *Root*.
2. How is Arnold Wesker tried his best explores the theme of self-discovery?
3. Why is it so threatening for Joan to dress like a man?
4. Elucidate that by the end of the play Beatie has been let down by everybody.
5. Give a critical view on Self-discovery.

### **Answers: Self Assessment**

- |            |         |                   |
|------------|---------|-------------------|
| 1. (a)     | 2. (b)  | 3. self-discovery |
| 4. heroine | 5. True | 6. False          |

### 32.5 Further Readings



#### *Books*

Arnold Wesker. 1959. *Roots: The Second Play of the Chicken Soup Trilogy*. Penguin Books.

Robert Wilcher. 1991. *Understanding Arnold Wesker*. University of South Carolina Press, Columbia, S. Carolina.



#### *Online links*

<http://www.arnoldwesker.com/synopses/roots.htm>

<http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/2008/jan/26/theatre>

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